

THE HONEYCOMBS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
1964–1966	Classic pop-rock	<i>Colour Slide</i> (1964)

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Honeycombs*

Years: *1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

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Album released:

Sep. 25, 1964

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Tracks: 1) Colour Slide; 2) Once You Know; 3) Without You It Is Night; 4) That's The Way; 5) I Want To Be Free; 6) How The Mighty Have Fallen; 7) **Have I The Right?**; 8) Just A Face In The Crowd; 9) Nice While It Lasted; 10) Me From You; 11) Leslie Anne; 12) She's Too Way Out; 13) It Ain't Necessarily So; 14) This Too Shall Pass Away.

REVIEW

The first — and second, and third — thing you are bound to focus on while searching the Web for information on the Honeycombs is that the Honeycombs were one of the first — nay, the *very* first — band in the UK — nay, the world — to have a female drummer in its ranks, a good three years before the likes of Moe Tucker and a solid five before Karen Carpenter, just to namedrop two of the most obvious examples from the decade of (presumed) sexual liberation. True enough, Anne Margot "Honey" Lantree, formerly a hairdresser's assistant, was the band's drummer and even played the drums herself, which was so unusual at the time that most of the photo and film cameras could not help but always put her in the center of attention. From the point of view of empowerment and all, it's nice and influential, but (much like Moe and Karen) Honey Lantree could hardly be called a *great* drummer. Furthermore, while her presence behind the drums is indeed important not only for the image, but also for the sound of the Honeycombs, it is inextricable from the *overall* sound and importance of the band — and this is precisely what gets overlooked in its typical assessment: «a one-hit novelty wonder from the early days of the British Invasion with a babe at the drum set».



Not having lived through the epoch, I did not really have a chance to hear the Honeycombs until after getting acquainted with most of the major names in popular music of the Sixties and Seventies. Imagine, therefore, my surprise when, about 30 seconds into 'Colour Slide', the song that opens the band's self-titled debut, my brain exploded with a tremendous revelation: «This sounds *exactly* like Sparks!» Well, okay, the brain then did quickly step back, a little embarrassed and blushing, but the impression never faded away completely. The most obvious common element was, of course, the voice of lead singer Denis D'Ell, whose overtones are almost indistinguishable from Russell Mael — the same helium-powered, super-insistent, near-obnoxious bleating tenor which Russell neatly adapted to service the satirical, post-modern needs of his band. But the Honeycombs were neither satirical nor post-modern — they were a pop band releasing pop singles in frickin' 1964, and for that time and context, Denis' vocals were utterly unique, a complete anti-thesis to the generally more «manly» standards of the Merseybeat and London bands.

That is not all, however. From the very start of their recording career, the Honeycombs fell into the hands of Joe Meek, the legendary indie producer whose futuristic studio techniques turned every artist he ever produced, no matter how distant stylistically, into a representative of the Joe Meek Sonic Conglomerate. Prior to the Honeycombs, Meek's greatest, or one of the greatest, commercial successes was 'Telstar' by the Tornados, and serious echoes of that lightly proto-psychedelic «Sputnik-style» sound are all over the place: not only is 'Colour Slide' accompanied with a melodic electronic pulse, suggesting interplanetary communication and stuff, but even its guitars, played by Martin Murray and Allan Ward, are processed in such a way that their folk-pop jangle feels stripped of all physicality and becomes pure, uncontaminated sonic aether. No other band at the time (unless, perhaps, those that were also guided by Joe) had that kind of sound.

Finally, the third and equally important component, in addition to Denis' voice and Meek's production, is the writing skills of Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley, a couple of British musical journalists who had been searching for a musical group on which they could try out their artistic ambitions; most of the Honeycombs' classic material, including all the hit and non-hit singles, was written by these guys. Probably the most striking thing about it are their lyrics, highly unusual for both the typical pop-rock and folk-pop models of the time: "I got you on my wall / I got you ten feet tall / I got you on a colour slide / I met you on the beach / You weren't too hard to teach / I quickly drew you to my side" — see how the very first verse of the very first song uses practically *none* of the common love song clichés, how it has a vaguely proto-psychedelic feel (due to the use of the word *colour* and maybe the ambiguousness of the word *slide*), and how it sounds funny enough, amplified by the exuberance of Denis' vocals, to qualify as a proto-Sparks piece.

But from a purely melodic standpoint, the songs aren't half-bad, either. Howard and Blaikley take the folk model rather than the country / blues model as their point of departure, as if being more infatuated with the Searchers than the Stones or even the Beatles, and cross it with some elements borrowed from show tunes and operettas; the final product is typically more bombastic and anthemic than the Searchers, agreeing perfectly with Denis' manner of singing and maybe not so perfectly with Meek's manner of production — yet this somewhat strained marriage produces a most unusual offspring. You may not *like* this record, but you will be forced to admit that it has an absolutely different kind of pop sound for 1964 from the ones you are most likely to be familiar with.

