Felix Cavaliere of the Young Rascals

The Long Winter of Discontent

There used to be a lot of good, good lovin' between them.

The [Young] Rascals were so close, people thought they were four brothers—or at least our answer to the Beatles. For they were on their own magical mystery tour, with such jazzy, rousing hits as "People Got to Be Free," "A Beautiful Morning," "Groovin' " and of course, "Good Lovin'."

Then they got too big and famous, and everything fell apart.

Managerial problems, ego battles, hassles with record companies, drugs, women—all this contributed to the group's downfall.

But as Felix Cavaliere, their chief songwriter and vocalist bitterly suggests, the Rascals' demise is more the stuff of a scandalous Tommy Thompson novel; lost dreams, innocence adrift in a sea of greed and orgies, power plays, and savage personality clashes that scarred and bankrupted the group's soul.

"We had so much camaraderie, we were having so much fun, we didn't see what was happening to us," cries Cavaliere, his dark, bearded face reddening with despair. Wincing, as if talking about the death of a loved one, he shuffles past an impressive array of oriental antiques in his living room. Finally plopping down on a sofa, he shakes his head disgustedly, and insists, "We could've been a household word, we could've done so much. We had the world by the tail; we were so damn hot it was

insane . . . there was no reality whatsoever. I felt like I was an astronaut.

"We were going so high up we lost all control. Everything was happening too quickly. The notoriety overcomes you, the money, the wild parties, the women, the kids screaming, the constant pressure to produce . . . stardom sweeps you up, and changes you . . . None of us dreamed we were going to get so big. Remember, in two years [1966–68], we had nine Top 20 hits . . . that was unbelievable, but it ruined us . . . all of a sudden we're in L.A., around people who've been stars for years, and if you're not a strong human being you never come back. They're space cadets out there, and you get sucked into it . . .

"Instead of candy, people gave us LSD, drugs, you name it. We had a harem, orgies in the back seats of cars . . . it was sickening, at least for me . . . I was very disillusioned. There's a falseness about being a hot artist . . . being on top is very precarious. I got confused and started to question things . . . the other guys didn't want things to change, they saw the money coming in, so the fighting got very stupid, very vicious. A lot of resentment surfaced. We split into cliques, and fighting just got to be too much, too, too much . . . The tragedy of the Rascals is that we lost our dream, we were a very special group, and we blew it . . . we had a dream there . . . and we'll never regain a tenth of that."

While Cavaliere is still mourning that loss, the Rascals' influence lives on. They crossed the color line, and flavored pop music with a distinct R & B sound. The group was also a political trailblazer. They wouldn't perform unless black acts were included on the bill, and while this predictably caused them a lot of trouble in the South, several clubs and arenas were ultimately integrated.

These accomplishments prompt flashbacks for Cavaliere, and when talking about them, he drifts between pride, rage, and sadness. Entombed by "what might have been," he derives limited satisfaction from his family, his lush Connecticut surroundings, and recent attempts to get back into the business. He's tried to find some solace in Eastern mysticism, and judging by the numerous portraits of the Swami Satchinanda in his house, that faith is still strong. But even this guru has failed him in a way, for there's a void in Cavaliere's life. He grew up with a dream, a consuming passion to be respected as a musician, and only wound up with a few years of glory. That need to be acknowledged couldn't have been fulfilled. There was promise for so much more.

As a youngster, growing up in New Rochelle, New York, Cavaliere was forced by his mother to take classical piano lessons, and by age twelve he was winning contests at Carnegie Hall. Even then he fell into a "trance" when writing lyrics, and felt a need "to create my own stuff."

His father didn't understand this musical absorption. A traditional Italian of the old school, he wanted Felix to follow his own footsteps, and become a dentist. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cavaliere encouraged her son's musical interests, but she died in 1956 when Felix was only fourteen. He was quickly ordered not to play rock 'n' roll in the house.

"Blown away by Ray Charles, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Fats Domino," Cavaliere didn't give in. He surreptitiously joined a high school band, and was constantly going "to the wrong side of town" to hear people like the Clovers (they had a 1959 hit with "Love Potion No. 9") and the Drifters.

When remembering these early jaunts to ghetto clubs, Felix finally perks up, and breaking into a smile, says, "One time I freaked out. I saw a Hammond organ for the first time, and it popped my head off. That's what the Rascals were all about, that organ, sax, drums . . ."

Stirred by the sound in these forbidden haunts, Cavaliere openly rebelled against his father by becoming "blacker and blacker." Besides forming his own band, the integrated Stereos, he slicked back his hair, wore a black leather jacket, and hung out with such songwriters like Neil Diamond and Carole King, in the beatnik coffeehouses of Greenwich Village.

Each downtown trip heightened his father's anxiety, and finally, the eighteen-year-old was sent to Syracuse University. This pre-med training was meant to turn Felix away from music, or, as he good-naturedly quips, "My father thought it would end this rock 'n' roll foolishness, and put some sense into my head." But freed of all restraints, Felix sang in enough black clubs to earn the nickname "Ray Charles." In 1963, he met "Mr. Twist," Joey Dee.

