Psychedelia USA

Out there and over here! To accompany our exclusive interview with The Doors, we take a look at the strange and highly collectable world of American psych...

They say one man's meat is another man's poison. Well, dip your hand into the huge, swelling vat that is US psychedelic rock, and who knows what you'll come up with – or whether you'll like the taste. Britpsych, with its frequently chewy pop flavour, is a fairly safe bet for most who have sampled its delights. But the assorted varieties on the American psych menu each have the potential to either leave one satisfied or, conversely, to deliver a rapid case of the trots.

A comparison of British and American psychedelic genres will always invite generalities, but there is a far wider variance as to what is understood as 'American' psych. It's a bigger and more affluent country, after all, and the US underwent a far more significant generational/cultural shift than the UK during the 1960s, directly informing the music being made.

Therefore, US psych was – and is – an amorphous beast that can mean radically different things, depending on who's talking. It runs a vast gamut: from a myriad over-modulated garage combos to privately-pressed hippie arcana; from the soft-pop bleatings of **The Strawberry Alarm Clock** to the sludge-rock interpretations of **Vanilla Fudge**; from the 'adult rock' of San Francisco and **Doors/Love**-helmed freakouts of LA to the downer vibe of NYC's **Velvet Underground** and the avant garde crudity of the **Godz**.

A starting point of sorts could be the early 1966 release of **The Byrds**' startling Eight Miles High; while an end is most definitely the turn-of-the-decade turgidity of **Blues Image** and **Frijid Pink**. Inbetween, behind the tie-dyed, flower-powered stereotypes of In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida and Incense & Peppermints, US psych constituted a weird, wonderful and incredibly diverse panoply, with something for everyone.

Every city across America in those years had its psychedelic innovators – **HP Lovecraft** in Chicago, **The Litter** in Minneapolis, Detroit's guitar-glorious **SRC**, etc – with many acts operating in splendid isolation, yet all similarly inspired by the tremendous, liberating possibilities that rock had opened itself up to. It was a new sonic frontier, enabled by the radical wordplay of Dylan, the melodic and harmonic explorations that the early 60s folk boom had introduced, rapid advances in recording technology and musical electronics, and the continued and pervasive influence of British groups such as **The Beatles** and the **Yardbirds**, whose popularity brought open experiment to American Top 40 radio.

And that's not to mention America's 'new generation with a new explanation'. The country's huge baby-boomer population came of age at just the right time to give psychedelic rock a captive and willing audience – one that was further emboldened by the social and cultural rebellion implicit to youthful America in the mid-to-late 60s.

By the genre's own mind-expanding definition, drugs were no doubt an influence on US psych, but hindsight has proved that they were not necessarily the essential constituent that we have often been led to believe. In the crucial birthing years of 1966 and 1967, San Francisco caught the media's attention as the centre of psychedelic rock. But while that city's heady brew of raga, folk tunings, elongated blues and jazz-like improvisation no doubt bent your mind if you were tripping at the Fillmore or Avalon, in the cold light of day, heavyweights like **The Grateful Dead** and **Jefferson Airplane** came across on vinyl as essentially less freaky – at least at first (the former's Dark Star being a notable exception).

The prescient **Charlatans** probably ingested more LSD than any other band within the entire San Francisco milieu, but they hardly played acid rock. The one Bay Area combo whose early records *did* musically convey a pure psychedelic aura was folk-politicos **Country Joe & The Fish**. But if you have to put a regional emphasis on the birth of US psych, it began not on the bohemian West Coast, but in archly conservative Texas, with the pioneering **13th Floor Elevators**, the first rock band to openly characterise their sound – and vision – as psychedelic. However, it was not LSD that gave the Elevators' style its unique qualities, but rather mushrooms, peyote and other organic hallucinogens.

The search for a sonic high meant that, compared to the Brits, American groups were quick to embrace the new electronics as an integral part of their sound. **Silver Apples, United States Of America, Fifty Foot Hose** were all willing to go out on a limb musically, while the first album by **Mad River** is a particularly bewitching example.

