



jefferson
airplane

Jefferson Airplane were America's greatest and most idiosyncratically unique rock band. From late 1966 to 1970 – roughly from *Surrealistic Pillow* to Marty Balin's decision to leave the band that was his brainchild – the Airplane were an unstoppable machine, idolized by fans, respected by peers and critics as the purest distillation of San Francisco's rock aesthetic, and were allowed their eccentricities by their blue-chip record label, RCA Victor, because they sold vast amounts of records.

For five albums – *Surrealistic Pillow*, *After Bathing at Baxter's*, *Crown of Creation*, *Bless Its Pointed Little Head* and *Volunteers* – the



Airplane soared higher than anyone before or since. The classic band – vocalists and composers Marty Balin and Grace Slick; vocalist, guitarist and composer Paul Kantner; lead guitarist Jorma Kaukonen; bassist Jack Casady; and drummer Spencer Dryden – that produced these masterworks managed to balance art and entertainment, as well as created a new vocabulary for rock music. Like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in Britain, Jefferson Airplane anticipated trends, never followed them.

After dabbling in pop, painting and poetry, Marty Balin realized his dream of forming a large electric-folk band that would include a female singer to complement his honeyed tenor. The band, adopting a variation on Kaukonen's tongue-in-cheek sometime-moniker, Blind Thomas Jefferson Airplane, debuted on Friday, Aug. 13, 1965, and consisted of Balin; Kantner; Kaukonen; Casady; vocalist Signe Anderson, a down-home Pacific Northwest folkie; and drummer Skip Spence, who was replaced by Dryden in the summer of 1966 and was later a guitarist and songwriter for Moby Grape.

The buzz was immediate. Within four months the Airplane were the first San Francisco band with a major-label recording contract and were in Los Angeles making their first album.

Although other San Francisco bands existed – the Charlatans, the Warlocks, the Great Society – Bay Area rock didn't really happen before the Airplane, certainly not on a national level. Not exactly blues, pop, folk, experimental or U.K. obsessed, Jefferson Airplane were influenced by these strains and many more. In the bigger picture they can be seen as America's first full-fledged rock band, taking a singular and readily identifiable synthesis of influences to the next plateau.

After *Jefferson Airplane Takes Off* was released in September 1966, it sold enough to make the national charts but was largely overlooked. In October, Anderson left the Airplane; at the same time the Great Society was breaking up. The Airplane, who often appeared together with the Society, admired their use of Eastern drones and eclectic instrumentation, as well as their lead singer, a tall, thin brunette named Grace Barnett Wing Slick, who wrote with fire and sang with ice – and who needed no approval except from herself to turn a crowd on.

A former model, Grace Slick formed the Great Society with her husband and his brother after seeing the Airplane's first gig and deciding that anybody could be in a rock band. It took the Airplane's most reticent member, Jack Casady, to ask Slick to join. Soon she was in Los Angeles, laying down tracks for *Surrealistic Pillow*.

Released to hosannas in February 1967, *Surrealistic Pillow* was a roiling gumbo of styles: love songs ("Today"), tone poems ("Comin' Back to Me"), tripartite vocal excursions ("How Do You Feel"), rockers with mysterious titles ("3/5 of a Mile in 10 Seconds") and hallucinogenic workouts ("Plastic Fantastic Lover"). *Pillow* reached No. 3, sold 2 million copies and stayed on the charts for more than a year. It became clear that Grace Slick was the special ingredient that offset the others, and she became the reluctant superstar of the band. Her signature songs, "Somebody to Love" and "White Rabbit" (which she wrote), became the unofficial soundtrack to the Summer of Love. Jefferson Airplane became San Francisco's first superstars.

