

THE HEP STARS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964-1989</i>	<i>Pop rock</i>	<i>Sunny Girl (1966)</i>

Only Solitaire

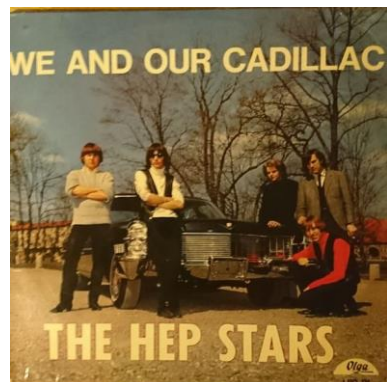
Artist: *The Hep Stars*

Years: *1964-1965*

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WE AND OUR CADILLAC

Album released:

September 1965

V A L U E

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More info:



Tracks: 1) Cadillac; 2) Be My Baby; 3) That's When Your Heartaches Begin; 4) Send Me Some Lovin'; 5) Young And Beautiful; 6) Rockin' Love; 7) No Response; 8) I'll Never Quite Get Over You; 9) Sweet Little Sixteen; 10) Oh! Carol; 11) Then She (He) Kissed Me; 12) Bald Headed Woman.

REVIEW

Of the two principal Swedish bands to form in the wake of the British Invasion (and by «principal» I mean «known at least a little outside of their home country»), Tages was unquestionably the more musically interesting and important one, if only because its members showed a strong interest in original songwriting right from the get-go. However, The Hep Stars got a bit of a time jump on them when it came to actual recordings — which seems only too appropriate, since The Hep Stars were based in Stockholm, while Tages came from Gothenburg; after all, the capital will always have its way, want it or not. And somehow, too, through the earliest years of their existence, The Hep Stars managed to quite handily outsell Tages — indicating that young Swedes were a bit more willing to enjoy native covers of their favorite US and UK artists rather than attempts by their own countrymen to find their own *Svenkst* way of doing things.



The Hep Stars' first minor appearance on the charts, though, was not even with a US or UK cover. Recorded in late 1964 with the band's original keyboard player Hans Östlund and released on Åke Gerhard's independent Olga label, it was 'Kana Kapila' — a cover of a minor 1961 success by the Belgian band The Continental Cousins (or simply The Cousins) from the

height of the twist craze. 'Kana Kapila' is in itself a corrupted spelling of Hawaiian *kanikapila* "violin sound", a relatively free-form style of homebrewn Polynesian improvisation — and the quirky little ditty was probably the result of free-style associative thinking, from *twisting* to *surfing* to *Hawaiian*; apparently, the syllabic structure of Hawaiian works pretty damn well for a novelty approach to dance music in 1961, like when you make a rapid fire delivery of *wiki wiki wiki wiki* ("quickly, quickly!") that really brings out the inner kid in your twistin' persona. Why The Hep Stars thought, three years later, that it would make for a good artistic choice in the era of The Beatles is anybody's guess — especially since none of their other early covers went *that* far into the direction of silly kitsch. They did have a pretty tight rhythm section, I'll admit: Lelle Hegland on bass and Chrille Pettersson on drums drive this thing more steadily and assuredly than The Continental Cousins ever did, though probably still a few notches below The Ventures, had the latter ever tried it out.

Starting already with the B-side of 'Kana Kapila' — a cover of Ray Charles' 'I Got A Woman' — the band asserted its predilection for the OG school of rock'n'roll and R&B: in addition to Ray Charles, their early singles honor the Everly Brothers ('Bird Dog'), Eddie Cochran ('Summertime Blues'), Ritchie Valens ('Donna'), and Buddy Holly, though in an indirect fashion — through the cover of Mike Berry's heartfelt, but musically and lyrically lame 'Tribute To Buddy Holly'. All of these imitations are listenable, but all of them also make clear that The Hep Stars, from the beginning and until the very end, would be careful to present themselves as wholesome family entertainment — maybe just one step away from quintessential «bubblegum rock» (a notion that did not yet exist in 1965, but its roots certainly lie in bands like these). Admittedly, this is something one might probably come to expect from a band that reared Benny Andersson — who replaced Östlund at the end of 1964 and whose quiet, appropriately funereal organ playing on 'A Tribute To Buddy Holly' is, unless I'm mistaken, the first officially issued evidence of Benny as a keyboard player. (What a long, strange trip, eh?).

