

## The Ups and Downs of The 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Elevators

By Tim Wilton

The popular music landscape of early 1960s America was largely awash in the safe and sanitized sounds that were still emanating from the innocent era that was the late 1950s. Girl groups like The Chiffons, The Ronnettes and later, The Supremes dominated the charts; country music's Nashville Sound was peaking as Patsy Cline released "Crazy" and "I Fall to Pieces" while on the left coast, the Bakersfield Sound was just hitting its stride; and heart wrenching blue-eyed soul stirred the passions of adolescent girls while surf music became the siren call for boys across America to ditch school and catch a wave.

The scene began to change however, beginning in 1964 when the Beatles first appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, thus signaling the start of the British Invasion which in turn sparked a huge directional change in how music was not only made and listened to, but also how it began to affect America's social fabric. Many scholars suggest that just the opposite happened, that it was America's social fabric that affected popular music. Powder keg issues like the civil rights movement, the escalating war in a remote part of the world called Viet Nam, cold war paranoia, and a counter-culture newly birthed by the songs of Bob Dylan and the teachings of Timothy Leary, were all part of the American conscience. Either way, there was a revolution going on and not just in the streets either, but on the AM tuner dial as well.

Down south in Texas, where police brutality was a spectator sport, repression of minorities was accepted and long hairs were not welcomed with open arms, a burgeoning folk/rock scene in Austin was just beginning to take shape by the start of 1965, most notably in Austin.

Austin's Sir Douglas Quintet had broken nationally with their top twenty faux British-twanged hit, *She's About a Mover*. An up-and-comer named Janis Joplin was the primary singer-in-residence at the Vulcan Gas Company, while the Winters brothers, Johnny and Edgar, were fine-tuning their musical chops in many clubs around town.

Meanwhile, a seventeen-year-old high school dropout named Roger Kynard "Roky" Erickson was fronting a garage music-styled combo called The Spades. The Spades had their own residency at The Jade Room, a popular Austin haunt, as well as a hit record on the local airplay charts, *You're Gonna Miss Me*, which was penned by Roky (pronounced Rocky) and featured his (still to this day) distinctive other worldly vocals--described by some as a cross between Eric Burden and Little Richard. Word had spread about Roky, almost to the point where the rest of the Spades were mostly an afterthought. Roky's talent shined like no other band member's did.

Across town, beat poet and self-styled bohemian Tommy Hall was attending the University of Texas as a Psychology and Literature major, was very active in the counter culture undercurrent that was brewing on campus, and was gulping down handfuls of high-powered, legal (at the time) LSD while writing far out songs and poetry that were influenced by the authors he adored and whose books he carried everywhere: Aldous Huxley, Alfred Korzybski, and G. I. Gurdjieff.

Local musician Tary Owens, a good friend and former high school classmate of Janis Joplin, introduced Roky to Hall, who in turn immediately recognized the almost limitless potential in the Spades' front man. The younger Roky saw a kindred spirit in

Hall and quickly became fascinated with the much older Hall's philosophical take on everything and anything. For many, this meeting of the two soon-to-be band mates was on par with John Lennon meeting Paul McCartney for the first time.

Around that same time, Hall had also met, by chance, members of a Port Aransas-based skiffle-turned-garage rock band, The Lingsmen. Bassist Benny Thurman, guitarist Stacy Sutherland and drummer John Ike Walton (all were originally from the Kerrville, Texas area) drove up to Austin because Hall recommended they check out "this great young singer, Roky Erickson."

One night, after the Spades had finished performing, Hall brought Roky over to his house for a jam session with Thurman, Sutherland and Walton. Instantly, everyone in that living room knew that there was something potentially special going on. Through Hall's insistence, Roky "fired" the Spades, and replaced them with the now former members of The Lingsmen, and added Hall to the line-up even though he had no actual music playing ability but was the de facto leader of the band and its chief songwriter. Thus, a few more jam sessions later, The 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Elevators were born.

The band's moniker, according to legend, was inspired by the fact that (a) most high rise buildings do not list a thirteenth floor, and (b) the thirteenth letter of the alphabet is "m", and of course, "m" is the first letter in the word marijuana. The name was also emblematic of Hall's determination for the Elevators to not just record and release rock music, but to create music that would take the listener to a higher plain of consciousness; much like LSD did for him and soon afterward, Roky.

The Elevators developed a reputation for fierce live shows, first at The Jade Room, and then all across Texas. Then they re-recorded Roky's *You're Gonna Miss Me* for International Artists, a Houston-based label run by Lelan Rogers, the older brother of pop and country crooner Kenny Rogers. Finally, Roky's song was punched up--big

time--to the level it should have been in the first place. Backed by a forceful, pulsating rhythm section featuring Thurman and Walton, and featuring Sutherland's stellar guitar play and Roky's growling voice, *You're Gonna Miss Me* was a powerful lament of a relationship gone sour. However, the most memorable ingredient of the song, outside of Roky's vocals, came from the most unlikely of places: an electric jug. Hall, during one of the band's many jam sessions, had picked a crock jug, taped a microphone to the opening, and blew through it, creating an uncanny sound that still puzzles many first-time listeners today. The single reached number one in many major markets across the nation, and reached number 31 on Billboard.

