



The Hollies

BY ANDY SCHWARTZ



When good reviews translated into sales, the group was chronically underrated by the music press. When “rock & roll” became “rock” and moved from singles to albums, the band’s American LPs were carelessly assembled and frequently underpromoted. When creative autonomy was a counterculture byword, they simply recorded the best songs they could find, no matter the source. They weren’t rebellious or scandalous or even terribly hip.

No, the Hollies just made *great pop music*: unforgettable melodies, kinetic rhythms, striking arrangements, and gorgeous singing. And the power and beauty of that music made the Hollies, in their native Great Britain, the most consistent and longest-lived hitmakers to emerge from the sixties Beat-group explosion. Each and every year from 1963 to 1974, the Hollies released at least one single that reached the U.K. Top Thirty; eleven of these twenty-six recordings made the Top Five.

By 1992, according to *The Guinness Book of British Hit Singles*, the Hollies had logged a career total of 316 weeks on the British singles chart, close behind the Rolling Stones’ 340 weeks and well ahead of the Who (245 weeks) and the Kinks (213 weeks). Across the pond, meanwhile, the Hollies scored nine Top Thirty *Billboard* hits between 1966 and 1974. Six of these songs cracked the Top Ten of the Hot 100, and two were certified gold for sales of more than one million copies.

The Hollies were not only a commercially significant group but an extremely creative one. They progressed rapidly from covering lesser-known American R&B songs to making classics of British folk rock, pop psychedelia, and romantic balladry. Although many of their biggest hits were outside compositions, the group’s core songwriting team of Allan Clarke, Graham Nash, and Tony Hicks wrote some of the Hollies’ best-loved numbers, including “Stop Stop Stop” and “Dear Eloise,” along with numerous high-quality album tracks and B sides.

Hollies songs evoked the magical innocence of childhood (“Jennifer Eccles”), the challenges of adulthood (“Pay You Back With Interest”), and the social turbulence

of the sixties (“What’s Wrong With the Way I Live”). In their immaculate three-part harmonies, we can hear the yearning soulfulness of Northern England and keening echoes of the Anglo-Irish folk tradition – a unique, instantly identifiable sound that became the key to their success.



Salford, Manchester, England, 1947: On his first day at a new school, Ordsall Primary School, 5-year-old Allan Clarke (born 1942) is called to the front of the class. When the teacher asks which of Allan’s classmates wants to sit next to him, the only hand raised is that of Graham Nash (born 1942). “We sang right from the start,” Clarke recalled in a 1996 interview with Jud Cost. “At the assemblies we’d sing ‘The Lord Is My Shepherd’ in harmony . . . We were always interested in music.”

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When rock & roll hit England full force circa 1956–1957, Allan and Graham began playing acoustic guitars and performing songs by the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly in a duo variously known as the Two Teens, the Levins, and the “brothers” Ricky and Dane Young. When bass player Eric Haydock (born 1943) spotted the pair at a pub gig, he invited them to join his more established group, the Deltas. In December 1962 at the Oasis Club in Manchester, the quintet played its first gig as the Hollies: Allan Clarke (lead vocals), Graham Nash (vocals, rhythm guitar), Eric Haydock (bass), Vic Steele (lead guitar), and Don Rathbone (drums).

“We were doing this gig at the Oasis at Christmas, and the guy asks, ‘What shall I introduce you as?’” Allan told Jud Cost. “And we said, ‘Well, just for tonight, call us the Hollies.’ Because it was Christmas, and also, of course, because of Buddy Holly. Well, that’s a condensed version . . . There’s a hell of a lot more than that!”

By January 1963, the Hollies had taken over the Beatles’ lunchtime residency at Liverpool’s Cavern Club, where their energetic performances greatly impressed EMI staff producer Ron Richards. Vic Steele declined a full-time commitment, however, and was soon replaced by lead guitarist-vocalist Tony Hicks (born 1945) from Ricky Shaw & the Dolphins. From this same Lancashire

Outstanding in their field – the Hollies: Bobby Elliott, Tony Hicks, Eric Haydock, Graham Nash, and Allan Clarke (from left), c. 1966



Hollies in early bloom: Clarke, Nash, Elliott, Haydock, and Hicks (clockwise from top left)

group came the dynamic drummer Bobby Elliott (born 1941), when *he* replaced Don Rathbone a short time later.