Conversely, some of the most outrageous rock of the time was made by musicians who loudly eschewed the use of drugs – none more so than **The Mothers Of Invention**. Their 1966 landmark debut, *Freak Out!* is not a record normally defined as psych, but musically and thematically it not only fits, but is way ahead of the pack. San Jose garage band **Teddy & His Patches** stole a line from that album to create their own psych masterpiece, Suzy Creamcheese, yet Patches organist Dave Conway recalls his group as 'so straight, we made a straight band look curved!'

Nevertheless, Suzy Creamcheese is a paradigm of the kind of deranged 45rpm artefact that fascinates a great many US psych fanciers: a record that emanates from the era defined by compilations like the original garage primer *Nuggets*. The late Greg Shaw succinctly labeled this sub-genre 'acid punk' in *Who Put The Bomp*, but its tenet of bizarre experiment holds well for psychedelia as a whole, and if such experiment wasn't the direct influence of drugs, then it was the musical brain damage that drugs implied. Much of what has been labelled acid punk also corresponds thematically with its approximate British equivalent genre, freakbeat.

As that is also, by-and-large, a singles-dominated genre, the following list, compiled by top US psych collector, Erik Lindgren, eschews the traditional album-orientated focus of the US psych scene to celebrate a selection of these off-beat gems.

Some groups made studio trickery an integral part of their sound (**Electric Prunes**), others were capable of throwing impressive dabbles with psychedelia into catalogues of otherwise stylish pop (**Blue Things, Mouse & The Traps**). Yet more had their own unique qualities, but made records that fall within the parameters of psych (**Music Machine**). And some, like Curt Boettcher's **Ballroom**, were purely studio aggregates released on major labels and aimed sideways at the charts. However, the majority are

tremendous examples of the regional variegates mentioned above – every state in the union had bands sequestered in backwater towns like Enid, Oklahoma or Tyler, Texas, all of which were capable of at least one inspired, innocent moment of psych madness.

It goes without saying that, in common with the 60s garage rock genre as a whole, these are frequently very rare records, principally because they were pressed in small quantities, and had localised distribution (or at best minimal national distribution). Even those on major labels have often proved difficult to track down and, as always, demand determines supply.

The likes of the internet have made it slightly easier in recent years to find originals, but be prepared to do battle with other collectors if you spot a copy via eBay, and make an appointment with your bank manager if you win. Though it must be said, in terms of sheer expense, British psych still leads the field.

The same goes for albums, though the vast majority of the acknowledged US psych classics are or have been made available on reissues and compilations in recent years, with varying degrees of legitimacy. For the neophyte, there has never been a better time to investigate. So dig in!

Alex Palao

PURE GOLD ON 45

The Top 40 US psychedelic singles, chosen by musician and leading psych collector ERIK LINDGREN

My criteria for this list was to pick the most imaginative, excessive, and creative songs released as 7"s in the latter half of the 60s. Extra points were given for sophisticated composition, dynamic production, and colourful lyrics. Unique musical textures such as backwards sounds, theremin/electronics, heavy echo/reverb, and other interesting sonic effects helped in their rank.

I shied away from songs that are more garage in character (e.g. **Gonn**'s Blackout Of Gretely, **The Bees**' Voices Green & Purple and **Sweet Cherry**'s Funny Things Floating), which are unquestionably brilliant records, but which don't exactly fit the definition of psychedelic music. I also avoided songs that were humorous or insincere in character (e.g. **Kim Fowley**'s The Trip and **Jefferson Handkerchief**'s I'm Allergic To Flowers).

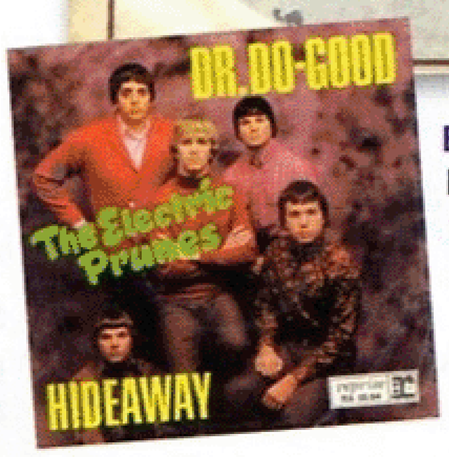
My final criterion was that the vocal and instrumental performances had to be somewhat accomplished and production value had to bring out the best of the music. Everything is subjective of course, but this is what I'd consider to be the Top 40 first-generation US psychedelic singles.

