

Volunteers of Amerika

Miller Francis Jr.

1970

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Look what's happening out in the streets

Got a revolution Got to revolution

Hey, I'm dancing down the streets

Got a revolution Got to revolution

Ain't it amazing all the people I meet

Got a revolution Got to revolution

.

One generation got old

One generation got soul

This generation got no destination to hold

Pick up the cry!

.

Hey now, it's time for you and me

Got a revolution Got to revolution

Come on now, we're marching to the sea

Got a revolution Got to revolution

Who will take it from you?

We will, and who are we?

We are Volunteers of Amerika

Volunteers of Amerika

Volunteers of Amerika

There are times when criticism passes beyond evaluation and becomes advertising, the review becomes a "hype," any one statement a "plug." This is one of those times.

The Jefferson Airplane has created an album that is so rich in conception and so perfect in its implementation that little can be said in the way of "critical analysis," only: Dig it! Very few artists or groups perform on such a high level that dealing with their recorded work is more a matter of assimilation of something far beyond your capacities as a listener (much less as a writer): the Judge becomes the Judged.

"Beggars' Banquet" was such an album, Dylan's stuff, the Beatles', "The Notorious Bird Brothers," anything by the Band, "Tommy," the Mothers of Invention, "Surrealistic Pillow," and now another one by the Jefferson Airplane—"Volunteers of Amerika" (Shortened by RCA Victor, who did a generally lousy job of recording and pressing this album, to "Volunteers").

After an extremely uptight series of hassles with RCA, the Airplane managed to come through on top.

They got all the “fucks” and “shits” and “motherfuckers” in intact, they got by with all the Stars & Stripes irreverence on the cover artwork, the militant songs are there just as they are sung live. RCA got an incredible ad drawn up as a result of their “problems” with the Jefferson Airplane!

(Media fans take note: As with the printed libretto to “Tommy,” objectionable words have been replaced. “Up against the wall, motherfuckers” becomes “Up against the wall, fred!” Those parents who are now perusing the song sheets of their kids’ favorite albums evidently can’t hear with their ears what they can see with their eyes.)

The overall finished product is perfect Airplane music, with the added presence of Jerry Garcia, Steve Stills, and David Crosby contributing a broader spectrum of colors, and the nonpareil piano work of Nicky Hopkins inviting a deserved comparison with “Beggars’ Banquet” (just his presence guarantees a similar sound).

“We Can Be Together” is a love song to the revolutionary youth movement. (Listen closely and you’ll hear the same rhythm underlying the alternative melody and lyrics of “Volunteers.”)

Just about the hippest thing I’ve ever heard in the Way of “political” rock, this song combines militance in its verbal stance (We are outlaws in the eyes of Amerika In order to survive, we steal, cheat, lie, forge, fuck, hide and deal/We are obscene, lawless, hideous, dangerous, dirty, violent and young) with a lyrical kind of sentimentality in the way it is performed (the “message” of the vocals and instrumental is expressed in another stanza: Come on all you people standing around / Our life’s too fine to let it die and / We can be together).

Paul Kantner has everybody in the same boat in this song, everybody young, and the advice is as sound as can be: All your private property is / Target for your enemy / And your enemy is / We.

By now you’ve probably heard that the Airplane sings those famous lines, “Up against the wall, motherfuckers,” and they do; but the way this statement is handled in the context of this song is very clever and imaginative indeed.

It follows a brief pause in the song and appears after the lines, Everything they say we are we are / And we are very / Proud of ourselves so that these specific lines are emphasized, and sing like a piece of dialogue complete with quotation marks.

The Airplane is obviously more into tearing down walls than putting people up against them, and the song ends with a positive statement of cosmic revolution: We must begin here and now / A new confident of earth and fire / Tear down the walls / Come on now getting higher and higher / Tear down the walls! Outtasight!

“Good Shepherd” opens with a startling entrance by lead guitarist Jorma Kaukonen (how we’ve under-rated him!) with a repeated phrase so thick and resonant that it sounds like an electric saxophone. Both the melody line and the excellent vocal are reminiscent of the most recent music by the Velvet Underground.

“The Farm” is the biggest surprise of the album, one of two country songs undoubtedly inspired by the presence of Crosby and Stills, and containing some really fine pedal steel guitar by Jerry Garcia. The Jefferson Airplane is just about the last rock group -I’d expect to find living on a farm, but this song is a hymn to just that kind of life.

“Hey Fredrick” is Grace Slick’s tour de force, the best thing she’s done since “White Rabbit.”

In that same vein of Spanish-influenced-Bolero-type building up of rhythmic intensity, “Fredrick” matches some of Grace’s freakiest lyrics (Is this maybe an anti-speed song?—How many machine men will you see before you / Stop believing that speed / Will slide down on you / Like brakes in bad weather?) with one of the most perfect singing instruments in all of rock music on top of a solo by Jorma (with wah-wah pedal) that must be heard, as they say, to be believed!

Toward the end, the tempo is halved and doubled and everyone works their asses off, Jorma’s shouting, screaming guitar over bass, drums and tambourine.

“Eskimo Blue Day” is another one of Grace’s specialties—cold savage lyrics, sung with eerie, sustained vocal lines and tightly controlled vibrato. (Redwoods talk to me / Say it plainly The human name Doesn’t mean shit to a tree!)

“A Song for All Seasons” is the second country style song, and its lyrics fall into the category of Self-Criticism rock: after castigating another rock group for obtaining success at the price of internal stability (Well, the word, my friend, you know, is on the street / It’s on the lips of everyone I meet / While you’re climbing up the chart / Your band just fell apart / I guess your life just ain’t really that complete), the singer makes a fast exit from the scene—Well, my friend, it’s time for me to go / I just can’t be late for my evening show / You see, I’ve written this tune’ / And I hope that very soon / I’ll be heard on Top 40 radio.

Put this one in the same very high class as the Stones’ rock song about rock songsters, “Jigsaw Puzzle.”

“Volunteers” is the mover of the set, a street fighting song if ever there was one. Most folks missed the boat on the Beatles/ Stones controversy over “Revolution” and “Street Fighting Man”; so freaked out were they over the former that they stupidly embraced the latter for almost all the things it was not, missing both the muffled militance of the Beatle song and the cold cynicism of the Stones tune.

“Volunteers” is what we tried to force “Street Fighting Man” to be.

Evidently the Airplane knew exactly what they were doing because this song is just over two minutes long, guaranteeing convenient airplay (I heard it on an Atlanta station followed by John Mayall’s “Don’t throw rocks at policemen” thing!), and it is so simple in its lyric emphasis and so infectious in its rhythms that it insists on being a sing-along.

“Volunteers” is the 1969 version of “Get Together” (a love/peace/flowers song by the Youngbloods now resurrected by RCA Victor years later), which the Airplane recorded back in the hey-days of the Haight. The distance between the two songs is the distance we have travelled between the V-sign and the red fist.

The Jefferson Airplane loves you.

fifth Estate

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