The Hollies were signed to EMI subsidiary Parlophone, and Ron Richards assumed a role comparable to that of George Martin with the Beatles – a relationship that he and the Hollies would maintain for the next sixteen years. (Ron Richards died on April 30, 2009, at age 80, after a notable career, during which he worked with artists ranging from P.J. Proby to Ella Fitzgerald.) In early 1964, a cover of Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs' "Stay" became the Hollies' first Top Ten hit, igniting a U.K. chart run that continued for eighteen months and six more Top Ten singles. Among these were "Just One Look," their first song to reach the U.S. Hot 100; the thrilling Number One smash "I'm Alive"; and "We're Through," the first Hollies hit composed by Clarke, Nash, and Hicks under the collective pseudonym L. Ransford.

In this same period, the Hollies released five full-length British LPs that demonstrated their increasing studio sophistication. But the group's American label, Imperial Records, seemed to take far more interest in its domestic acts, such as Cher and Johnny Rivers. Although the Hollies made their



On 'Ready, Steady, Go!,' 1964



Men in black: Clarke, Nash, new bassist Bernie Calvert, Hicks, and Elliott (from left)

U.S. stage debut in April 1965, at the Brooklyn Paramount Theatre, their first American album (*Hear! Here!*) was not released until early 1966 – by which time the Rolling Stones, for example, had five U.S. LPs to their credit. Still, the undeniably distinctive sounds of “Bus Stop” and “Stop Stop Stop” would power both songs into *Billboard*’s Top Ten, and “On a Carousel” would reach Number Eleven.

In the spring of 1966, Eric Haydock split with the Hollies; his replacement, Bernie Calvert, yet another refugee

from Ricky Shaw & the Dolphins, was then working in a Manchester factory. At their first meeting, Calvert and the group rehearsed a new song, “Bus Stop,” then recorded it the next day. A Scandinavian tour followed, after which Bernie returned to his old job – toiling away at the factory while “Bus Stop” played in heavy rotation on the shop radio – until he was invited to join the Hollies on a permanent basis.

In 1967, the Hollies switched to Epic Records for U.S. distribution and promptly scored with “Carrie Anne,” an



Dedicated followers of fashion: Calvert, Elliott, Nash, Clarke, and Hicks (from left), c. 1967



Another television performance, 1968



Change partners: Nash with David Crosby at Woodstock, 1969

enchancing group original that peaked at Number Nine on the Hot 100 in August 1967. But as Ken Barnes noted in a 1972 retrospective for *Phonograph Record Magazine*, this success also launched “an unhappy era of continual corporate product-mangling on Epic’s side [in which] no album from ’67 on . . . appeared without drastic title and/or cover-art changes, and all but one have been tampered with in the area of song selection.” That such beautifully crafted singles as “King Midas in Reverse” and “Dear Eloise” failed even to make the American Top Forty struck Barnes as “sheer inexplicable injustice.”

In 1967, the Hollies released two British albums that *should* have firmly established them on both sides of the Atlantic as a premier contemporary rock band. *Evolution* and *Butterfly* “can only be regarded as classics of the psychedelic era,” wrote Bruce Eder in *Goldmine* in 1996. “These are the two indispensable Hollies albums,” said Ken Barnes, “with one superb song after another, ranging from almost-raunchy rock (‘Then the Heartaches Begin’) to the lushest and loveliest of ballads (‘Butterfly’) . . .”

But when Epic released its truncated U.S. version of *Evolution* in the Summer of Love, the album only reached Number 43 on the *Billboard* chart. *Butterfly* was given a new sequence and the unwieldy new title of *Dear Eloise/King Midas in Reverse*; issued in November 1967, it didn’t even make the chart. After this disappointing response, the group did not tour America again until 1972.