But the Airplane put musical exploration and growth above stardom, commercial success and the scene. They were an extraordinary live act – Kaukonen, a major first-wave purveyor of feedback, was routinely mentioned in the same breath with Hendrix and Clapton as a technician and innovator; Casady seemed only to play lead, taking the bass to places that Paul McCartney hadn't dreamed of; Dryden added finesse, his jazz fills percolating with loopy style. Marty Balin, the band's romantic, sang for the girls, his

tenor full of vulnerability and caresses; Paul Kantner's staunch iconoclasm and idealism endeared him to middle-class liberals everywhere; and Grace Slick, who cited electric guitars as her main vocal influence, simply made a sound unlike any of her contemporary pop divas – Dusty Springfield, Mama Cass or Cher. Being a woman in a group of strong men, Slick achieved the impossible, neither overpowering nor undermining the group's cohesion and identity.

Quickly tiring of the hit single/teen dream circuit, the Airplane retreated into RCA Studios and emerged with *After Bathing at Baxter's* in December 1967. Turning their backs on three-minute pop songs, the group produced a labyrinthine mosaic of suites, running from the feedback squall of "The Ballad of You & Me & Pooneil" to the impressionistic beauty of "Martha" to the supercharged triple turbojet assault of "Watch Her Ride," "Wild Tyme (H)" and the nine-minute "Spare Chaynge." One of the greatest albums of the '60s, *Baxter's*, fulfilled Airplane's potential, and this album remains America's *Sgt. Pepper's* – sublime, joyful, dense and unashamedly psychedelic, acid drenched and optimistic.

With no singles success, *After Bathing at Baxter's* failed to reach the Top 10; the Airplane couldn't have cared less. Their next album, *Crown of Creation*, was softer, sexier and surer than *Baxter's*. With its acoustic flourishes, *Crown of Creation* was enthusiastically received both by critics and fans and pointed to new directions for the band. A frenetic live album, *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, followed, and it captured the turbulent interplay between the Airplane's members and reflected the violent social chaos that was America in 1968.

With *Volunteers*, the Airplane broke the sound barrier. They were now political leaders, musical icons – the American Beatles – with an unassailable integrity that fans cherished. Released in November 1969, *Volunteers* summed up an explosive decade and contained monumental music: the "We Can Be Together/Volunteers" manifesto, Slick's defiant "Eskimo Blue Day" and "Hey Fredrick," and Crosby-Stills-Kantner's apocalyptic "Wooden Ships."

As a new decade was dawning, Jefferson Airplane ascended in popularity: They headlined the second day of Woodstock and appeared at Altamont in December 1969, performing a tumultuous set prior to a Hell's Angel's knocking Marty Balin out as he tried to break up a fight. Gold records continued to pile up.

In 1970 the turmoil surrounding the Airplane got wilder, the drugs less easily controlled and the personalities more extreme. Slick was pregnant by Kantner, and Balin became increasingly embittered and felt out of the loop. Casady and Kaukonen, who formed a blues-based side project, Hot Tuna, just wanted to play; Dryden would soon leave, caving in to the rigors of the road and too many confrontations.

The death of Janis Joplin in October 1970 signaled the denouement of Jefferson Airplane. Having failed to show up to play the night after Joplin died and no longer interested in the competition and bad vibes, Balin was surprised when no one called, and he retreated for an extended break.

Becoming neophyte entrepreneurs, the Airplane regrouped and formed their own record label, Grunt, in 1971. Instrumentally the band could still boogie with the best, but the challenge and fun were gone. After a fall 1972 tour, the band fell apart, solo albums proliferated, and Hot Tuna became a full-time band. In 1974, Jefferson Starship were unveiled and went on to great commercial success. A 1989 Airplane reunion album and tour brought together Kantner, Balin, Slick, Kaukonen and Casady for the first time since 1970. Those who saw them were reminded of their special chemistry. A sound is re-created, a time and place evoked when beautiful things were possible – a time of acid, incense and balloons, a time to feed your head. –David Cohen

JEFFERSON AIRPLANE



Top (clockwise from top right): Jack Casady, Marty Balin, Paul Kantner, Grace Slick, Jorma Kaukonen and Spencer Dryden. Far left: Casady (top) and Balin in dramatic headgear. Left: In the studio with Balin looking through the window (top) and the Airplane with a propeller as a prop, circa 1968.



OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM MARSHALL (TOP), HERB GREENE (MIDDLE ROW), THE COLLECTION OF BILL THOMPSON (BOTTOM ROW).