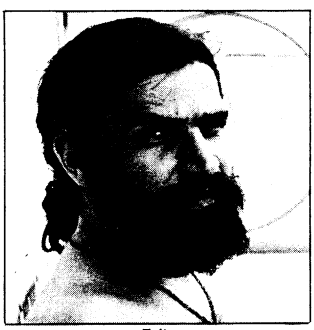
Photographs by **Steven Paley**

THE BLACKEST WHITE GROUP OF ALL



Felix

BY JOHN LOMBARDI

They're the toughest white group in Harlem. You can hear them at 125th Street and Lennox Avenue, in Watts, Los Angeles, on the South Side of Chicago, at Broad and South in Philly—wherever there are black music stores blaring soul into littered streets—right along with Ike and Tina, Rufus Thomas, Pharoah Sanders. It's at the point now where the Rascals don't get their gold record if the black street people don't dig their latest single.

Felix Cavaliere grew up in Pelham, New York, on the far side of the Bronx, out where the skyscrapers and 16-story modern tenements of New York give way to lower horizons and less dramatic life-styles. It is one of the neighborhoods where the city's hard-hats go when they leave their construction jobs. In the Forties, when Felix was a kid, it was already being "invaded" by blacks.

Asked to explain his attraction and affinity for black music, Cavaliere can only hesitate, then mumble something about "feeling and rhythm . . . you, know, the rhythms are tighter, more together, *happier* in a way" . . . If you have to *ask*, man, if you didn't grow up with all those skinny-strap undershirts and St. Francis miraculous medals shining in the sweat of July and boiling macaroni, with that tough punk posturing that separated you from the corniness of Confession and the old man's belly . . .

Down the block, on one of the corners where your boys never hung out, the black guys who were moving in were striking singing poses and harmonizing songs like "In the Still of the Night" by the Five Satins and "I Only Have Eyes for You" by the Flamingos, and they were *better;* sure, the old people in the neighborhood could talk all they wanted to about "eggplants" (a generic term for blacks in Italian ghetto slang), but the music these guys were making made more sense than the white stuff by Bill Haley and the Comets or Freddie Bell and the Bellboys, or the Mario Lanza 78s Uncle Georgio was always hauling out and announcing as "real music." And the black chicks were always switching by with their high, firm butts and their little smiles. It was hipper, the whole thing, the way the blacks walked, danced, played cards—they were outside all the crap.

The reasons why records by three Italians and an Irishman with the kinds of working-class backgrounds that are usually antithetical to blacks are listened to and even purchased by blacks are, perhaps, deceptively simple. The Rascals, particularly Felix Cavaliere, beyond being dedicated to R&B and soul, understand it. If that sounds too easy, try considering that "understanding soul" has to do with letting down real barriers, bridging a couple of cultures and identifying intelligently in an almost Stanislavskian sense.

The superficial aspects of soul can be picked up easily—the vocal inflections, rhythmic, harmonic and lyrical techniques, the choreography, the jive—but an understanding of the basic sadness and bleakness that most black music covers and seeks to transcend is simply beyond the scope of white groups like the Soul Survivors, the Detroit Wheels or, in hipper circles, Janis Joplin, Al Kooper or Canned Heat. What is needed, to get it on, is a (temporary) loss of self, or more directly, the realization of another "self" in an "alien" culture.

When the Rascals did Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Tour" and "Mustang Sally" in 1966 and '67 they were, in a sense, paying dues (even though the songs were hits). You have to start somewhere, and as imitations go, the releases were excellent. But unlike the Stones, Joe Cocker, Delaney and Bonnie, Van Morrison, Creedence Clearwater and Dr. John, who use soul and R&B as a jumping off place for their own styles, the Rascals submerged themselves in the form and then surfaced—in tunes like "Groovin'," "Girl Like You" and "People Got to be Free"—with nothing less than a new musical persona. (This holds true despite the fact that the change did not occur evenly, that "imitation" and "real" records overlapped for a time.) The white Rascals were writing and performing black songs; it was as if they'd discovered a kind of funky alchemy.

Reaction in white, black, hip and teeny circles was predictable and followed class patterns. Blacks and prole white kids dug what was happening. Hip, middle-class whites were put off by lines like "I'm in love with you" and by Rascal arrangements, which were considered "too simple." Teenies didn't like the weird beards and funkier image that went with the musical changes and that obscured, for example, drummer Dino Danelli's celebrated Paul McCartney features.