The prices vary wildly, since some of these discs are extremely rare and only a handful of copies are known to exist. Again, everything is subject to supply and demand, but they do give a rough idea as to rarity. The prices listed are for records in Excellent condition, which may be next to impossible to find for some of the more elusive titles.

TOP 20 US MAJOR LABEL PSYCH 45s

RIDERS OF THE MARK The Electronic Insides & Metal Complexion That Make Up Herr Doktor Krieg (20th Century Fox) $150 2.14 of pure, unadulterated psychedelic bliss. If this is the future, sign me up.

THIRD BARDO I'm Five Years Ahead Of My Time (Roulette) $400 Pretty much as good as American psychedlia gets.



ELECTRIC PRUNES Hideaway (Reprise) $40 These guys cut so many brilliant tracks, but, from my point of view, this is their psych high water mark

BALLROOM Baby Please Don't Go (Warner Brothers) $125 Curt Boettcher's hallucinogenic holocaust.

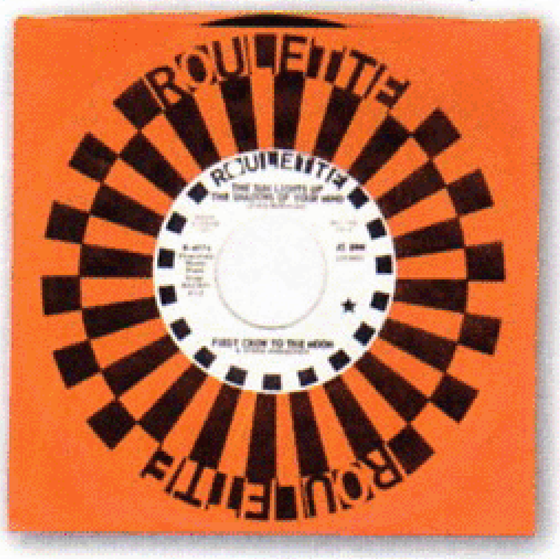
13th FLOOR ELEVATORS Slip Inside This House (International Artists) $75 Their first two albums are invincible. This is a severely-edited mono version, but still holds up.

KENNY & THE KASUALS Journey To Tyme (Mark) $400 (United Artists) $250 Who needs drugs when you have this song?

SILVER APPLES You & I (Kapp) $75 I still get chills when I think that this NYC electronics/drum duo actually walked on this planet.

RAIKS PROGRESS Sewer Rat Love Chant (Liberty) $150 An incredible, ethereal song with a West Coast vibe.

FIRST CROW TO THE MOON The Sun Lights Up The Shadows Of Your Mind (Roulette) $300 Who cares if the label screwed up on their name (it should be First Crew)? Plus it's a double A-side, to boot.