"This was the turning point for me," says Felix, as his wife brings a tray of tea and cookies into the room. After exchanging smiles with her, Cavaliere again turns grim. Recounting how his introduction to Dee eventually led to his joining David Brigati and the other Starlighters on a European tour, he bristles, "Joey got all the attention, 80 percent of the take and I felt I was working in toilets. He was very intelligent in picking his players, but I'd been a small-time *star,* and now I was only a sideman. The whole thing was very discouraging, I lost all my confidence.

"The only good thing going on was playing with the Beatles. We'd turn up in the same small clubs in Hamburg and Sweden, and seeing the hysteria they caused, you could tell there was something happening. I could see the beginning of a revolution."

Still there was the discouragement of his career "coming to a grinding halt." He turned to drugs, and was soon overcome by marijuana, pills and hash. A woman, with whom he had two children, restored some of his confidence, but he continued to play with Dee until 1965.

That's when he met Eddie Brigati, David's brother, who was singing regularly at the Choo Choo Club in New Jersey. Felix went there one night with another Starlighter, Gene Cornish. After the three did a few numbers together, Felix was so impressed by the audience's reaction, he sensed that "This was something special we had to take advantage of.

"The rebel was rising up in me, and I told them, 'Look, we really did it right, so why not start our own group? We were great out there, our music went POW!' "

The others agreed, and after Felix secured the services of long-time friend Dino Danelli, Them, as the Rascals were initially called, came into being. For months, they appeared at the Choo Choo Club. Then they hooked up with Soupy Sales at the Barge (a discothèque in East Hampton, Long Island), and their whole act changed.

"We were still doing funky versions of Beatles tunes, but we wanted to attract more attention," recounts Felix cheerfully. "Dino got us out of our suits and ties, and we started wearing these ridiculous knickers. That's when Soupy said, 'I'd like to call you the Little Bastards.' We couldn't do that, so he called us the Little Rascals."

It was Big Break time. Since Cavaliere's group was filling the Barge, record people inevitably came to see them. An RCA representative, various agents, and even Phil Spector offered them contracts. But Sid Bernstein, the impresario of the Beatles' upcoming Shea Stadium concert, talked the sweetest. He became their manager, and in August 1965, the scoreboard lights at Shea flashed, "The Rascals are here."

They certainly were. Aided by that appearance, Bernstein ignited a bidding war among the major record companies, that eventually led to a deal with Atlantic. This brought them "some decent money," but Cavaliere bitterly fumes, "The first thing Sid did for us was the last. So many bad moves were made, we were run like a little candy store. It was ridiculous. I don't really blame him; we saw what was going on, yet we were schmucks; we let them happen.

"Right away Sid called us, and said we can't use just the name 'Ras-

cals,' then without our knowledge, he put in the 'Young.' I hated that name.

"We were also losing control over what we recorded . . . but did Eddie or Dino care? Shit! They'd been poor all their lives, so the only important thing to them was the money. I was always the bad guy, the guy making waves."

Despite this turmoil, the Rascals spun off a string of hits. First there was "Good Lovin'," their remake of the Olympics' 1965 song, which soared to number one by May 1966. Then "I've Been Lonely Too Long," written by Cavaliere, and "You Better Run," which was co-authored with Brigati, came next. Both songs hit the Top 20, but by 1967 they had abandoned their spirited, black R & B sound and adopted a lighter, more carefree style for the song "A Girl Like You" and their album *Groovin'*. The album's title song, about a lazy Sunday afternoon, was one of the year's top sellers.

Most of these songs had an airy, whimsical quality. Felix's singing and organ playing were decidedly upbeat. But, by 1967, the "screwing around" and the LSD parties had soured him—and in turning to the Swami Satchinanda for spiritual help, his songs became progressively more serious and introspective.

The Rascals, in turn, became more hip. They dropped the "Young" from their name, stopped wearing Edwardian knickers, and moved from poignant ballads like "How Can I Be Sure?" to the psychedelic-edged "It's Wonderful."

This effort to keep up with the times kept their streak of hits alive for a while, but when record sales started to drop at the beginning of 1968, they were ill-equipped to deal with adversity. Their chemistry, the bond that keeps groups together, had already been destroyed by years of fighting. The group went on for a few more years, and even scored with two more smash hits, "A Beautiful Morning," and "People Got to Be Free," yet, as Cavaliere mournfully suggests, the feuding got so bad, these 1968 successes had little meaning.

"The gulf between us was so wide; there was really a break-up," says the forty-four-year-old Cavaliere, leaving his seat to walk out a rear door that leads to acres of wooded land. Once outside, he ignores the icy winds blowing off a nearby lake, and heads toward a cliff edged with huge boulders. On the way, he gruffly continues, "The other guys always resented my leadership role, but when I got close to the Swami, they thought I was insane. That's when the fighting got out of hand. They thought I was deserting them, and viciously went on the attack.