Graham Nash’s departure from the Hollies in December 1968 has been attributed to his objections to plans for *Hollies Sing Dylan*, with its glossy treatments of “I Shall Be Released” and “Blowin’ in the Wind.” But in a 1973 interview with Harold Bronson for *Rolling Stone*, Allan Clarke told a different story: “After the Hollies played a Whisky gig in Los Angeles, Graham went to an apartment and played with David Crosby and Steve Stills, and was turned on to a completely different trip, one that stimulated him greatly. He saw something better for himself, and he became frustrated when we weren’t turned onto his type of music. The Hollies did [Nash’s songs] ‘Marrakesh Express’ and ‘Be Yourself’ [in demo form], but they just didn’t work as Hollies songs. He actually had the Stills and Crosby sound in mind.”

In early 1969, Nash was replaced by Terry Sylvester (born 1947), a veteran of Liverpool Beat groups the Escorts and the Swinging Blue Jeans. “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” was a sumptuously orchestrated ballad (with an uncredited Elton John on piano) that became, in March 1970, the first Hollies song to crack the U.S. Top Ten since “Carrie Anne.”

Three years later, the Hollies’ chart career was reignited again by their most atypical hit. Coming on like Manchester’s answer to Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1972’s “Long Cool Woman (In a Black Dress)” was, in Ken Barnes’s words, “a superb single by any standards, leaping out of the radio with that immediate sense of presence and instant identity common to the best 45s.” The Hollies’ first U.S. gold disc, “Long Cool Woman” peaked at Number Two and propelled their Epic album *Distant Light* to Number 21.

By the time “Long Cool Woman” hit the charts, Allan Clarke had left the Hollies for a solo career. His replacement, Swedish vocalist Mikael Rickfors, recorded only one album (*Romany*) with the group and Clarke returned to the ranks in July 1973 for “The Air That I Breathe.” This ethereal ballad reached Number Two in the U.K. and Number Six in the



On 'Top of the Pops,' 1974: New singer/guitarist Terry Sylvester, Clarke, Elliott, Hicks, and Calvert (from left)

States, where it became the Hollies' second gold single and a highlight of their only American gold LP, *Hollies*.

The 1975 album *Another Night* garnered some favorable notices, particularly for a prescient cover of Bruce Springsteen's "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)." But even a critically lauded tour of U.S. showcase clubs failed to boost the song beyond Number 85 or the LP into the Top 100. In 1983, Graham Nash reunited with Allan Clarke, Bobby Elliott, and Tony Hicks for an Atlantic comeback album, *What Goes Around*. It quickly came and went after a flurry of chart action for a cover of the Supremes' "Stop! In the Name of Love."

Truthfully, the Hollies didn't really need another hit record. Their talent, work ethic, and deep catalogue would sustain them as a successful touring act for many years to come – a status confirmed by the U.K. Top Five sales of 1977's *Live Hits* (unissued in America) and a rerelease of "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" that topped the British singles chart in 1988. "Their longevity is assured," declared *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, "as their expertly crafted, harmonic songs represent some of the greatest music of all mid-sixties pop."

Both Bernie Calvert and Terry Sylvester left the Hollies in 1981; Allan Clarke retired in 1999. Through all the years and all the changes, Bobby Elliott and Tony Hicks have kept alive the Hollies' timeless legacy, to the delight of their loyal fans around the world. "It was a case of 'If we can stretch this out for three or four years, you know, we'll be very pleased' – and we did that," Tony told veteran British radio host David Jensen. "It feels possibly better today than it ever did, really." ♪



The author is indebted to Ken Barnes, Harold Bronson, Jud Cost, Dawn Eden, and Bruce Eder for their past writings on the Hollies. Bruce Eder's definitive essay, "Just One More Look at the Hollies," first published in 1996 in 'Goldmine,' is posted in full at <http://www.hollies.co.uk/goldminearticles.html>.



A mid-seventies portrait



Elliott (in cap), Clarke (with beard), and new mates in the nineties