



NEROSUBIANCO

Colonna sonora tratta dal film omonimo

THE FREEDOM



On the basis of their UK releases, the low esteem in which Freedom have always been held by the more discerning listener is entirely appropriate. Two late 1960s singles of wildly fluctuating quality were followed by a trio of albums featuring an anonymous, blustering hard rock style in keeping with the sonic excesses of the early 1970s - not exactly the stuff of which dreams are made. However, this is only part of their story: by the time the band's UK debut LP 'Freedom' had been issued by ABC in 1970, Freedom were barely recognisable as the outfit that had emerged in September 1967 as a splinter group from the embryonic Procol Harum, with only drummer Bobby Harrison surviving from the initial line-up. Fortunately two obscure European-only albums recorded at the tail-end of the decade bear eloquent testimony to their early promise, and this generally unknown legacy of recordings suggests that, given no more than an average share of good fortune, Freedom could have been major players in the late 1960s psychedelic stakes rather than hard rock also-rans.

The Freedom story can be traced back to an April 1967 advertisement in Melody Maker inviting musicians to join lyricist Keith Reid and former Paramounts lead singer Gary Brooker in a potentially exciting new venture. Two of the successful applicants were guitarist Ray Royer and drummer Bobby Harrison. The latter had ironically been a member of the Paramounts in their early days; more recently he had recorded two singles for CBS as part of Birmingham-based soul band the Powerpack. With Matthew Fisher on organ and Dave Knights on bass, the grandiloquently-christened Procol Harum signed to Deram via producer Denny Cordell, immediately striking gold with the Brooker/Reid composition 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale'. Constant exposure has dulled the song's impact to such an extent that even the band's most fervent supporters would surely be content never to hear it again, but at the time 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' probably encapsulated the Spirit of 1967 better than any other record, and its spectacular success catapulted Harum from the bowels of the UFO club to international acclaim almost overnight. Royer, Harrison and colleagues looked set for a glittering career.

No sooner had 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' dislodged the mighty Tremeloes from the top of the charts, however, when Harum's regal entry was rudely shattered. Session man Bill Eyden publicly announced that he, and not Bobby Harrison, had played on the A-side, a revelation that received disproportionate coverage from an outraged national press. Unfortunately the adverse publicity coincided with the belated realisation within the Harum camp that Harrison and Royer were incompatible with the rest of the band's sound. Midway through the recording of Harum's debut album, the two musicians were taken to one side and advised that they were 'unsuitable'. Not surprisingly, they were reluctant to leave: only a couple of months earlier, they had been handpicked by Reid and Brooker after auditions had given them the edge over other applicants. Furthermore, Royer had been considered 'suitable' enough to contribute to a million-selling single, whilst Harrison was arguably more experienced than any other member of the band, having been a professional musician since joining the Rockefellas in the late 1950s. Royer and Harrison threatened legal action if they were ejected from what was shaping up to be a rather substantial gravy train. In an attempt to avoid further adverse publicity, Harum's management offered the recalcitrant duo a generous out of court financial settlement that would enable them to launch an alternate musical venture. They duly accepted, and in September 1967 Royer and Harrison announced that they would be partners in a new band with the rather pointed name of the Freedom. (Coincidentally, the final Paramounts recording in 1966 had been a slab of embryonic psychedelia called 'Freedom', a track that eventually surfaced in 1983 as part of a Paramounts retrospective.)

For a while there was considerable confusion amongst both press and public concerning the state of play in the Procol Harum camp, and with no further vinyl product emanating from this new phenomenon, the inevitable 'Harum split' conclusions were erroneously drawn. In fact the band merely brought in two former Paramounts (Robin Trower and B J Wilson) to fill the gaps left by Royer and Harrison, but the changes in personnel meant that the follow-up single 'Homburg' (which turned out to be 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale')

with a nose job) didn't emerge until a full five months after the release of their debut - an eternity in the 1960s. In September 1967 the Freedom were as well placed as Harum to exploit the success of the latter's debut single, but their severance pay appears to have lulled them into a false sense of security. In a fatal error of judgement they decided not to capitalise on the publicity afforded to their new venture, instead following the increasingly fashionable pattern of retreating to the country for a couple of months to write and rehearse.