The first group Felix ever appeared with was called the Stereos. They were right off the streets of Pelham and Felix was the only white guy. Nobody played an instrument but the singing was strong. It was 1957.

In 1957, Eisenhower was still president and Frankie Avalon was still an unknown trumpet player with Rocco and the Saints in North Wildwood, New Jersey. The pejorative "Wop-rock" had not yet been born, but Felix's musical predilections weren't so popular around the neighborhood:

"I had a couple tough times, you know the old people. But time went by. I made a little money and they saw I was serious. You know."

Joey Dee and the Starlighters, except for Joey and Felix (and for a brief time Felix's older brother Dave), were also black, and Felix got a lot out of the group. (Later, Gene Cornish, who would become the Rascals' lead guitarist and Eddie Brigati, who would become bassist and lead singer, joined the band.) He was with them in the early Sixties, playing organ and singing. He'd begun listening to Ray Charles and had visited black clubs where he found "the people were having more fun and they were less inhibited than anything I'd ever seen before . . . these people had nothing. They just came and enjoyed the beat and smiled. It went beyond music."

In addition to giving the world its third version of the Twist—Hank Ballard and the Midnighters wrote it and recorded it first, Chubby Checker "pop-

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Dino

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ularized" and (according to the elite corps of Wop-rockers and their Hebe entrepreneurial fellow-travelers who were beginning to emerge) "bastardized" it—Joey Dee and his boys, the house band at the Peppermint Lounge in the West Fifties in Manhattan, represented the first full flowering of the Pop Life.

All the "names" in music, movies, journalism, even theater, could be found for a season at the Lounge, twisting away with all the anonymous proles from Brooklyn, New Jersey and Pelham. Felix was part of that of course, but his interest was more in what the band was playing than what the social ramifications would be. There were a couple of dynamite musicians with the Starlighters. One was Willie Davis, an incredible black drummer who has disappeared: the other was Sam Taylor, Jr., a mad guitarist and son of the famed sax player Sam "The Man" Taylor. Neither of them made much impact or had much success in music. Nor did Hank Ballard. The fact that all three were black impressed Felix with a sense of something larger going wrong.

The Rascals began in February, 1965 at the Choo Choo Club in Garfield, New Jersey, Eddie Brigati's hometown. Felix, Eddie and Gene left Joey Dee together, and Dino Danelli, whom Felix met during a gig in Las Vegas, joined them a short time later. They had no name at first but everyone knew them as "the guys who wore knickers."

Eddie first wore them to be funny since a lot of older Italians men in town occasionally wore their grandfathers' knickers, but they got response and the whole band began showing up in them.

"We put them on as a joke," Gene Cornish remembers. "We didn't want to wear suits because it was too stiff. And we didn't want to wear dungarees—it really wasn't being done except for the Stones and we didn't want that kind of image."

There were some other gigs after the Choo Choo Club, but they were on the same level. By July however, the band graduated to a nightclub called The Barge in Long Island's chic South Hampton. People like Bette Davis, Judy Garland and Senator and Mrs. Jacob Javits —the post-Peppermint Lounge crowd— frequented the place. The "Guys in Knickers" socked it out regularly in 40 minute sets, doing English and straight rock as well as rhythm and blues, but it was the R&B that started the lines forming outside The Barge. What had become accepted fare in real prole bars like the Choo Choo was an innovation in South Hampton. Felix and the boys took full advantage.

In the summer of 1965, Sid Bernstein, a powerful New York promoter and agent, was presenting the Beatles in concert in Shea Stadium. Walter Hyman, another agent (now Dustin Hoffman's manager), was working with the band and had been trying to get Bernstein out to Long Island to see them for weeks. Finally Hyman and his chauffeur just grabbed Bernstein as he was leaving his office one day, stuffed him into a limousine, and drove him out to The Barge.

"I looked at these funny-looking guys," Bernstein remembers. "They don't have sex appeal — who's going to buy those knickers? They looked like Italian kids from a Tremont Avenue poolroom I used to live near.

"Forty-five minutes later I felt I had heard the greatest group I ever heard in my life. They were so dynamic. They were beautiful. All of a sudden they had sex appeal."