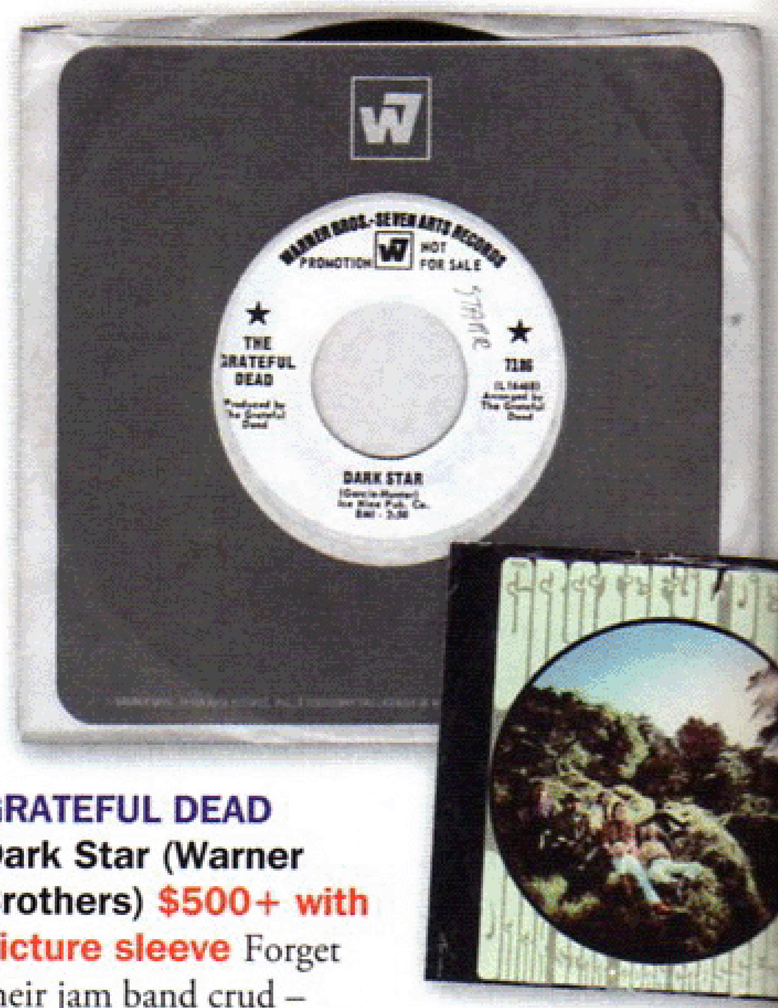


BLUE THINGS The Orange Rooftop Of Your Mind (RCA) $125 Are we in Kansas yet? Another boss double A-side.

BALLOON FARM A Question Of Temperature (Laurie) $30 A punkadelic masterpiece that actually charted – and yes, that is a theremin you can hear, dude.

DICK WAGNER & THE FROSTS Sunshine (Date) $200 An awesome song with awesome production that's finally getting its due.

MOUSE & THE TRAPS I Satisfy (Fraternity) $100 A searing erotic track that explodes with energy and attitude at every turn.



GRATEFUL DEAD Dark Star (Warner Brothers) $500+ with picture sleeve Forget their jam band crud – this 1967 tightly-composed non-LP track is a lite-psych sonic head trip.

MUSIC MACHINE The Eagle Never Hunts The Fly (Original Sound) $40 A savage, punky pummeller from Sean Bonniwell and crew.

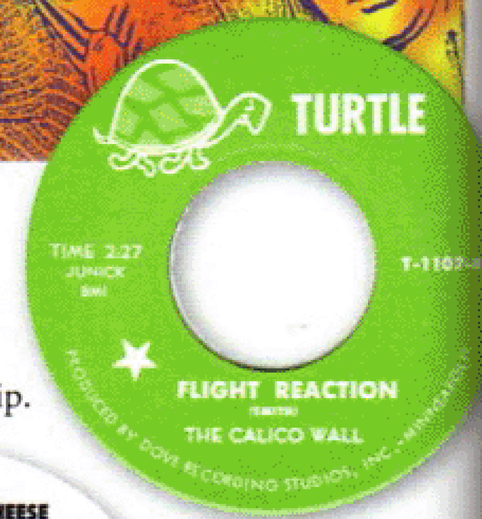
MORGAN OF DREAMS (ABC Probe) $60 An edited version from their mandatory LP, which is a must have for all discerning US psych heads.

SPIRIT Mechanical World (Ode) $30 Give this psychedelic slab a whirl and feel your puny human mind expand!

