

# New Groups and Non-Groups

Mike Kerman

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There is a lot happening in pop music and it is ridiculous to predict trends. One noticeable occurrence is the breaking up of groups and the need for individual artists to “go it alone.”

The group movement started in England and came over with the Beatles.

On both sides of the Atlantic all musicians seemed to be in groups. Possibly forsaking their own musical desires, what seemed important to the rock artist was the group “sound.”

After the Beatles and Rolling Stones made it, we heard from The Who, Them, Animals, Spencer Davis Group, Small Faces, etc. and in the U.S. the Jefferson Airplane, Doors, Grateful Dead, Country Joe, Lovin’ Spoonful and many others.

Today while groups still seem to be in the forefront of rock music, individual artists are branching off by themselves and starting another movement in rock. The Beatles, first known as the “Fab Foursome” are now generally regarded as four individual artists with their own unique musical viewpoints.

The break-up of the Cream, Mamas and Papas, Yardbirds, Animals, Hollies, Big Brother, Electric Flag, Buffalo Springfield and Byrds must certainly be a sign of something. At the same time more individual efforts by Janis Joplin, Mike Bloomfield, Al Kooper, Neil Young (from Buffalo Springfield), John Sebastian (Lovin’ Spoonful) and Cass Eliot continue to show that individual artists want to make it on their own.

Most interesting perhaps is the joining of David Crosby, Steve Stills and Graham Nash (respectively from the Byrds, the Buffalo Springfield and Hollies) who are forming a three man “non-group.” They will play together with each member utilizing the other two as back-up men and arrangers rather than being a threesome with a “sound.”

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Some of these thoughts about pop music came from the listening of new albums by Al Kooper, and Blood Sweat and Tears. I will discuss these briefly.

Al Kooper has been quite busy producing and recording. Three albums by him, a solo, *I Stand Alone*, and a double set, *The Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield*, and *Al Kooper* (Columbia) were released the same day.

The solo album is all Kooper—conceived, arranged, produced, partially written, and performed by him. The very elaborate production of the album utilizing strings, soul chorus, the Don Ellis Orchestra on one cut and the substitution of sound effects for silence between cuts—is usually effective but might put-off people as gimmicky.

One glaring turn-off is country music’s Bill Monroe’s “Blue Moon Over Kentucky” where Kooper uses tremendous echo, banjo breaks, soul chorus and a lot of noise to screw up a pretty song. But he bounces right back on the next cut with a rhythm and blues “Toe Hold” and R&B is where Kooper can cut it. The brass, piano, chorus and Kooper’s improving voice make him a top white R&B artist.

Kooper’s own material usually smacks of a pop sound that isn’t blues or hard, but well done rock. It is his versatility that makes this album similar to the Kooper-inspired first Blood Sweat and Tears album. Being a creative musician, he is comfortable with different types of music and can produce them so that they are rich in depth and texture.

As the first Blood Sweat and Tears is somewhat similar to *I Stand Alone*, *Supersession* resembles the double Kooper Bloomfield set. While some might prefer the raw jam (*Supersession*) that is stripped of elaborate arranging and instrumentation, I prefer (in this case) the other.

On the “live” album, Kooper does none of his own material and splits his time between rock (including Simon and Garfunkel’s “Feelin’ Groovy,” Traffic’s “Mr. Fantasy” and The Band’s “The Weight”) and improvised blues with ex-Butterfield Band and Electric Flag member Bloomfield leading the way.

If you liked *Supersession*’s side one which featured Kooper and Bloomfield, you probably will like this one.

The re-grouped Blood Sweat and Tears minus Kooper has lost a leader but gained a new vibrant and equally good sound. They are a more cohesive group now and all nine members keep their individuality while creating an overpowering resilient sound.

The album is very good for a variety of reasons. It is well done, tapping the energy of nine musicians and channeling this power and excitement into a record. No question about it, all nine are talented, there is no shucking and waste of time. There are many drummers who think they are Ginger Baker and guitarists who think they are Clapton, who bore us with long breaks of dubious virtuosity.

There is none of this with BS&T. Their songs are long but concise and there is no messing around. With five horns, organ, piano, and guitars you have to be tight or bad. The arrangements (by themselves) and production by James William Guercio fits BS&T splendidly.

While their new lead vocalist David Clayton-Thomas, a popular Canadian singer, might not be the male Janis Joplin he’s been called, he certainly does have an effective, unusual, guttural voice.

Their choice of material is inspiring. They butter us up by opening and closing the album with a horn variation of a piano theme by the brilliant French turn-of-the-century avant-garde composer Eric Satie. They add a moving Billie Holiday song (“God Bless the Child”) that reminds us where Janis Joplin and others got their inspiration.

BS&T includes material by Traffic’s Stevie Winwood, Motown’s Brenda Holloway, Laura Nyro, and themselves that further prove their diversity while retaining a musical stamp that is unquestionably unique.

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