

The Everlasting Trip

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Hawkwind, acid rock's ship of state, survived the buffeting of the new wave. During a spell in dry dock the band told their tale to Ian Pye.



"What a long, strange trip it's been" - so sang the Grateful Dead on "Truckin", their reflection on the shattered illusions of the Sixties. The sentiment's tailor-made for their British counterparts, Hawkwind. Like the Dead, they became the musical vanguard of a drug-based "alternative society" which brought them more than their fair share of ups and downs.

This helter-skelter ride, eulogised in the same song with the lines "Sometimes the light's all shining on me / Other times I can barely see", can be partially attributed to various past and present member's voracious appetite for every conceivable brand of pharmaceutical goodies. But it's also a result of countless personnel changes.

Somehow they always managed to weather the storm, battling on with their unique style of psychedelic rock, lovingly dubbed space music by the band themselves, pursuing an improvisational form that went out with Timothy Leary, incense and ethnic clothing. Fanatically loyal fans and dogged determination kept them going.

They did nearly suffer a fatal breakdown during the crisis-ridden '78 tour of America, when founder member Dave Brock walked out.

"Yeah, I was really pissed off with the whole thing. It just got too much, so I sold my guitar and drove off with my wife to the Arizona desert. It seemed like the end of it all."

Internal squabbles, personal tantrums and the sheer fatigue of being on and off the road for ten years finally took effect. Then typically he picked up the pieces, returned home and formed The Sonic Assassins. It was a short-lived alliance, replaced by the Hawklords, who metamorphosed into the seemingly eternal Hawkwind. A UK tour followed in 1979, recordings of which were released by Bronze this year to put the band back in the charts once again.

"I wasn't surprised," Dave Brock announced modestly. "All our records get into the charts." Dressed in purple cords, handmade shoes and T-shirt, Dave is recovering from a long session of interviews in the air-conditioned luxury of the Bronze offices at Camden. Adjacent are the Roundhouse Studios where the current line-up of a loaned Ginger Baker on drums, Tim Blake on keyboards, bass player Harvey Bainbridge and, after a ten year absence, guitarist Huw Lloyd Langton, is putting the finishing touches to the new album.

Only Tim Blake is absent as the kings of UK acid-rock recount their past and current adventures down rock 'n'roll's heady avenues. As if by tradition the initial studio sessions have been marred by personality clashes culminating in the departure of drummer Simon King. But bad vibes aside, the recording has been swift and satisfying for the band who all look remarkably fit considering their reputation for unbridled hedonism.

Limited Excess

"We've only taken excess to a point - we don't go completely over the top," Dave protests. Well, what about ex-bass player Lemmy, now leader of the infamous Motorhead (the underground term for speed freak). Wasn't it true that he had to be sacked because of a predilection for white powders? As the guffawing induced by the mention of Lemmy's name dies away, Dave admits "Yeah, we had to sack him, but Christ, I warned him a hundred times not to take stuff through borders, and he just wouldn't listen. Everybody knows Lemmy always has huge amounts of speed with him and he got pulled by customs in Canada. We had this gig in Toronto and didn't know what to do. Eventually he got out on bail but he couldn't go back to America. He'd been warned so many times, I had to tell him. It was pretty upsetting, I mean five years is a long time and we always got on very well. It was all very emotional and sad."

A similar fate befell sax-man Nik Turner who was in at the band's conception and always a strong visual focus. In '77 the liaison came to end "because he persistently played out of tune and when people were doing vocals." Dave claims in both cases it was for their own good because now "they've got themselves together" and have bands of their own.

"Nik was terrible for getting out of it when he was with us. I remember one night I was trying to sing and he kept playing. A roadie signalled to him but he was so gone he didn't understand. In the end I threw a beer can at him - got him right on the head. That put him on the floor all right."

These ever-changing line-ups somehow tie in with the band's general philosophy and outlook. "We're a very open band," Harvey Bainbridge observes "and we play a very open type of music." You don't so much join Hawkwind as pass through. Some even go the full circle and return for another dose of space rituals. Current guitarist Huw Lloyd Langton got trapped in some nasty cosmic swing doors when the band played outside the legendary '70 Isle of Wight festival during which French anarchists pulled down the fences under the banner of the people's right to hear free music. "Somebody spiked my drink with acid and I was away. You could say I've had mental problems ever since. It's taken me ten years to recover."

Of this transient cast of thousands, perhaps the most fascinating and difficult of all was science fiction writer and composer Bob Calvert, who amongst other things wrote the band's anthem "Silver Machine" with Dave Brock and was responsible for many obscure, tangential solo projects including the albums "Captain Lockheed And The Starfighters" and "Lucky Leif And The Longships".

Smashed Guitars

"Calvert is a very unusual man," Dave recalled. "The thing was that he was always the one that got interviewed and it affected his ego so much it changed him. Two hours later he'd come down and be the same again. Also he went up and down like a yo-yo. He's a very clever man, like all those people, Arthur Brown and Peter Gabriel for example. When they're on the ball it's great, but if they're down... Bob used to get so over-excited. If his guitar was out of tune he'd smash it on the floor. Right now he's writing a book on the 'biz' tentatively titled 'Hype' - it's very good too."

In their day Hawkwind were the doyen of the British underground, playing endless benefits at the front-line of the struggle against "straight" society, aligned with urban guerrillas like the White Panthers, and supporting community organisations such as BIT and Release. In the alternative press of the day, Friends, IT and Oz, they were hailed as grass-roots rockers championing the people's cause. They were to the hippies what the Clash are to the punks.

As the dreams of a new age were buried under a tide of cynicism and economic austerity how did the band and their friends come to terms with the failed aspirations of the Woodstock generation? Harvey explains: "People were changed by it all but there was probably more optimism than was warranted. The thing is that the media and the system in general has this amazing capacity to absorb threatening movements, sometimes even re-packaging them and selling them back to people."

Aren't the band something of an anachronism today? "I don't think we're outdated," asserts Dave. "Rock theatre, the show side, is still strong. We get people coming from all over the country to see us."

Mention of the punk insult "old fart" evokes a swift response from Dave. "Yeah a bloke came down to see us, from Record Mirror I think, and he kept going on about us being old farts - I nearly punched him on the nose!"

With their steady if unspectacular success, they shouldn't worry about passing fashions, they've stuck to their guns and survived with a good deal more integrity than other artists anxious to stay abreast of this month's latest thing. And judging by the titles of some of the tracks on the new album they aren't about to change at this stage in the game. "Dusts Of Time", "Whose Gonna Win The War" and "Space Chase" are some of the coming gems from the boys at the helm of rock's oldest starship.

At the end of the day Dave Brock, as usual, has the final word to say on the force behind this school for degenerates and wayward bass players: "We've all disgraced ourselves at some time in the past but times have changed. What's most important is that we enjoy what we are doing... Next thing up is a British tour because that's it when it comes down to it. To play, man that's the point of a band, to play and have fun."