TOP 20 US INDEPENDENT LABEL PSYCH 45s

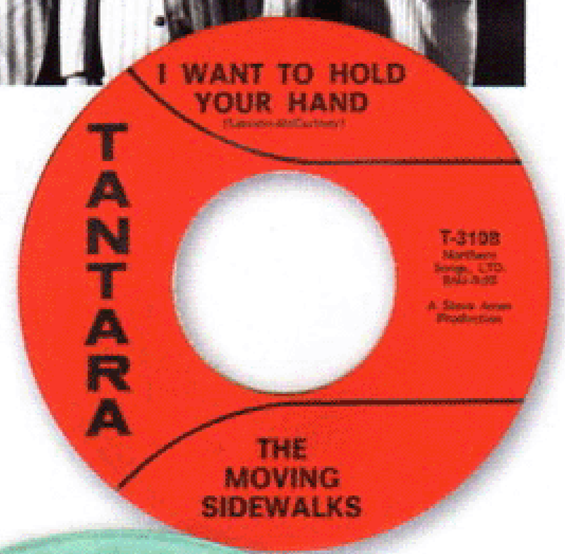
NOAH'S ARK Love In (Decca) $150 A swirling, tripped-out track with massive effects.

PARK AVENUE PLAYGROUND The Trip (USA) $2000 Completely over-the-top, excess in every single respect.

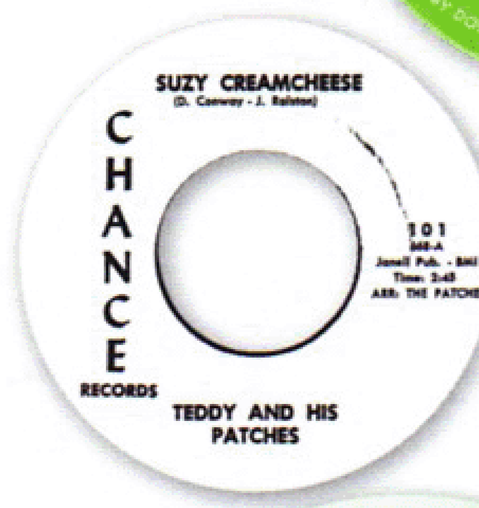


CALICO WALL Flight Reaction (Turtle) $750 The ultimate musical re-creation of an acid trip.

THINGS TO COME Come Alive (Warner Brothers) $100 Another great Dave Hassinger engineering job, with a Prunes vibe.



MOVING SIDEWALKS I Want To Hold Your Hand (Tantara) $400 May you never hear Merseybeat music again.



TEDDY & HIS PATCHES Suzi Creamcheese (Chance) $400 Sheer dairy product dementia – to the max!

MUSSIES 12 O'Clock, July (Fenton) $750 Unquestionably the most savage punkadelic fuzz instrumental ever recorded, complete with manic drum solo.

TOUCH We Feel Free (Coliseum/London) $40 Don & The Goodtimes on acid. Totally overblown musical madness, mixing a Vanilla Fudge aesthetic with Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. The band's album is also something of a landmark.

ORANGE WEDGE From The Tomb To The Womb (Blue Flat Owsley Memorial) $1500 A relentless, wailing Michigan scorcher.

SOUND APPARATUS Travel Agent Man (Black & Blue) $2000 A fuzz cruncher with fewer than five copies known to exist.

SPONTANEOUS GENERATION Up In My Mind (Feure) $1500 Definitive fuzz tremolo mayhem.

DOVERS The Third Eye (Miramar) $600 A frenetic 12-string rave up with a stunning Eastern-tinged vibe.

BOYS BLUE Coming Down To You (Frantic) $1200 This song is epic in scope, with many mood changes. It even reinvents the *Batman* TV theme.

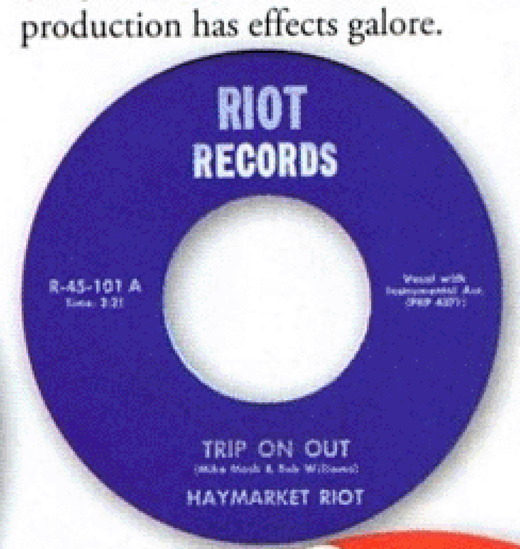
GRAF ZEPPELIN You're In My Mind (Orlyn) $500 This crazed production has effects galore.