"The group was coming apart at the seams . . . everyone was panicking . . . especially when I went off to Mexico with the Swami for a while. But the big mistake was Bernstein's letting them into the decision-making process. They had no training for that, and a manager should have kept them in their place. We were a democracy, vetoing things we never should have. I wanted to open up new territories, like South America and Japan, but they always said no. I can understand their frustrations, too. I was often headstrong and cut out some of their songs, but they put me against the wall."

Feeling trapped and increasingly frustrated by "bad business decisions," Cavaliere insists, "I had to save myself, so I got tighter and tighter with the Swami. He was like the perfect father for me; he never put me down. We had such a rapport, and, unlike the other people I was meeting, he never asked for any money. I never had any warmth from my father, so maybe he was the replacement. I loved him; he's a good, intelligent, sensible human being.

"If not for him, we would have never done '[It's a] Beautiful Morning'. I was ready to give it all up, but he told me it was my obligation to the kids to spread joy and happiness. So the group stayed together . . . but there was no spirit left. It was long gone."

The Rascals still had enough energy to do their memorable swan song, "People Got to Be Free," a lively retort to a racist incident at a Fort Pierce, Florida, concert. The song stayed on the charts for months (number one for five weeks) in 1968–69, and has since sold over four million copies.

They adopted a jazz motif next, incorporating free-flowing instrumentals from people like Ron Carter and Hubert Laws, and their audience deserted them. Albums such as *See* and *Search and Nearness* were commercial disasters. The magical mystery tour was now over. In 1970, on the eve of signing a new deal with Columbia, Eddie Brigati left the group.

"I couldn't believe he'd do that to me," says Felix, shaking his head in disgust. "I took him in and inspired him to be a lyricist. We were like this [he touches his thumb with his forefinger]. For him to turn on me like that . . . it still hurts. I'm extremely pissed off by the whole thing. I was treated like a greedy S.O.B., but that's bullshit. I always put the group first. In those days, I turned down a lot of money, many times, by refusing to do solo ventures."

After Gene Cornish left in 1971, Felix and Dino kept the group alive by bringing in three new musicians. This allowed them to do two more

albums for Columbia, but, in reality, the Rascals had already died. It only became official in the summer of 1972.

While the other Rascals joined different groups, Cavaliere retreated to his Connecticut home. After two solo albums, he shied away from the business for several years, until Laura Nyro asked him to produce *Season of Light.*

Admittedly, the mid-1970s were tormenting for Cavaliere. None of these musical efforts recaptured the magic of the Rascals, and this preyed on him. Besides struggling financially and emotionally, he felt like "an outcast in the industry"; someone who couldn't relate "to the mass of Wall Streeters that came into the business after Woodstock."

Many of these corporate types have pressured him to put the Rascals back together, floating rumors about their revival; and on several occasions, the group has even talked about a string of concerts. While Cavaliere could certainly use the money, each meeting has only strengthened his conviction that such a reunion would be wrong. He sees it as "a ripoff of the public," and even more pointedly says, "It would be a disaster to get together again, a smear on the Rascals' good name."

Gritting his teeth in disgust, Cavaliere hops off a boulder on which he's been sitting, and continues talking while pacing around, "Look, we're just not one big happy family anymore, so the right reasons for a reunion aren't there. Why kid ourselves? It's no good. It's a sellout if I do it. I don't want people to see what they're really like. I don't want the public to see what the others have become. The most important thing to me is not the money, but keeping a little of our magic—the illusion—intact."

Hoping to create "new works of art that will also dazzle people," Cavaliere is writing the musical score for a Joseph Papp play, *Five Guys Named Mo,* and producing records for a few Connecticut rock groups. This latter endeavor brings him into contact with record-industry people, whom he still distrusts. Felix angrily complains, "The business is so damn political, I can't cope with it at times," but he's still devoted to helping "kids" avoid the "mistakes" he's made.

"I've gotten beaten up. Your feelings can really be bruised by how the business is run today. There are a lot of slimy people around; they're so commercial-minded. But my religion has kept me sane, and I'm getting a lot of happiness from guiding these groups. The Rascals never got much help; that's why we didn't reach our full potential. Yet the past

doesn't have to repeat itself. I know I can be of value to these kids. They don't have to go through the crap we did."

These biting remarks belie Cavaliere's assertion that "there's no sadness in my life," and hint at a deep inner torment. Despite living comfortably in a beautifully furnished house that resounds with the happy laughter of two young children, he's still burdened by the past. "There's some life in the old man yet," he'll happily chirp when talking about his new interests, yet the conversation always drifts back to the Rascals, especially to their unfulfilled promise, and then his lingering regrets become all too clear.

"I'm happy that the Rascals will be remembered by their songs. We're still played. Unlike the Doors, who've made a conscious effort to stay alive, no one's pushing our songs, and I'm proud of that. That lasting recognition is something I always wanted, even when I first started to play the piano as a young kid.

"But it's a shame; that moment we had on the stage was so short . . ." Smacking his palms together to illustrate the brevity of that moment, Cavaliere falls silent for a while. His face etched with regret, he finally sighs, "It was so short, it was so damn short."