

*Sons of Fred, Sam Gopal's Dream, Vamp, Clark Hutchinson -
The MICK HUTCHINSON interview!*

Clark Hutchinson made just three albums in their all-too brief career, the first of which, 'A=MH2', remains a classic of its genre. Recorded in two ten-hour sessions by the two musicians - Mick Hutchinson on guitars and Andy Clark on keyboards, vocals and drums - the record boils over with long, bluesy Eastern-tinged guitar romps which to my mind have never been equalled to this day. The follow-up, 'Retribution', was more straightforward blues-based rock but maintaining the lengthier excursions into druggy freakout territory on one or two numbers and the final album, 'Gestalt' (today, the rarest of the bunch) is more song-based but nevertheless still delivering the goods if, like me, you like to sit back and let an electric guitar play tag with your spine.

All three albums can be found at a reasonable price with a little perseverance today; none has been reissued (a state of affairs bordering on the insane) and as far as I'm concerned - and I know this goes for the rest of the PT team too - each one marks its own unique place in history and must rank as an essential purchase for the discerning listener (and hence, the average PT reader). This isn't a record re-review though; it's an overview of the career of one of the prime movers of Clark Hutchinson, an article put together using fragments of one of the most fascinating interviews Nick and I have yet undertaken, with a musician who must rank as one of the finest exponents of the electric guitar this country has ever produced. I am talking of course about Mick Hutchinson, who today has a low-key but happily busy little business teaching the guitar and studio techniques to budding musicians in the East Sussex region.

Featuring high on our 'hit list' of people to interview, Mick Hutchinson was nevertheless difficult to track down. The lead came from an out-of-the-blue 'phone call from Pete Sears - late of the Jefferson Starship and Quicksilver, long-domiciled in California but previously a colleague of Mick's in such bands as the legendary Sam Gopal's Dream and Vamp in the England of the late 1960s (and himself hopefully to be the subject of the Terrascope treatment in the not-too-distant future). In answer to one of my first questions, it transpired that Pete and Mick have remained in contact ever since, and after a few nights of fingers-crossed waiting the 'phone dinged one evening and a voice said "hello, it's Mick. I'm told you'd like to talk to me?". Mick Hutchinson. A hero of mine since I first learned what guitar music could do to one's forebrain. And then to learn that far from having left everything behind him Mick Hutchinson is still playing guitar, still recording his own music and, for Christ's sake, is playing material not that far removed from that stunning first Clark Hutchinson album. All being well we should have something of Mick's recent work for you to hear on the free EP with this issue, and if so - well, all I've said above will be rendered redundant because as ever, Mick's guitar talks more eloquently than I could ever begin to achieve.

And so, to sunny Eastbourne where Nick and I met Mick one afternoon in his modern house on an estate at the edge of the town. Tucked away in his back-room studio and surrounded by the best modern equipment to suit Mick's present-day occupation, we sat around our spoon-fed tape recorder and chatted to our man.

Mick's first 'real' band was South London-based the Sons of Fred, responsible for releasing a thimbleful of beat singles during 1965 that today fetch sums that could be mistaken for telephone numbers. Mick played on all of them, so did Pete Sears and at various times they were joined by Ray Redway (now a gold dealer), Alan Bowling (now involved in Christian music) and Tim Boyle, nowadays a PA engineer who was last heard of working for Dire Straits. The band went through several incarnations during their short life and, according to Mick, "kept coalescing into different things. It went from being a kind of Everly Brothers close harmony thing through being a soul band, into improvised jazz, some Eastern stuff and eventually turned into a sort of noise band, total anarchy really with no chords and completely atonal. People would expect a pop band to turn up and find themselves faced with this bunch of lunatics making all this noise. Then the bloke who put all the money up took all our gear away so it turned into a band that pushed old vans around the country. There was a law suit over it, the two guys who were over eighteen ended up having to pay 5p a week for the rest of their lives... we had all sorts of people coming in and out of the band, some of the line-ups were really quite good, very innovative for the time. We played all over the place, but none of it ever got taped unfortunately."

It was during the Sons of Fred era that Mick first met Pete Sears.

"I met him on a train, we used to travel up to London together. The bass player we had in the Sons at the time wasn't very good at all and it looked like we were going places, so we roped Pete in. We did 'Thank Your Lucky Stars' and 'Ready Steady Go' for television, and at one time we did a pilot programme for Kenneth Williams (the late British comedian best known perhaps for his work in the 'Carry On' films). We were to be a band called 'Crud Murky and The Germ Spreaders', a kind of dirty band as bands were supposed to be then and the idea was that Kenneth would start spraying us with this stuff because we were so grubby. Well, our singer didn't like this so he grabbed the sprayer off of Kenneth and sprayed him back. 'Cut! Cut!' You can't do that!' - so we blew that one out. I'm glad we did though, it wasn't really us."

Mick left Sons of Fred because of his increasing interest in jazz and Indian music. Following a spell of working at Vox, the guitar makers, he was asked to join The Moody Blues just before they made 'Nights In White Satin'... (and subsequently Jon Hiseman's Colosseum), but they weren't following the Eastern direction he was interested in. Someone then introduced him to a brilliant young tabla player named Sam Gopal and, with Pete Sears in tow the three of them hit the road as Sam Gopal's Dream, improvising Indian music and jazz with a little blues thrown in. Mick: "We gigged a lot, mostly for nothing. We had no money, no equipment - we had one amplifier between us! We used to borrow the Soft Machine's gear quite a lot. Then Brian Morrison, who had a booking agency, offered to get us some free AC30 amps, but you still couldn't hear us. People kept telling us we weren't commercial enough, that we needed a singer and an image - but we weren't doing songs, we'd just follow a scale or a rhythm. Eventually Andy Clark came in as vocalist. He'd written all these mad songs, sort of weird folk songs, peculiar things they were - he's a lunatic, really. Somebody or another was about to sign him, but we brought him in as a vocalist and keyboard player. The thing is, none of that stuff ever got taped either. I think Hendrix took some film of us at Olympia during 'Christmas On Earth Continued' [see the Mike Hart interview last issue - Ed.]. We couldn't hear each other play there though - I had five Marshall stacks and all I could hear was

myself, we couldn't hear the tablas at all. We never did hear the tablas all evening! During the second set, we just did it by looking at each other and hoping that we were playing in time".