KAMA DEL SUTRA She Taught Me Love (Zig-Zag) $600 Despite the somewhat derivative musical territory, this really works.

LEGENDS High Towers (Railroad House) $150 with picture sleeve This power trio featured wah-wah piano, day-glo lyrics and a young Dan Hartman.

TC ATLANTIC Faces (Turtle) $800 This awesome fuzz driver will rattle your windows.

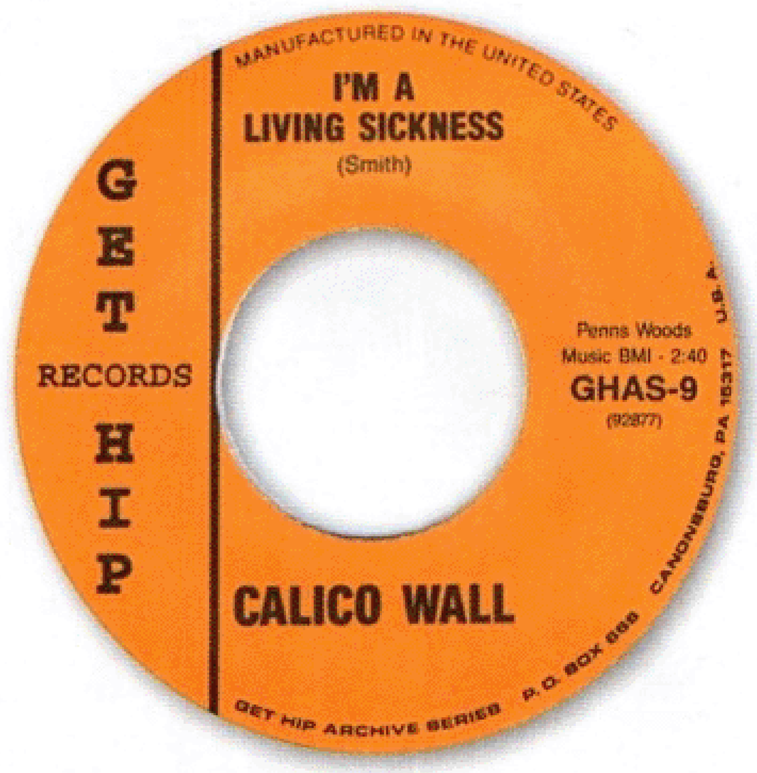
WILD THINGS Acid (Another Colored Ink Drawing) (Blue Onion) $600 Another twisted testament to the frightening world of LSD.



HAYMARKET RIOT Trip On Out (Riot) $250 A truly stupendous little piece of plastic, boasting some crippling fuzz and a savage break, to boot.