A fairly weak link in The Hep Stars was their lead singer, Svenne Hedlund (he takes the lead on about 75% or so of all the recordings, with lead guitar player Janne Frisk occasionally stepping in for the sake of diversity). Unfortunately, as it sometimes happens with non-native English speakers, his chief focus in the studio too often seems to be on striving to sing in English with as little Swedish accent as possible. He achieves a pretty impressive result — though still betrayed quite a bit with the inability to control his palatal affricates ("*Farmer Y-yohn, I'm in love with your daughter*") — but this is about as far as his talent reaches, judging both by the tepid take on teen angst ('Summertime Blues') and the plastic soul take on teen serenading ('Donna'). He did have the required dashing looks, though, which was probably what kept him so steady in the frontman's seat for all that time.

The first big break for the band came with 'Cadillac', which was in itself a Renegades cover of Vince Taylor's 'Brand New Cadillac' — apparently, The Hep Stars were never even aware of the original rocking version, having only been exposed to the Renegades' slowed-down and «moodified» cover through a radio broadcast (which just might have something to do with The Renegades being much bigger in Finland at the time than in their home country — and, by radio-wave extension, through the rest of Scandinavia as well; not coincidentally, the song was also recorded, in a slightly harder version, by The Shamrocks, another popular Swedish band from the same era that never reached the Hep Stars' level of notoriety). Even if you're cool with the idea of turning this original blast of teen rage (which would further be amplified all the way up to eleven by The Clash fifteen years later) into a slow, somber, stop-and-start mood swing spectacle — and I'm not sure I am totally cool with this myself — it still has to be admitted that The Hep Stars do fairly little with this song that The Renegades had not already done; the only notable difference is that the garage-rock guitar solo on the original is replaced by Benny Andersson's less furious, but technically more accomplished organ break — clearly showing who, already in those earliest days, was really the heart and soul of every band he'd been in. (*Note*: to hear that properly, you need to listen to the more widely circulated album release of the song, *not* the original single release on which Benny plays both keyboards and rhythm guitar — the organ solo is almost inaudible on that one).

One thing that the commercial success of 'Cadillac' in both Sweden and Norway showed is that audiences were clearly hungry for more contemporary material; Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran did not work as well for young Scandinavians in the early Sixties as did The Renegades and The Premiers, which meant that the band had to expand its horizons. They probably got the idea to cover 'Farmer John' from The Searchers rather than The Premiers, but one album which they clearly latched on to quite heavily was the Kinks' self-titled debut: two of their mid-'65 A-sides were 'Bald Headed Woman' (in its Shel Talmy / Kinks incarnation) and Ray Davies' own 'So Mystifying' — apparently, 'You Really Got Me' was way too heavy for those degenerated softies, so totally unworthy of their glorious Viking past! — and, as with everything else, they do half-decent jobs here, never quite making us understand why we should listen to this stuff instead of the originals but providing an okayish substitute in case you get a craving for a «different take» on some early Kinks.

When the time came to reward the fans with an entire LP, both of these trends — nostalgia for pre-Beatles rock'n'roll and necessity to incorporate some modern ideas — were continued in near-equal measure. On the memory lane side, The Hep Stars cover more Buddy ('Send Me Some Lovin'), a little Chuck ('Sweet Little Sixteen'), and even do a lengthy, faithful rendition of 'That's When Your Heartaches Begin', replete with the entire spoken part — no fear of dethroning Elvis or The Ink Spots, though, what with Hedlund's sweet and sincere, but totally karaoke-style delivery; the best thing about the song

is Benny's quiet, restrained, sublimely beautiful piano part in the background, almost making me wish they'd simply recorded it as an instrumental — but then it wouldn't be all that sublime, would it?

