

THE ZOMBIES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964-2015</i>	<i>Pop rock</i>	<i>Imagine The Swan (1969)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Zombies*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Begin Here](#) (1965)



BEGIN HERE

Album released:

April 9, 1965

V A L U E
3 3 3 4 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Road Runner; 2) Summertime; 3) I Can't Make Up My Mind; 4) The Way I Feel Inside; 5) Work 'N' Play; 6) You've Really Got A Hold On Me; 7) **She's Not There**; 8) Sticks And Stones; 9) Can't Nobody Love You; 10) Woman; 11) I Don't Want To Know; 12) I Remember When I Loved Her; 13) What More Can I Do; 14) I've Got My Mojo Working.

REVIEW

My personal pet theory about why the Zombies failed to achieve the same fame and fortune as many of their far more lucky, but not any more talented peers is that it all boils down to their witty, original, and totally disastrous name choice. Who on Earth would be liable to associate the concept of *zombies* with gorgeously romantic, classically-influenced pop music? At least «The Kinks», another band with a less-than-parent-friendly moniker, started out by playing some genuinely «kinky» hard rock deliciousness — the name might have been somewhat anachronistic



when applied to the likes of 'Waterloo Sunset', but it perfectly matched the sound of 'All Day And All Of The Night'. «The Zombies», however, inevitably brings on associations with horror films; a less knowledgeable person would probably just be frightened of the name, and a more intrigued one might have expected the band's music to sound something like Screamin' Jay Hawkins — and chuck it out in frustration and disappointment after being subjected to its sweet shower of sissiness.

According to Rod Argent's memories, the band members themselves had very vague ideas of what «zombies» were supposed to be when they decided to take that name in 1961, largely out of consideration that this would never lead to them being confused with anyone else (their previous self-appellation was The Mustangs, which, to be perfectly honest, also suits

them about as much as if Ted Nugent began calling himself Cutie Pie Ted). It would still be seven years until *Night Of The Living Dead* transformed and modernized that concept for us, taking the Voodoo aspect out of the zombie the same way Black Sabbath took the blues out of heavy metal, but even in the early Sixties, the name could only bring on fairly creepy associations. At the very least, it might have been justified if the Zombies were specifically a dark, heavy, blueswailing offshoot of the UK's rhythm'n'blues scene, stirring up souls with disturbing renditions of Hawkins, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker...

...which they actually *did* try to do. Keyboard player Rod Argent, guitarist Paul Atkinson, and drummer Hugh Grundy were all big fans of the American blues and soul scene, as well as jazz, and after they got together with vocalist Colin Blunstone and bass player Chris White, their early repertoire consisted largely of covers of their overseas idols, much like any other rhythm'n'blues band's in the UK. Traces of that repertoire are still very much in evidence on their first LP, for which they did not have enough original material, leaving them in a potentially competitive position against the Stones, the Animals, the Yardbirds, and other already well-established names on the «clean British white boys with a love for dirty American black music» scene of 1964–65.

The problem here is that the Zombies were a *very* average rhythm'n'blues band at best — if, like me, you thought that the Kinks' debut LP was disappointing because of too many mediocre covers alongside several brilliant originals, just wait until you hear the Zombies' **Begin Here** open with arguably the single worst version of Bo Diddley's 'Road Runner' I have ever heard. The only player to sound energized is drummer Hugh Grundy, whose enthusiasm is largely wasted on the totally by-the-book performances from everybody else except for Blunstone — Blunstone's vocal delivery is downright awful. Colin may have possessed one of the most haunting set of pipes in Sixties' pop, but applying it to screechy, cocky R&B only results in an ugly whine effect, making him feel like a drunk loser in the corner, double-daring you in some stupid bluff. Adding insult to injury, they do not even remember (or never took the time to figure out) the lyrics, resulting in the necessity of ad-libbing most of them. "I'm a road runner, baby, and you can't keep up with me" becomes "I'm a road runner, honey, baby that's all I am to you", and the cocky arrogant bastard protagonist becomes an unsympathetic whiny little wuss.

Similarly, Muddy Waters' 'I've Got My Mojo Working', which concludes the album, may be notable for the cymbal-heavy, thunderous drumming, but Atkinson's guitar tone is thin and wimpy, his soloing is confused, with plenty of mistakes and little sense of purpose, and Blunstone's performance is a perfect example of the «skinny white boy trying to sound like an old Delta dude» stereotype — if even *this* guy really got his mojo working, the issue of getting laid should be removed from

the teenager checklist altogether. Nor does the mojo in question work well on Motown soul-pop: their 'You've Really Got A Hold On Me' is a rather faceless drag, hardly saved by dragging in an extra couple verses from Sam Cooke's 'Bring It On Home' — they simply go down hand in hand, rather than separately.