Bernstein, who doesn't putz around once he's on to a good thing, used the electric scoreboard at Shea Stadium during the Beatles concert on August 16th to advertise "The Rascals Are Here." He became their manager the next day. After signing them, he prefixed "Young" to the Rascals' name, because someone had already registered "Rascals." (The "Young" was dropped again two years ago when the boys reached their late 20s).

Shortly after that, in part because of Bernstein's interest, record companies began making offers. Atlantic got the Rascals with a $15,000 advance, low in current times but good for pre-Johnny Winter days. The group's first single, released on November 16th, was a Cavaliere/Brigati composition called "I Ain't Gonna Eat Out My Heart Anymore," and it made the Top 50. Wop-rock, a genuine amalgam of tomato sauce and ribs grease, had been born.

The Rascals' first number one song was "Good Lovin'." It broke while they were working at the Whiskey A Go Go in Los Angeles. "We really didn't want that record out," Gene Cornish recalls. "I didn't like the mix or the sound. Some of the fellows tried to deny that it was our record for the first couple of weeks because we were embarrassed. When it got to be number one, they didn't deny it."

Eddie

Gene

They looked like Italian kids from a Tremont Avenue pool room

cals' contemporaries in those ied the Vanilla Fudge (form- n as the Pigeons whom they e Long Island and North Jer- y the Vagrants and the Rich four groups played a par- nky music, influenced by the Spanish elements in New York completely different from the e elaborately lyrical and coun- folk-rock that groups like the oonful were beginning to pop- day only the Rascals are left t was tentatively called "The t Sound." The reason—beyond ersonality conflicts and money to do with the Rascals' defi- oul":

a lot of things I do, I'm turn the other guys off. But respect each other and allow to be. That's really impor- like being married." Felix is beard. "We bend. We are fference between an Oriental stern person. An Oriental kind with the wind, and a Western ets it head on. So we kind of lot of this Oriental philosophy es towards each other."

Two and a half years ago Felix had achieved what most pop musicians would consider "success." The Rascals were making money, getting consistent Top 40 singles and high album sales, and they had a following in black and white audiences. And Felix was unhappy.

He'd begun reading Zen and Timothy Leary, and then someone gave him a book on Yoga. Felix was skeptical but, he says, the book stayed with him. During a rehearsal for a show he was going to do for Steve Paul, he spotted an old man with long robes and hair seated in a circle of about 150 people at Paul's Scene, one of the first hip music clubs in New York. Felix says he "recognized" the man, Swami Satchidananda. He's been a part-time pupil ever since.

"Sometimes you wonder how a person in the ghetto feels when he turns on a television. Someone is blaring at him to get something you know he can't afford. It must be really frustrating. I have more than three-quarters of the people on the earth. Why? How come? Swami Satchidananda said it had to do with my sansara, my road. I learned what I know in another lifetime. I shouldn't question it except to be aware of it. That's all."

Unlike some other "revolution"-talking pop stars however, Cavaliere has gone beyond the acceptance of a conventional wisdom. After playing a series of jobs in the South during a Dick Clark tour, he came home determined to do something:

"A lot of people forget that Florida is in the South. They get confused with the fact that Miami is Florida, but that's like an extension of New York. We were doing Tampa and Orlando and places like that. We had a little Cortez—which is like a trailer—and everybody else on the tour was in a horrible bus.

"We would travel by ourselves with no Dick Clark representative and get there whenever we got there without anybody hammering over us. On this particular ride we happened to break down near a town by the name of Fort Pierce. It was a big mistake for us.

"A policeman came by and saw that we were broken down. We explained that we'd like to use the telephone and call ahead to tell them we couldn't make it. Then we went to have dinner in a restaurant. These two men came over and one sat down and said: 'You know I'm trying to figure out whether you're a boy or a damn girl.' We tried to be funny with him and say 'I'm not too sure myself' and all, and then we realized that this cat is not fooling around. He says: 'You know where we come from we chew on people like you. Let me see your draft card.' I said, 'What do you want to see my draft card for?' He said, 'Because I'm an ex-Marine myself.' We were in for it now because the rest of the place was becoming aware of what was going on and they're on his side. There's a big rebel flag behind the counter. People were grabbing knives and forks because it's going to happen, man, and you better be ready for it.