As for the more contemporary stuff, the band shows quite an affection for Phil Spector, covering both 'Be My Baby' and 'Then She Kissed Me'; again, no serious need to bother, but even without the ability to reproduce the Wall-of-Sound, these songs work better for the band than 'Sweet Little Sixteen', with decent group harmonies (Frisk takes the lead on both of these and arguably does a better job than Hedlund) and Benny's organ work once again stealing the ground from under everybody else's feet. On one occasion, The Hep Stars even manage to predate their idols: 'I'll Never Quite Get Over You', a catchy melancholic folk-pop ballad, written by the trio of Arnold, Martin, and Morrow (eventually to be known in the UK as «Butterscotch» of 'Don't You Know (She Said Hello)' fame), would become one of the last charting singles for Billy Fury in early 1966 — but not before it was actually discovered and tapped into by these Swedish lads; and, for the record, their stripped down version, with Benny's sweet piano all over it, is better than Billy's overblown arrangement — in all respects other than the vocals. Perhaps it would have been a good idea to just let Billy Fury audition for The Hep Stars and kill two birds with one single stone, flung directly across the North Sea!

The most historically important song on the album, however, was 'No Response', the very first composition to be publically presented by the young fledgling genius mind of Benny Andersson — allegedly, he himself does not hold a particularly high opinion of it in retrospect, and status-wise, it probably occupies about the same place on his musical legacy shelf as Paul McCartney's 'In Spite Of All The Danger', but it's quite a creative little ditty all the same. The verse is based on the bassline of 'Don't Be Cruel', on top of which it plants a well-mannered English verse meter, sung somewhat Peter, Paul & Mary style; then the chorus unexpectedly transitions into 'Memphis, Tennessee', while the vocals switch into full-on pop mode, resolving into a nifty, decisive hook at the end. I'm not sure it all really makes much emotional sense, and there are too few original ideas in this odd hybridization to allow you to see the seedlings of ABBA — but there is a sense of genuine attempt at creativity here, unlike in so many early «originals» from second- and third-rate British Invasion bands that merely consisted of writing new lyrics over wholesale-stolen melodies.

Apparently, the biggest problem Benny had with the song is finding the right words; he admits to have been using an English dictionary, but it did not help him much. "*I don't see through it, not a bit / Someone has found your heart to pieces (?) / I try to take it as a whit (!!!) / I had to make another reason (?????)*" is fairly thought-provoking, to put it mildly. At least the chorus — "*But the expression in your eyes / Is like a big black curtain in my mind*" — offers a bit of redemption

for lines like "*you'll never make me to retire*" (somehow this started out as an angry tirade against a cold bitch but then transitioned into criticism of the Swedish pension system). Accustomed as we are, though, to occasional slip-ups on the part of even the best ABBA songs, Benny's problems with the English language are probably the least significant issues one might have with **We And Our Cadillac**. Certainly the Swedes themselves thought nothing of them when they happily sent the song into their national Top 10.

In the end, **We And Our Cadillac**, like so many other debut records by so many young bands outside the major hubs of the rock'n'roll universe, is not a record you listen to in order to happily enjoy it or to viciously put it down — more like a record you listen to to be mildly amused and to be reminded that, no matter how simple that old rock'n'roll may be, getting it *right* is far from an easy chore, impossible to complete on the strength of mere passion and adoration. In this particular case, though, it is also a good reminder that great artistry rarely appears overnight, and that everybody deserves a second, third, and maybe even fourth and fifth chance before they finally come into their own. There's quite an overwhelming distance between 'No Response' and 'Dancing Queen' or 'Eagle', and back in 1965, there was even hardly any guarantee that this distance would ever be traveled; in fact, Benny's 10-year journey (!) on the road to wholesome artistic success is, to my mind, one of the longest in the history of youth-oriented popular music (he was 28 in the year of 'Waterloo' — the age of Paul McCartney upon the *split* of the Beatles). But as we see, it's quite a possible situation all the same, even if I'm not at all sure that any sound conclusions can be drawn from it to apply to the circumstances of the 2020s.

