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The Beckies, with Michael Brown centre...

MICHAEL BROWN

'Renee' to Beckies - a career review.

The fact that twice in his life Michael Brown has turned his back on rock stardom surely makes him an enigmatic character; the fact that he was only seventeen when he first hit success with his own song makes him something special.

Born Michael Lookofsky on 25 April 1949 in New York, he was brought up in a musical environment, his father, a Jewish emigre, being a much sought after studio violinist who recorded under the name of Slash Brown — hence the choice of name.

Recorded in 1966 and released on the Mercury/Smash label the first single, "Walk Away Renee"/"I haven't Got The Nerve" (Smash 2041) was an instantaneous chart success in the States, peaking at number 5 for his first band Left Banke. Initially, there was no Left Banke, the song having been recorded in his father's studio by Michael, Tom Finn, George Cameron and session musicians. On the basis that there was a hit it was logical that a band should be seen performing and so a group was formed consisting of Steve Martin (vocals), Jeff Winfield (guitar) who was replaced early in the bands career by Rick Brand; Tom Finn (bass), George Cameron (drums) and Michael Brown (harpischord and organ).

It's interesting that "Walk Away Renee" should be credited to Brown/Sansone/Callili, and the story goes that Brown wrote the song while using Tony Sansone's piano and in return he donated half the song to Sansone who in turn donated half of his share to Robert Joseph Callili. The debut album, "Walk Away Renee/Pretty Ballerina" (Smash SRS 67088) was

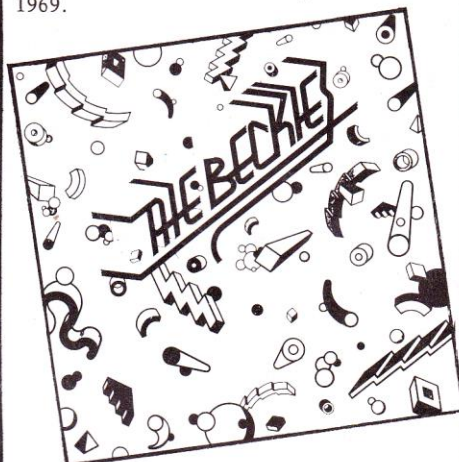
released in March '67 and was also recorded with the help of session men, produced by Brown's father. Of the 11 songs included, Brown wrote three with Steve Martin, two with Steve and George Cameron, three with Tom Feher and one on his own in addition to 'Renee'. The extra is a Martin Cameron number.

The group were obviously much influenced by British pop of that era since the guitar break in "Let Go Of You Girl" is a direct crib from the Beatles' "You're Gonna Lose That Girl" while "What Do You Know" has a similar influence. Another feature of the era was the use of harmont and Left Banke were no exceptions as showed on both "She May Call You Up Tonight" and "I Haven't Got The Nerve". Then of course there's the strong baroque rock feel to tracks such as "Ballerina", "Barterers and the Wives" and "Renee" with prominent use of harpsichord. For me the album's no way dated and remains very much a classic.

The only solo Brown composition on the album, "Pretty Ballerina" appeared b/w "Lazy Day" (Smash 2074) as the band's second single but was only a minor hit.

Considering the conditions under which the group was formed it was not unexpected that internal strife soon arose and Brown was the first to quit just after a national tour with the Beach Boys and returned to his favourite haunt, the recording studio to produce the single "Ivy, Ivy"/"And Suddnely" (Smash 2098) with the aid of Tom Feher and Bert Sommer. Released under the name of Left Banke the remainder of the band were non too pleased

with Michael's moves. The original band then had Smash release "She May Call You Up Tonight"/"Barterers And Their Wives" (Smash 2097) as the 'official' follow-up to "Ballerina". Both singles flopped. Smash then released a second album, "Too" (Smash SRS 67113) which comprised tracks left over from the original band and new tracks by the remaining three members. This features only two Brown compositions, both co-penned with Feher. "In The Morning Light" is fairly unspectacular but "Desiree" (released as a single — Smash 2119 — with "I've Got Something On My Mind") is the ultimate baroque Left Banke number. Despite the 'magic' the single flopped. With a few exceptions the remaining songs on "Too" are by Finn or Feher and with the exception of "Desiree" really isn't in the same class as the debut. The Left Banke struggled on for a while but eventually disbanded in 1969.



