

THE YOUNG RASCALS

The biggest event in New York City in August 1965 was the Beatles concert at Shea Stadium. Over fifty-six thousand screaming fans converged on Flushing, Queens, the night of August sixteenth to see John, Paul, George, and Ringo. When they got to Shea Stadium there was a cryptic message on the giant electric scoreboard in center field—"The Rascals are here." Who the hell were the Rascals? they all thought. A few days earlier Sid Bernstein, the promoter behind the Beatles concert at Shea, was taken, against his better judgment, to the Barge, a nightclub in Southampton, Long Island. Bernstein was shanghaied into listening to the Barge's house band, four young men dressed in knickers, Eton collars, and short ties, who looked like rejects from an *Our Gang* comedy. Bernstein was uninterested in the band until they started playing the most riveting, foot-stomping "blue-eyed" R & B Bernstein had ever heard. The day after that Beatles concert, Bernstein became the Young Rascals' manager. Within a month he had set off a bidding war among the major record labels, and the Young Rascals signed a contract with Atlantic Records. Now Bernstein could legitimately proclaim, "The Rascals are here."

The Young Rascals were Felix Cavaliere, Dino Danelli, Eddie Brigati, and Gene Cornish. Felix grew up in Pelham, New York, a mostly Italian and black working-class community. He learned classical piano, but listened to R & B. He was the only white member of the Stereos, a street-corner singing group that hit the bottom of the charts in 1961 with "I Really Love You." Felix left the Stereos to go to Syracuse University, with all intentions of becoming a doctor. In two years he was back in New York City looking for work as a musician.

Dino Danelli learned to play drums as a kid in Jersey City, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. A fierce jazz drummer, Dino turned professional at age fifteen to tour with the Lionel

Hampton band. When his gig with Hampton was over, Dino wandered down to New Orleans, where he tuned in to rhythm and blues. In 1963 Dino headed back for New York City to work as an R & B session musician. While playing with a pickup band at the Choo Choo Club in Garfield, New Jersey, later that year, Dino met Eddie Brigati. Eddie, whose older brother, David, had played with one of the titans of the twist, Joey Dee and the Starlighters, was a seventeen-year-old wise guy who was trying to make it as a soul singer.

In early 1964 Felix and Dino both joined Sandy Scott and Her Scotties. After a quick tour of Las Vegas, both Dino and Felix had had enough of the Scotties and started looking for something else. Felix then played organ with Joey Dee and the Starlighters at the Peppermint Lounge in Manhattan. Joey Dee soon brought in a new lead singer, Eddie Brigati, and a new guitarist from Canada, Gene Cornish, whose group had broken up, leaving him stranded in New York. By the end of 1964 Felix, Eddie and Gene were chafing at the bit doing the twist every night at the Peppermint Lounge. They decided to form their own group, adding their old friend Dino on the drums. They spent the winter working on their act. In February 1965 the Young Rascals made their debut in Garfield, New Jersey, at the good old Choo Choo Club. By July they had moved to the Barge in Southampton, where Sid Bernstein found them.

The Young Rascals' first single was "I Ain't Gonna Eat Out My Heart Anymore," a blue-eyed soul rocker that climbed to number 52 on the charts in early 1966. Their next record, "Good Lovin'," a remake of the Olympics' 1965 record, started off as an embarrassment for the Rascals. They didn't like the mix on the record, so they began denying that it was theirs—but only until it hit number 1 in May 1966. The Young Rascals became the rage in New York, playing discotheques such as Harlow's and inspiring

hundreds of white soul bands in the metropolitan area.

They started 1967 with a top-twenty hit, "I've Been Lonely Too Long," and an official change in the group's name to simply the Rascals. In the spring, Felix sang the lead on a jazzy, laid-back number about taking it easy on a Sunday afternoon called "Groovin'," which became one of the biggest singles of 1967. It was number 1 for two weeks in May and two weeks in June, staying nine weeks in the top ten. "Groovin'" marked a change in the Rascals' style. While they had started out as a gutsy, rough-and-tumble white R & B group, the Rascals became more introspective after "Groovin'." As Felix and Dino got more involved with Swami Satchidananda's Integral Yoga Institute, the Rascals felt that every single had to have some deeper meaning. "How Can I Be Sure" was a hauntingly beautiful ballad, light-years away from the Rascals' earlier sound. "It's Wonderful," an embarrassing psychedelic montage released in December 1967, was an attempt to prove that they were as hip as the Beatles and the Jefferson Airplane.

In 1968 the Rascals sat down to redo "Groovin'" and came up with the dreamy "Beautiful Morning," which climbed to number 3 on the charts. After the Rascals were run out of Fort Pierce, Florida, by a bunch of rednecks because of their long hair, Eddie and Felix wrote the angry anthem, "People Got to Be Free." This became the Rascals' biggest record, spending two months in the top ten and five weeks in the number-1 slot. The group practiced what they preached, too. After the Fort Pierce incident, the Rascals announced that they would not appear on

any show that didn't include at least one black act. Many Rascals concerts were canceled as a result, and the group even turned down an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* because of alleged "racist policies."

Unfortunately the group's star was on the decline after 1969. Their music had become too personal, too jazz-oriented, and too free-form to attract a large following. In 1970 Eddie Brigati left the group because he wasn't satisfied with the direction his music was taking. In 1971 the Rascals left Atlantic Records for Columbia. Then Gene Cornish quit. Cavaliere and Danelli added three new members—Buzzy Feiten, Robert Popwell, and Ann Sutton—but the Rascals' two Columbia albums were mere exercises in self-indulgence. In the summer of 1972 the Rascals disintegrated.

Following the demise of the Rascals, Felix Cavaliere furthered his involvement in Eastern religion while producing records for Laura Nyro and the feminist rock group Deadly Nightshade and recording three solo albums on his own. Dino Danelli and Gene Cornish began the band Bulldog in 1972, but had little success with it. In 1978 Danelli and Cornish joined forces with Wally Bryson, formerly of the Raspberries, to form Fotomaker. Fotomaker hit with the single "Where Have You Been All My Life," but their album was disappointing. These former members of one of the great rock bands of the sixties were never able to recapture the chemistry that had brought them so much success and made so much memorable rock and roll.
