

# Five years of the Rascals

BY LENNY KAYE

I know this may sound a little overboard, but there once was a time when the Young Rascals were the greatest rock & roll band in the world. I say this without flinching, and in full realization that such combinations as the Rolling Stones and the Beatles were in the process of turning out their finest work. I say it in spite of the fact that there are those who would much rather see the Remains, ? (Question Mark) and the Mysterians, the Daily Flash, or some other heart-felt favorite stand in the top spot. And I say it knowing far too well that if you never had a bit of the Long Island psyche to guide you on your way, the chances are quite good that the group never made much of an impact on you, one way or another.

But in terms of stage presence, dynamics, and a flair for the most unique and ground-breaking style this side of Liverpool, I can't think of any other group that could have cut the Young Rascals in their prime. They never just walked on stage; they literally slithered in front of you, starting things at an energy level that most bands would have been happy to finish with, Dino snapping his head and twirling the sticks, Felix waving his hands around and rocking back and forth, Eddie with the toys and the tambourines, Gene playing the fattest guitar in four states. Their harmony was impeccable, their arrangements always tight and tasteful, their choice of songs always a step ahead of the obvious overdone. They were the first unabashed rock band that claimed a

massive rhythm & blues heritage, and they birthed a school of music that was to reach its fullest flowering with the Vanilla Fudge and last up until this day in the form of Uriah Heep.

And yet, the Rascals that we see in *Search and Nearness* (Atlantic SD 8276) is not that group. Increasingly, especially over the past couple of years, they discarded what were always their obvious strengths and concentrated on developing their weaknesses, and though one can't fault them for trying to grow and expand musically, you'd be hard pressed to find some of their legendary drive and excitement today, that massive power which gave them an impressive word-of-mouth following long before Atlantic had even heard of the group.

If you'd like a place to pin-point the start of this change, I'd have to choose the single, "Groovin'," which, ironically has probably been the Rascals' biggest record to date. The song itself is a beauty, a great move when you remember the acid-hazed spring in which it came out, fitting snugly into the format of Top-40 Good Guys radio with a charm that the Rascals always found quite natural to tap. But, ultimately it was flawed.

The group had been driven to become known as blue-eyed soul brothers, much in the tradition of the Magnificent Men and the Righteous Brothers, and so where they had formerly assimilated their R&B roots in a way that was never obvious, always in the context of the white rock & roll band formula, they now chose to bring it out in the open. Felix's reading of the song—a light, somewhat bouncy number—is a shade on the heavy-handed, weighing down the lyrics in a way that makes it seem as if you'd gone for a walk in the park with a twenty pound sack over

your shoulder. In retrospect, it might have been better for Eddie, whose voice was higher and younger, bordering very much on the teenage, to have sung in this particular setting.

The second problem though it was nowhere as apparent here as it would become in future Rascals' releases, was a kind of aggressively up-to-date feel to the lyrics, which now makes them seem dated and out of place. For the word "groovin'" itself, whatever its popularity might have been in the spring before the Summer of Love, does not appear to have been designed as a timeless expression, and thus does not add to the song's durability.

After "Groovin'," both of these factors got larger and larger, with the group following a patch that took them farther away from rock & roll with each passing album release. I'm not about to set rock & roll up as any be-all and end-all here, but the Rascals, in their push to be an ace rhythm & blues band, their jazz trappings and their quest to communicate Great Truths, always seemed to move in the direction of the most mediocre of those styles, the most readily apparent direction. They had always had a predilection toward cocktail music, with such things as "More" and "I Believe" in the early days, and now this was being expanded to cover a simplistic form of 5/4 jazz, heavy production trips that obscured rather than enhanced what they were doing, and songs that were as meaningless as they were meaningful.

Happily, they still hit some high points. The Rascals *always* made great singles, beginning with "I Ain't Gonna Eat Out My Heart Anymore" and "Good Lovin'," and once you have that sort of knack, it's very difficult to lose it. And so,

in the midst of a peculiar brand of Long Island Orientalia, or the vague noodlings that permeated much of *Freedom Suite* and *See*, you could still pick out a goodly number of instant classics: "People Got To Be Free," "Carry Me Back," "See" and a few pieces of some others. Like the rest, they were bogged down by a duality consisting of slightly overblown lyrics and a feeling that someone, somewhere, was trying a bit too hard; but they sounded so good, so old-fashionedly lusty, that anything else that tied them down was amazingly simple to ignore. Good ol' radio did it again.

Which leaves us, at the end of the trail, with the new album. In a sense, *Search and Nearness* is a sign of hope for the group, for it shows that the pattern that the Rascals have so relentlessly been following over the past couple of years is petering out. Judged on its own, it's not a particularly memorable album, but somehow it does hold out hope for the future.

For one, guided by the handy sleeve that comes inside the cover, those once-pallid lyrics seem to be rapidly improving. If Felix wants to write about Truth and Self instead of such rock & roll perennials as sex and havin' a good time, that's nothing to knock in itself. And here, he avoids obvious sermonizing (as characterized much of the previous few albums), preferring instead simple statements of his philosophies, mixing up his images in a directly personal way that wasn't apparent before.

The songs, too, are less gimmicky, prone to follow their own particular courses all the way through. We're not being impressed here that, yes, the Rascals are conversant in this-and-that form of music, but rather they're letting each tune speak for itself, drop-

ping in additional fills whenever necessary.

Indeed, except for a couple of bland moments, most of the album comes off as sort of nice. They do their first wholly successful jazz-oriented instrumental in "Nama," have Eddie deliver a lovely Gene Cornish tune called "You Don't Know," and watch Felix steal the show with "Almost Home," one of the prettiest things he's written in a long, long time. Dino's drumming, of course, remains one of the finest features of the record, crisp and to the point as always, and even the closing cut, scene of so many Rascals' toppling masterworks, is a rocking good time, a "Glory Glory" full of that gospel fervor which they increasingly tried for and never came quite as close to as here. Though it must be admitted that nowhere do you feel any of the ramrod drive that characterized their early records, home-bound hits like "Slow Down," "Come On Up," or my personal favorite, "You Better Run," I guess it was only inevitable that the Young Rascals would have to grow up someday.

The group moves to Columbia from here, and among the circulating rumors is that they have added either one or two girls to the group, have a new album that is nearing completion, and plan to go on the road once again. Eddie's long gone, of course, and he'll probably be the one I miss most and Gene has since departed as well, but it seems apparent at this stage that the story of the Rascals is not quite over yet. With all of their ups and downs, they've given us a block of five years which contain more than we might have expected from most groups, a bit of rock history that can never be denied. My only hope is that they're about to start all over again. Once more, with feeling.