Buoyed by the success of *You're Gonna Miss Me*, the band hastily recorded their debut album for International Artists (according to legend, the album was recorded in a quick eight hour session) and in the spring of 1966, America was introduced to *The Psychedelic Sound of the 13th Floor Elevators*, a landmark recording that brought psychedelic music to the masses. Also out that same year were pivotal releases by the Beatles (*Revolver*), Beach Boys (*Pet Sounds*), and Bob Dylan (*Blonde on Blonde*).

It should be noted that the first record recognized as "psychedelic" was released by an obscure acid-folk band called The Holy Modal Rounders in 1964. In addition, the live shows put on by the Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd around that time were drenched in psychedelia, while Donovan's hit, *Sunshine Superman*, and the Beatles hits, *Day Tripper* and *Paperback Writer*, are all accorded their place as pioneering efforts in the "new" genre called psychedelic rock.

However, the 13th Floor Elevators are credited with the usage of the word "psychedelic" in a rock music context. Just read the opening liner notes to *Psychedelic Sounds* and it is clearly evident what the band's intentions were for the listener: "Since Aristotle, man has organized his knowledge vertically...our language has been used

primarily to identify--and consequently distinguish between--objects, rather than to focus on the relationship between them..." The Elevators had made their declaration and had firmly planted their psychedelic colored flag in the ground.

The Elevators' success did not reward them with large amounts of money (such was the case of most small label bands of the era--see interview with John Ike Walton: <http://www.texasheritagemusic.com/John%20Ike%20Walton%20Interview.pdf>), but it did bring about notoriety--and not the good type either. Hounded by the police everywhere they gigged in Texas, and arrested for marijuana possession (the charges were dropped due to a technicality), the Elevators pulled up stakes in mid-1966 and moved to San Francisco, the mecca for the psychedelic movement. There they headlined shows at the famed Avalon Ballroom and at the Fillmore. Among the acts that opened for them were Moby Grape, Great Society, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Big Brother and the Holding Company featuring ex-Austinite Janis Joplin.

After four months of San Francisco gigs, the Elevators came back to Texas to record their second album. By this time, Thurman had already left the band and Walton grew tired of "being broke." They were replaced by Danny Galindo on bass and Danny Thomas on drums. In 1967, they released what is arguably their best album, the conceptual *Easter Everywhere*. And although he is not credited on the LP, Walton did play on *Levitation* and *She Lives*. The most noteworthy cut on *Easter Everywhere* is the eight-minute psychedelic opus, *Slip Inside This House*.

The Elevators continued to tour (and of course, do drugs) throughout most of 1967, while also making appearances on national dance programs such as American Bandstand. Dick Clark, after the Elevators had finished their song, innocently asked Roky who the head of the band was. Roky's quickly answered, "We're all heads, Dick."

Finally, after being busted for the second time on possession of marijuana after a college gig, Roky was ordered to stand trial. Being that possession of even a single joint was a felony punishable up to twenty years, Roky's attorney decided that a plea of insanity would be less harsh. However, this resulted in a five-year sentence in a mental hospital. Things were never the same afterwards for the Elevators. And although they did release one more studio album as a group, *Bull of the Woods*, (Sutherland did most of the songwriting), the Elevators were done. In the end, International Artists tried to keep the band's name in the spotlight (read: make more money) by releasing *The 13th Floor Elevators Live*, a compilation of outtakes and covers that were recorded before *Psychedelic Sound* came out. To add insult to injury, IA overdubbed it with canned applause.

The Elevators have tried to get back together many times, but without success.

Tommy Hall is a recluse living on disability benefits in the tenderloin district of San Francisco.

Roky, after being in and out of mental institutions in the early 70's, released an album in 1980, largely based on horror movie material called *Roky Erickson and the Aliens*. Still, his mental health continued to deteriorate throughout the 80s, and while living in federal housing, was later charged with tampering with U.S. Mail, a federal offense. Sent off for more "testing", Roky ended up doing some more time. In 1990, a slew of alt-rock musicians released a Roky Erickson tribute album, *Where the Pyramid Meets the Eye*. Today, he is under the care of his brother, Sumner, and occasionally performs on stage.

Stacy Sutherland died tragically in 1978, and is buried in Center Point. Benny Thurman is living a private life away from the harsh spotlight that was the Elevators. John Ike Walton still remains involved in music in one way or another, most notably

bringing the kalimba, an African instrument, into the mainstream. He still lives in Kerrville.

Today, The 13th Floor Elevators are members of the Texas Music Hall of Fame and are regarded as one of the most influential bands to have come out of the halcyon days of the mid- to late-60s rock era.