Although the Freedom kept a low profile over the ensuing months, Harrison and Royer were still smarting from their ignominious exit and appear to have made a concerted attempt to compete with their former colleagues. Harrison had returned to Birmingham to recruit 20 year old bassist and singer Steve Shirley, whose chief credential was an uncanny vocal similarity to Gary Brooker. Within weeks of Harum announcing that they had been approached to write the soundtrack for the subsequently aborted film 'Seventeen Plus', the Freedom responded that they had been invited to contribute to 'The Attraction', which would be masterminded by noted Italian producer Dino de Laurentiis. Given that the band had landed such a prestigious gig without composing a note, it seems safe to assume that the publicity regarding Royer and Harrison's dismissal from Harum had not had an entirely negative effect.

For a while the Freedom received the patronage of the influential de Laurentiis, even performing at the producer's New Year's Eve party (apparently a highlight in the continental film world's calendar) in Monte Carlo on the final day of 1967. De Laurentiis was widely regarded as the 'vieux terrible' of the Italian film industry, and fruitful partnerships with both Carlo Ponti and Federico Fellini had ended prematurely as the result of his fiery temperament. Nevertheless, he had a reputation for picking box-office winners as well as fights, and his prior engagement to 'The Attraction' had been as producer of the Roger Vadim-directed 'Barbarella'.

During the winter of 1967/8 the Freedom worked on the film's soundtrack, for which they were augmented by keyboard player Mike Lease. Rather than compose some vaguely appropriate incidental music, the band tailored each individual song to the film's storyline, a policy that must have been threatened by de Laurentiis' decision to retitle the film 'Black On White' ('Nerosubianco' in the producer's native tongue). Unperturbed, the Freedom kept the lengthy 'Attraction' as the main musical theme but cleverly incorporated the film's new title into the song's framework.

By April 1968 the soundtrack had been successfully completed under the guidance of producer Jonathan Weston. Reverting to a trio, the Freedom signed separate management and agency deals with New Breed and Harold Davison respectively (ironically both parties also represented Procol Harum), and a one-off single release - also to be produced by Weston - was negotiated with the Mercury label. Steve Shirley's 'Where Will You Be Tonight' was selected as the side for promotion, with Ray Royer's 'Trying To Get A Glimpse Of You' - a sublime cocktail that mixed elements of early Family and Traffic with the inevitable Harum feel - perhaps unwisely relegated to the role of support act. Released in June 1968, with initial copies boasting an attractive picture sleeve, 'Where Will You Be Tonight' thus became the Freedom's first vinyl offering since their formation the previous year. By this stage Procol Harum had recovered some of their lost ground, achieving a second Top Ten hit single as well as releasing an accomplished debut album, and the previous year's revelations had been largely forgotten. 'Where Will You Be Tonight' failed to make any impression, and Mercury were not sufficiently encouraged by sales figures to offer the band a second chance.

Despite the brief acquisition of former Powerpack keyboardist Robin Lumsden, by the end of 1968 the Freedom were existing in a bizarre kind of limbo. The financial pay-off that Royer and Harrison had inveigled out of Harum had long since evaporated, and the band's 15 month existence had produced a solitary, unsuccessful single. Equally disturbingly, their strongest material was tied to an obscure Italian movie that had



Long gone geeks: the original line-up of Procol Harum with Bobby Harrison (extreme left) and Ray Royer (extreme right)



Freedom

Formed in 1969, this progressive UK rock trio comprised: Bobby Harrison (b. 28 June 1943, East Ham, England; drums/vocals), Roger Saunders (guitar/piano/vocals) and Walt Monahan (organ/cello/bass). Harrison stepped from behind the drum-stool of Procol Harum to lead this highly-respected power unit who made an impact with audiences during late 60s British blues boom. The original members with Harrison were Steve Shirley and Robin Lumson. Together, they recorded a little known album which was the soundtrack to the Dino De Laurentis film *Black On White* (1969). The ever-restless Harrison sealed the band's fate when he decided to make a solo album in 1970. Ironically, *Funkist* eclipsed Freedom's efforts in total sales.