The one and only song you *might* be familiar with — and even then, most likely if you yourself are a child of the Sixties — is the Honeycombs' first and last #1 hit, 'Have I The Right?', whose major chart success in June '64 gave the band its proper lease on life. If you distill it to its base melody, you will probably sense a courteous and generic folk-pop ballad; but speed it up a bit, put Denis D'Ell at the microphone, give the guitars the Joe Meek treatment, and presto, another oddly futuristic pop anthem, made even more special by its stomping percussion effects (Meek captured the band members' stomping on his wooden stairs with several strategically arranged microphones) and Meek's decision to actually speed up the tapes a little bit, giving the song just a very, very faint shadow of the Chipmunk. The final result is a delightful pop nugget which, in some ways, is a precursor to all things «twee-pop» — pure, unpretentious, a bit child-like and completely free from any vestiges of male chauvinism (on an amusing note, I cannot refrain from remarking how relevant these lyrics now sound in the MeToo era: "Have I the right to hold you?.. Have I the right to kiss you?.. Have I the right to touch you?.." — bet you'd never heard Mick Jagger asking for those kinds of permissions).

But I do disagree with several opinions I have encountered from people who were disappointed in the album, saying that most of what is here does not live up to the standard of 'Have I The Right?', because this simply isn't true. It is not entirely filler-free: for instance, a very questionable choice is the inclusion of the Elvis cover 'I Want To Be Free', which is a great song in its own right — but it puts Denis in direct competition with Elvis, and that is a competition few mortal men can win, particularly if the mortal men prefer to leave most of the original stylistic and arrangement details as they were. Another cover is that of Gershwin's 'It Ain't Necessarily So', whose popularity in the jazz world occasionally rubbed off on British rockers as well (the Moody Blues come to mind) — and although they try to spice it up with brief random quotations from Chopin's Funeral March (!) and Hava Nagila, the final result is still nothing special. Moody philosophical skepticism was not the kind of thing that the Honeycombs' musical style was properly adapted for.

But all those Howard–Blaikley originals — I really do not see what makes songs like ‘Colour Slide’ any weaker than ‘Have I The Right?’. The slow, dreary ballad ‘Without You It Is Night’ shows that they could do depression and melancholia just as efficiently as exuberance and optimism (and check out that nifty bass drop in Denis’ vocals when it comes to delivering the main punch-hook). ‘That’s The Way’, which would be released as a single somewhat later, pairs Honey Lantree with Denis on two-part harmony for a beautiful mutual love declaration, based on humility and shyness, which should have definitely taken the part of the far inferior ‘I Got You Babe’ in the public consciousness. Much the same attitude — shyness mixed with tenderness, not a drop of the take-what-I-want style — is felt in most of the other songs, such as ‘Just A Face In The Crowd’ (“is she the girl for me? will she ever be the one who really cares?”), though shyness and tenderness do not always prevent the lyrical hero from having a change of heart when Mother Nature calls for it, as in ‘Me From You’ (“and my heart feels like breaking, ’cause I know that she’s taking me from you”).

Two of the songs, however, are contributed by Meek himself rather than Howard and Blaikley, and they are definitely more rock-oriented. ‘She’s Too Way Out’ is the harshest of these, melodically ripping off Elvis’ ‘Girl Next Door Went A-Walking’ but lyrically telling a different kind of story (Denis gets dumped by his girlfriend who “did the dirty on me” after “along came a no good busybody”). And ‘Nice While It Lasted’ is about another breakup, this time with Denis taking the initiative after “you took all you wanted, now forget it”. Clearly, Meek has a hard time with girls — coming off as no big surprise, since his homosexuality was a well-known thing — while Howard and Blaikley idolize the opposite sex, and it is fun to see these tendencies clash against each other on the same record. But it can hardly be argued that Denis gives his most passionate, operatic performances on the idolizing numbers: Meek is a big production hero on this record, but his songwriting skills are all but non-existent against the background of Howard and Blaikley.

Finally, there is just one song credited to the band members themselves: ‘Leslie Anne’, by Martin Murray. With all that has been said about the Honeycombs’ style, it would actually be a big wonder if the album did not contain at least one direct Buddy Holly rip-off, and ‘Leslie Anne’ is precisely that — an unconcealed tribute to the author of ‘Peggy Sue’ and ‘Words Of Love’. Which also lets us understand fairly well why the band members did not usually write their own material. Not even the Meekification of the song can save it from being instantaneously forgettable as an exercise in imitation.

In the end, maybe we shouldn’t call **The Honeycombs** a «great» album by the standards of 1964, but it is definitely far more *interesting* and, in some ways, even *prophetic* than quite a few celebrated releases from that year. In fact, I am extremely surprised that it seems to have fallen through the cracks of the history-revisionist movement of the past decade —

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even when it is brought up in modern discourse, it is usually to pay the perfunctory dues to Honey Lantree, First Woman Drummer, while its *actual* musical and stylistical worth is being passed over. Let, therefore, this review of it be counted as my humble contribution to the flourishing of 21st Century Poptimism (especially since it's better than any 21st century poptimist album I've ever heard).