Sam Gopal left the band eventually - and went on to form a new outfit, with Lemmy, which eventually recorded an album entitled 'Escalator' - and the remaining three musicians brought in the already legendary wild-man drummer Viv Prince. As 'Vamp' (Viv, Andy, Mick and Pete - geddit?) they released the single 'Floating' which has since appeared on countless psych/freakbeat compilation albums. Mick remembers however that 'Floating' as we all know it sounds nothing like they intended it to.

"Vamp started out sounding a bit like King Crimson did later on, but with Eastern stuff in as well. We did this thing 'The Chinese Army Came To Call' that had all these different time changes in and went off into jazzy bits. We signed to Screen Gems, who said they were going to turn us into the new 'Monkees'. The only way they could see a band was as a pretty face. We were a sort of hippy band, but they didn't see us like that at all. We signed a deal though just because it was a deal. We played them this demo of 'Floating' and they said 'Camp it up a bit, you know - make it more...' If you could hear the demo, it was more a sort of hippy anthem all about floating. There was a really long guitar solo in there which I was particularly pleased with. They made me turn the guitar down so far that it wouldn't distort, though. There was tablas on it, as well. I wasn't at all happy with the single [on Atlantic] because... well, if you'd heard what it was really supposed to have sounded like you'd know why. The band broke up after that, but it never did anywhere near reach its potential. It was a good band, you know. Lots of quirky bits in there."

Clark Hutchinson evolved directly out of the ashes of Vamp, with an original line-up of Mick, Andy and Pete Sears. Pete left the band and a French (!) bass player called Walt Monahan was brought in, and together they recorded a blues album for Sire. Mick claims that the production on the album was abysmal however, although he was pleased with much of the material on there, and the LP remains unreleased to this day. Reduced to a duo, Mick is unsure about how the subsequent LP A=MH2 (Andy equals Mick Hutchinson squared) came to be recorded. "We didn't know we were going to do it, really. It was just, suddenly go in and record it all really fast. It took ages and ages to come out, though". Sire leased the album to Deram (part of Decca) and the album made its way into the underground charts, although as ever Clark Hutchinson made absolutely no money out of it. A drummer and bass player were roped in to play some live dates - Del Coverly (he also recorded with Carl Douglas) and Steve Fields (of the Skatellites) - two reggae types, who appealed to Mick and Andy because of their 'swing' and the way their playing suited the jazzy direction Clark Hutchinson were going in live. Mick:

"We used to put all the instruments completely out of tune for the hell of it. We played one night in Glasgow like that, with me playing guitar on my back in the middle of the audience and Andy stood on top of his organ screaming like some sort of mad crow. That went down pretty well! We liked to improvise atonally in different rhythms. Other times we would play swing jazz - closer to Count Basie than it was to rock - then it would disintegrate. Some numbers would start off as Thirties jazz things and gradually go through hard blues, funk, heavy rock and then completely atonal. That kind

of stuff never made it onto record though, principally because it was too difficult to get right in the studio. Often the band would work like it was all one person, you don't know where the music came from and you don't know where it's going - the music plays you, you don't play the music."

Two more albums followed - 'Retribution' and 'Gestalt' - which Mick admits to being a little disappointed with, although there were moments on each which he still likes to this day.

"There were too many bottles of rum being drunk though for things to go the way they should have done. Clark Hutchinson live would really fly, some nights we'd end up playing stuff you wouldn't believe, but that spontaneous edge was impossible to capture in the studio."

A later incarnation of Clark Hutchinson toured as just a trio, with Andy on Hammond organ, Mick on guitars and a drummer. They played innumerable gigs up and down the country, and folded all too quickly in 1971. Mick takes up the tale from there:

"I was drunk for six months after Clark Hutchinson. I was in a band that played at the Marquee, but I can't remember who they were or what they were called. Like I say, I was drunk most of the time. I was drinking fifteen pints of lager with a treble scotch in each every day for six months. I had a blender in my head for a few years, I couldn't even count let alone play the guitar. I just had to escape from the music business. I worked in a bicycle warehouse, got a job as a shelf-filler - I just had to get away from being around drink and drugs all the time."

Mick Hutchinson today is barely recognisable from his album-sleeve pictures, but he's very much alive - an active cyclist and a vegetarian with a keen interest in the environment. Through the students that come to him to learn the guitar he involves himself in a wide range of indie music, heavy metal and 'world music', and he continues to record his own stuff which, as you'll hear from our EP, is just screaming out to be released.

Andy Clark went on to join Upp for a couple of albums, and has recently recorded an album in Germany with Sam Gopal (released on CD, but I've yet to track a copy down...). There is the possibility of a partial reunion at a planned Leukemia benefit gig later in the year at which Mick, Andy and Sam are all scheduled to appear. You can bet we'll be there.

Written, produced and directed by Phil

Based on an interview with Mick Hutchinson by Nick and Phil, July 1991