Albums: *Freedom* (1970), *At Last* (1970), *Through The Years* (1971), *Is More Than A Word* (1972).



Reprinted from the Guinness Book of Seventies Music.
Nice try but don't give up the day jobs, lads...



Freedom in mid-1969: (left to right) Walter Monaghan, Roger Saunders and Bobby Harrison

yet to emerge. To add to their troubles, the musical tide appeared to be turning against them: psychedelia was in terminal decline and the music scene had been polarised by the emerging underground hard rock movement and the bubblegum sound, regarded by most as the lowest common denominator of the traditional pop scene. In an act of desperation Freedom (by this stage the band had dropped their prefix, from which point they effectively ceased to be the definite article...) abruptly shifted musical direction in a self-conscious attempt to pander to the masses and write a formulaised hit single. Two tracks were recorded: Ray Royer's 'Escape While You Can' (something of a shock to the system after the earlier excellence of 'Trying To Get A Glimpse Of You') and Steve Shirley's embarrassingly twee 'Kandy Kay'. With no interest from the major record companies, the single appeared on the small Plexium label but failed to make any commercial headway.

Whilst the Plexium release was receiving its just desserts, Dino de Laurentiis was having problems of his own. Another of his projects, a film called 'Waterloo', was ready for release, but the Italian government was chasing the producer for non-payment of taxes. De Laurentiis' response was to flee the country for the sanctuary of Hollywood, armed with a letter of introduction from the benevolent Fellini. After a brief hiatus de Laurentiis made an impact, producing such low-grade blockbusters as 'Death Wish', 'King Kong' and 'Flash Gordon'. Back in Italy, the government took possession of Dinocitté, de Laurentiis' film studio, in lieu of his debt. Amidst all this activity, 'Black On White' (or 'Nerosubianco' if you prefer) appears to have been abandoned. Whether the film was complete or not is difficult to ascertain, but it does not seem to have received a general release (although given that de Laurentiis is alleged to have financed more than 500 films, it's unlikely that even he noticed its non-appearance). However, the intended soundtrack album eventually emerged in June 1969, a full eighteen months after the band had started work on the project.

The lengthy gestation period inevitably meant that the album's musical content was out of step with current trends, and the stillbirth of the film condemned the LP to a very limited potential market: an unknown band performing foreign language songs from an unreleased film was unlikely to pull up any trees. The final nail in the coffin came when Atlantic, who were contracted to press the album, decided to wash their hands of the whole affair and refused to act as distributors. A small independent Milan label called RiFi Records stepped into the breach but inevitably lacked Atlantic's commercial clout, and consequently the album received extremely patchy distribution. Today the release is so obscure that the majority of psychedelic collectors remain unaware of its existence.

In truth, it is doubtful whether the belated appearance of 'Nerosubianco' was even noticed by its creators. The Plexium debacle had convinced Bobby Harrison that changes needed to be made, and by the time the album had limped out, Royer and Shirley had been replaced by guitarist Roger Saunders and bassist Walter Monaghan. Both newcomers had been members of the Washington DC's, co-writing their final single 'I've Done It All Wrong' b/w 'Any Time', which appeared on Miki Dallon's shortlived Domain label in January 1969. Whilst the single is eminently respectable, Monaghan is chiefly of interest to collectors of obscure psychedelia for his involvement in a band called Rust (later to metamorphose into Creepy John Thomas), who recorded a superb album in 1968 for the German Hor Zu label.