"Our road manager was going to get some Hertz cars and he called up, not knowing what was happening. We had our meals on the table. We put down the money plus at least $5 extra. We didn't touch the food. We just kind of went toward the door. There was another man who was saying 'Leave 'em alone,' but the man didn't want to hear it.

"The road manager arrived with the cars and we got out of there somehow, but then we realized we had to go back to the trailer and empty our stuff. In those days, it was everything we owned.

"We started to go to the trailer and we saw all these people following us. It had become a fun Saturday night thing to do for them. So I said, 'Let's go to the police station. We're not going to fight them. They'll kill us.' But this guy in the police station wasn't that interested in helping us. He didn't even want us in his police station.

"I told him I was going to phone the state police and that seemed to shake him up. They put two guys with us and said, 'All right, all right, never mind, we'll go along.' These guys didn't seem to care at all. Not at all. But they came and we had two cars and we had to unload this trailer. When we got to the gas station where we left the trailer—this is the truth—there must have been 50 or 60 motorcycles waiting for us. On each of the motorcycles there was at least one person. Some of them had as much as three. They were going to kill us, evidently. They definitely wouldn't just hurt us.

"Now one cop got out of the car and he reluctantly said, 'Aaahh go on home now. All right, go on home.' But he really didn't want to do that. You could see that in his eyes.

"So I told the guys let them do their little thing and let's get everything out fast. We were just like a chain and kept everything going. It was unbelievable. The two cops would have never stopped them. 'Go on home now,' and you hear vrooom, vrooom. It was really horrifying. Well, they followed us all the way to the outskirts of town. It made quite a mark on the group. Eddie was like a child compared to the people that were going to hurt him. He got so mad he swore he was going back in there and clean the town out with a machine gun."

When Felix toured the South with Joey Dee, he experienced similar problems. Gas station attendants often refused to serve them and sometimes even throw things; he once saw some rednecks lasso a black girl in a convertible, pull her out and drag her down the street; in Mississippi, after the Rascals had let some black kids without money in a back door to watch their show, the stage crew tried to keep them from going on.

Shortly after the Florida tour the Rascals released "People Got to be Free," and Felix announced a new appearance policy—the Rascals would perform at no more shows that didn't include at least one black act. This meant even more than the free shows groups like the Dead, Airplane and Peter, Paul and Mary had been doing for years, because it was a permanent financial sacrifice. Many of the Rascals' dates in the South and other places had to be canceled. ("You'd be surprised how many other places in the country are just as uptight.")

Felix claims he feels better doing a free gig after a series of paying ones: "It evens things out." Among a long list of benefits the Rascals have played are the Soul Together show for Martin Luther King two years ago at Madison Square Garden; a UNICEF benefit last year in London with John Lennon and Yoko Ono; a thing for Cesar Chavez and the grape strikers; gigs for the Long Island Tenant Farmers' Union, the University of the Streets, The Young Lords and even (scheduled) a show for the Hell's Angels. There is also a record label Felix has put together for ghetto talent called Ki.

"They're not all successful," Felix admits, "but some of them do some good. Besides, it's nice to get out among the people. I'd like to see some other rock groups doing that."

Felix means it, of course, and that kind of outspokenness is not likely to ingratiate him any more than his other opinions. Asked what he thinks about the Rascals' general "ungroovy" reputation he is likely to say something like: "That's right. We don't get busted, don't rape any little girls, don't take our pants off in public and don't talk dirty on stage. And we don't intend to do these things."

The Rascals still get their best singles by inviting a lot of friends over to hear tapes and releasing the song that gets everyone most excited. It's the same kind of approach that allows Felix to enjoy his big home in Connecticut these days and to "become a completely aggressive person in New York" without feeling guilty. It also allows Dino to work out some personal problems he's been having without destroying the group.

Felix recently announced the departure of Eddie Brigati. Though the two remain good friends, Eddie had admitted that he wasn't satisfied with his own music, and wanted "a rest." He may study music formally.

Simultaneously, the Rascals announced a label switch to Columbia. The contract is reportedly near the million dollar mark, and Felix hopes Columbia's extensive distribution channels will get the group exposure in Europe. As far as style and content go however, he doesn't forsee any major change.

After four gold albums, four gold singles and one platinum LP, the Rascals may not be the *biggest* group in rock and roll, but they are still together.