... and their album — a forgotten gem?

Now confining himself to the studio Brown songs were next featured on an album by Montage, a band that appear to be a latter day love and peace with beads outfit and comprised Bob Steurer (lead vocals), Vance Chapman (lead vocals, drums) Mike Smyth (lead guitar and vocals), and Lance Cornelius (bass and vocals). Brown produced the album and of the ten tracks co-wrote five with Sommer, four with Feher, the exception being Feher's own "My Love". The album (Laurie SLP 2049) has no release date on the cover but would appear to be around '68/'69. Michael's distinctive keyboard work can be heard throughout with side one being a spiral scratch of baroque rock. Brown's keyboards set the mood of the side, although on "She's Alone", the singer seems to be struggling to keep the melody and the lyric together. Stand-out cuts are "I Shall Call Her Mary" and a re-recorded "Desiree".

Side two is a mixture of influences. "The Song Is Love" has a very powerful harmony line, with excellent background organ work, but I'm afraid that "An Audience With Miss Priscilla Grey" is as bad as the title suggests.

Overall, the album has its moments but sounds dated and with a playing time of just under 25 minutes it's just as well that it's so short. One of the songs from "Montage", "The Grand Pianist", re-appeared on a Bert Sommer solo album, "Inside Bert Sommer", released on Buddah in '71 with Brown playing keyboards on the recording. Another Brown/Sommer number, "Magix Elixir", was featured on the "Bert Sommer" album also released in '71.

Michael's next group, Stories, was formed after his father introduced him to Ian Lloyd, whose father was also a studio violinist. Stories lined up as Brown on keyboards, Lloyd on bass and vocals with Steve Love (late of the Stone Canyon band and later for Roger McGuinn's Band) on guitar and Brian Madey on drums. The Baroque sounds of Left Banke and Montage were discarded for Stories whose sound was more that of a tight 60's British beat group. Concurrently bands such as Big Star, Raspberries and Blue Ash were floating

similar ideas but only Raspberries and Stories achieved any measure of commercial success. The first album released in 1972 was titled simple "Stories" (Kama Sutra KSBS 2051) and was produced by the band. It kicks off with the semi-religious "Hello People" and moves into "I'm Coming Home" which features a two voice counterpart vocal with Bar Room style piano greatly in evidence. "Winter Scenes" has a phased hissing effect on the vocal which creates the feeling of the voice carrying over vast snow covered plains; an excellent song. "St. James" which opens side two is probably the most upbeat number on the album and is, for me, the weakest track. Harpsichord is featured prominently on the ballad "Kathleen" but without any reference to Brown's earlier baroque interests and is surely one of the best cuts on the whole album. "Take Cover", which was issued as a single, is yet another 60's beat number with prominent guitar and drum patterns and searing Farfisa organ on the intro and close. Overall the album sees Michael back at a peak in both writing and performing, all the songs being written by the Brown/Lloyd partnership.

As with the debut, "About Us", the second album, was self-produced, part recorded in London at Olympic Studios and the remainder

at the Bell sound Studios in New York. Before the recording of this second album was completed Brown announced that he was quitting the band as he felt they were becoming stale. As a result the sound is less keyboard dominated. Unlike the first this album also features material written outside of the Brown/Lloyd axis, including Steve Love's "Changes Have Begun" and the American hit version of Hot Chocolate's "Brother Louie".