Thus reconstituted, Freedom entered Orange Studios in London in June 1969 to record what was treated as their debut LP. 'Freedom At Last' was a mildly schizophrenic album, as if the participants were torn between their psychedelic past and the emerging hard rock genre. Nestling alongside predictably lame versions of Howling Wolf and Willie Dixon material were impressive songwriting contributions from Brian Hillman (yet another former member of Rust and the Washington DC's) and more worthy interpretations of the Zombies' 'Time Of The Season' and 'Cry Baby Cry', one of the less stellar tracks from the Beatles' 'White Album' that was transformed by Freedom into a genuinely potent

song. Despite its considerable virtues 'Freedom At Last' failed to garner a UK issue, appearing only in France and Germany on the Byg and Metronome labels respectively.

Although the Harrison/Monaghan/Saunders axis remained intact for the 1970 album 'Freedom' on the Probe label (the third LP recorded under the name of Freedom but the first to appear in Britain or America, thus promoted as their debut set!), the music reflected the general shift towards a heavier sound, and titles like 'Frustrated Woman' and 'Ain't No Chance To Score' tell their own sad story. Two equally unedifying albums for Vertigo were marked by further personnel changes before Freedom eventually split up in 1973. Bobby Harrison, the band's only constant during their turbulent history, joined Snafu as lead singer before recording a 1975 solo album 'Funkist' that is alleged to have outsold Freedom's entire output.

Despite Freedom's peripheral existence and ignominious conclusion, the availability of 'Nerosubianco' is undoubtedly a cause for considerable celebration. It must be said that the album is slightly marred by an unsympathetic running order (presumably governed by the film's storyline) and a peculiar mix, most noticeably on 'Decidedly Man', which patently fails to find the right level for some excellent shafts of fuzz guitar. Musically, however, the band don't miss a trick, from the 'Are You Experienced' pastiche that opens 'Born Again' to the Beatles-inspired basslines and vocal harmonies of 'Childhood Reflection'. Elsewhere the instrumental textures are reminiscent of early Traffic and Family, although the most obvious comparison is, inevitably, with Procol Harum: Gary Brooker would surely be justified in hearing 'The Truth Is Plain To See' and 'The Better Side' and wondering just where and when he'd laid down the vocals. Nevertheless, whilst 'Nerosubianco' undoubtedly wears its influences upfront, the quality of songwriting and performance are more than sufficient to negate claims of mere imitation or parody, and the album's belated UK release will hopefully lead to at least a partial re-evaluation of Freedom's position within the rich tapestry of late 1960s British psychedelia.

DAVID WELLS
November 1994

DISCOGRAPHY

Singles

Where Will You Be Tonight/Trying To Get A Glimpse Of You (Mercury MF1033) June 1968
Escape While You Can/Kandy Kay (Plexium PXM3) January 1969
Frustrated Woman/Man Made Laws (Probe 504) October 1970
Thanks/Little Miss Louise (Vertigo 6059 051) September 1971

Albums

Nerosubianco (Italian Atlantic ATLO8028) Recorded January-April 1968, released 1969
At Last (French Byg 529325, German Metronome MLP15371) Recorded June-July 1969,
Freedom (Probe SPBA6252) 1970 released 1970
Through The Years (Vertigo 6360 049) 1971
More Than A Word (Vertigo 6360 072) 1972



SIDE ONE

RELATION (3.20)
WE SAY NO (3.20)
ATTRACTION (7.00)
CHILDHOOD REFLECTION (3.15)
TO BE FREE (3.21)

SIDE TWO

THE TRUTH IS PLAIN TO SEE (3.00)
THE BETTER SIDE (4.33)
BORN AGAIN (4.20)
DECIDEDLY MAN (4.15)
SEEING IS BELIEVING (3.13)

Recorded January-April 1968. Produced by Jonathan Weston.

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Tenth Planet TP011.

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