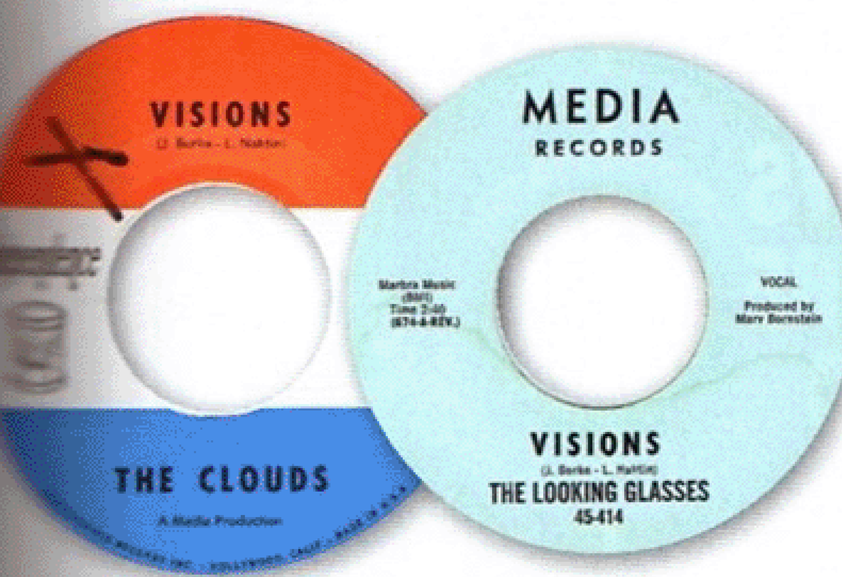
HONORABLE MENTIONS

CALICO WALL I'm A Living Sickness (unreleased Dove acetate) Why they put 6.03 of a tone generator going 'beep' on the flip of their sole 45, in lieu of this trippy masterpiece, is totally beyond me. Then again, it was the 60s...

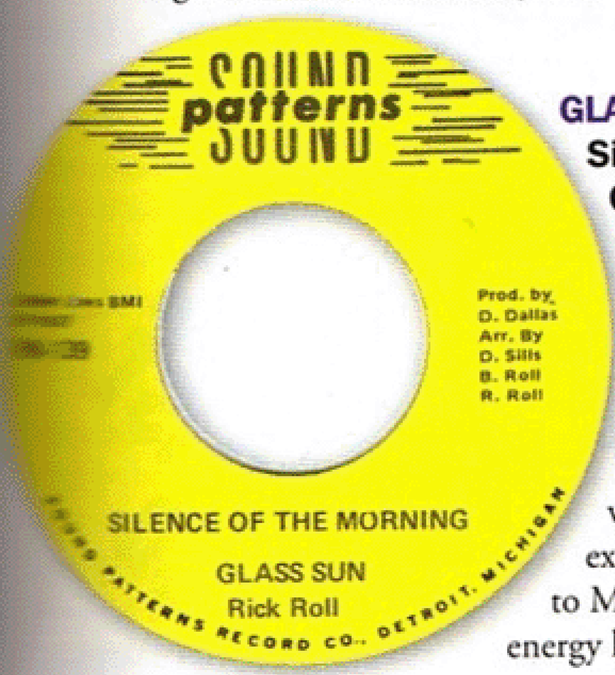


DRY ICE Mary Is Alone (unreleased Fleetwood acetate) This phenomenal 1967 anti-hard drug track is as good as any five-star UK psych track, with a Pretty Things *SF Sorrow* vibe. The track features a young Frank Dimino, before he joined up with Punky Meadows in Angel.

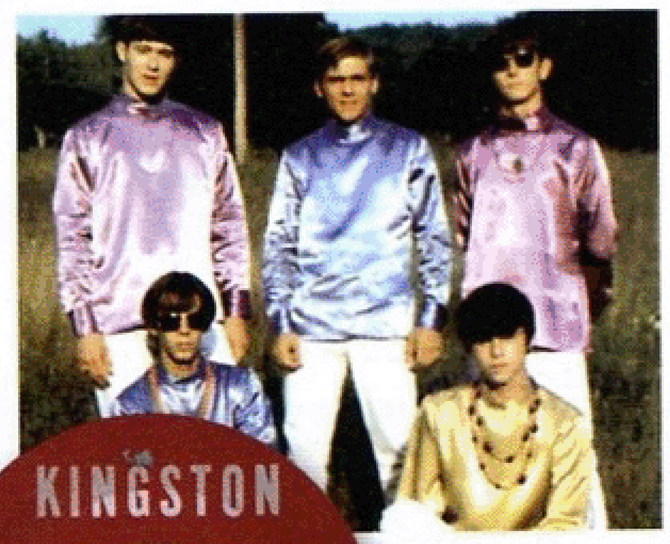
CHANGIN' TYMES Blue Music Box (MUMA) $300 An intense cut with a Music Machine groove.



LOOKING GLASSES Visions (Media) $400 A haunting cut with remarkable dynamics.



GLASS SUN Silence Of The Morning (Sound Patterns) $400 This is in the hard rock vein, but explodes in to Motor City energy levels.



FLOWERZ Flyte (Kingston) $75 Both Both musically and lyrically, this has to be one of punkadelia's finest moments.