The overall feel of "About Us" is more sophisticated, the opening number, "Darling" being taken at a fast pace which relies heavily on Love's acoustic guitar and Brown's mellotron, with Love also providing an excellent middle eight on electric guitar. "Don't Ever Let Me Down" maintains the same pace, this time using a driving beat on the drums and more excellent work on electric guitar. Brown and Lloyd's British pop influences are brought strongly to the fore on the remaining three tracks on the first side. "Love Is In Motion" could have come straight from the "Hard Days Night" soundtrack and has a fair resemblance to "If I Fell" while there is almost a repeat of "Helter Skelter" on "Hey, France" with heavy

use of mellotron and sitar. "Please, Please" is the final track and has flashes of Who styled windmill guitar breaks and is one of the best songs on the album. The second side opens with Love's contribution, flashing similarities to the Moodies "Ride My See-Saw" on the guitar work. "Circles" is a barrel organ instrumental reminiscent of Russ Conway played at 78. "Believe Me" is fairly unspectacular but "Words" creates, for me, a feeling of riding a carousel, a joyous song with magnificent use of harpsichord and piano. What "Down Time Blooze" is all about with its noisy party goings on in the background is anyone's guess but the mistake is soon repaired by the penultimate cut, "What Comes After" which, with its use of backward tape and inspired pianowork is one of the best numbers on the album. "Brother Louie" closes the album, recorded after Brown's departure.

While "About Us" was being recorded Brown had his only solo single issued, "Circles"/"Premonition" (Kama Sutra KAS 563).

While Michael withdrew again from the rock world Stories went on to record a third album "Travelling Underground" before they finally split, Ian Lloyd, recording a solo album released in the States on Polydor in '76.

Two tracks from the Montage album, "Tinsel & Ivy" and "My Love", were featured on a '72 soundtrack album for the Ultra Violet porno movie Hot Parts and among the other tracks were two Brown songs "Two By Two" and "Love Songs In The Night" sung by Steve Martin but Brown himself was not involved with the actual sound track, either in performance or commissioned writing.

For a period after leaving Stories, Brown worked as a producer at Mercury Records before he again met up with Scott Trusty who he had recorded with before Stories were formed. One of the records produced for Trusty was "Quarter Horses" which was released on Big Tree. From this partnership came the Beckies, adding some members of the now defunct Kansas City outfit Chesmann Square-Mayo McAllister (guitars) and Gary Hodgden (vocals and drums). Brown was back on keyboards while Trusty provided lead vocals and bass. The resulting album, "Beckies" was released on Sire (SASD 7519) and is one of the 70's lost gems. All tracks are by Brown and Hodgden and side one cuts open with "Light By My Side", featuring a sharp rasping guitar and solid drumming taken at a fair lick. Strings and piano are to the fore on "River Bayou", one of the best cuts in the collection and the single release here. The recurrent 60's beat influences in Brown's work shows up again on "Midnight & You" while "Fran" evokes memories of Left Banke with its use of the string section.

Side one winds up at great speed with "Song Called Love" and that pace is maintained with the opening of side two, "Can't Be Alone" and "River Song" fairly pounding along. The ballad mood returns with "On The Morning That She Came", emphasising the high dramatic chorus climaxes. Left Banke rears its head again for "One of These Days" and the album winds up in fine form with the other side of the single, the racing "Run, Jenny, Run", a classic album.

Sadly the Beckie split after the album and since that time Michael Brown has been without a recording contract although he is still writing and is at present working with singer Kevin Fields. But in the meantime the legend rides on and "Walk Away Renee" comes round again on the latest Terry Reid album, "Rogue Waves", adding the latest comment on it's mighty strength and the abilities of Michael Brown.

Arthur Wood.

I would like to express my gratitude to Jude Lyons, Michael's current manager and Brian Hogg of Bam Balam (see issue 3, 34p from Flat 1, Castellau, Dunbar, East Lothian) for their help in putting this survey together and not least of all to Michael Brown for making it worthwhile.