The really strange thing is how rarely on all these covers they resort to their primary weapon — the incredible skills of Rod Argent on the keyboards. Compare the Animals, whose early R&B sound was pretty much made by Alan Price, wisely allowed to let loose on almost everything they did: Rod's presence is humbly supportive on all the songs listed above, and nothing more. Now compare their arrangement of Ray Charles' 'Sticks And Stones', tight enough but suffering from all the usual problems, including Blunstone's whiny little voice... then Argent comes in with a brief, perfectly executed, virtuosic organ solo, shredding like crazy and still perfectly in line with the main melody, and makes you leave your jaw on the floor even today, let alone 1965. Alas, the second instrumental break is given over to Atkinson — the only guy back then who could have presented a worthy equivalent to Argent's organ solo would be Yardbirds-era Clapton; Atkinson bravely tries, but has absolutely no fluency or sense of composure when it comes to designing a great bluesy solo.

When things get more lyrical and Blunstone finally gets a chance to apply his natural talent to something appropriate, it works much better — their arrangement of Gershwin's 'Summertime', showing traces of Miles Davis' modal jazz influence, is several steps ahead of any other 'Summertime' cover in British Invasion times (Gerry and the Pacemakers, for instance, had it as a posh Latin dance number). Yet it is still a cover, as is filler such as 'Work 'n' Play', an instrumental tune from some soundtrack by Ken Jones, the British film composer and, incidentally, the Zombies' own producer, which spills all it has to spill in the opening three bars and then leaves us spending the rest of the time assessing how well Argent can blow the harmonica. He *can*, but he's no Little Walter, and I personally do not want the guy who just dazzled me with some of the most fabulous organ playing from the pre-prog era of popular music to show me that he can also blow a mean harp. (It's the same kind of feeling whenever you see Mick Jagger wield a guitar while prancing around on stage).

Anyway, all of those covers are at best *indicative* of some of the Zombies' greatness, and at worst, expose them as some of the least convincing rock'n'rollers of the entire period. But I am pretty sure that the band members themselves realized all too well that the only reason they ended up on that album was their inability to come up with a sufficiently large bag of newly written material over a short period of time — because, unlike some of their less demanding peers, the Zombies took their songwriting duties quite seriously from the very start. They had at least two talented composers — Rod Argent and Chris White, the band's own Lennon and McCartney (though it is hard to decide exactly who was who, given how similar

their songwriting styles are) — and what they composed was *way* different from the currently dominant styles of pop music writing; *too* different, one might argue, given how their very first single put them on the very pinnacle of their popularity, from which they took a really painful five-year downslide.

That single was ‘She’s Not There’, a song every bit as revolutionary in its own way as the much-more-often-talked-about ‘You Really Got Me’ (their release was separated by about 10 days’ time) — except where the latter was redefining the standards for what counted as «modern rock'n'roll», the former thrust open the gates for all sorts of new opportunities in the art of the pop song. ‘She’s Not There’ is a rare marvel for 1964 — pop-rock in terms of structure, jazzy in terms of harmony (its main piano theme along with Rod’s sophisticated, modal-influenced solo), and «baroque» in terms of general atmosphere (to be formally «baroque», it would probably need at least a harpsichord).

Most importantly, it’s a *dark* baroque atmosphere. Grim minor chords. Ice-cold electric piano emerging from under a prominent, insistently thick bassline. Vocals exhibiting a mix of sadness, fear, and 19th century romanticism. And those odd lyrics which possibly — *possibly* — imply a violent solution: "...it's too late to say you're sorry, how would I know? why should I care? please don't bother trying to find her, SHE'S NOT THERE..." This is progressive pop, in the sense that nobody ever wrote like that before, yet it is also retro, returning us to the age of courteous chivalry mixed with murderous jealousy. *And* it works. Way too many «baroque pop» songs get free pats on the head just because one hears the sound of a harpsichord, or some woodwinds or bassoons, and immediately associates this with «classiness». But ‘She’s Not There’ has dynamics and intrigue — its verse-bridge-chorus journey just keeps gaining and gaining in intensity, going through three different emotional stages along the way before popping off in a flash, and then starting all over again. In two and a half minutes — nay, in the first 45 seconds that it takes to run through all the three stages — it does everything one might expect of a long, sophisticated progressive rock suite.

The B-side was ‘You Make Me Feel Good’, Chris White’s first original composition, and it is nowhere near as impressive, forever sealing the status of Rod Argent as the more sophisticated and deep-reaching composer of the two — as far as straightforward love songs from 1964 are concerned, it’s not half bad, but its melody and mood could just as well come from the formulaic minds of the Dave Clark Five, and its production begs for a fuller, deeper sound, the likes of which could only be provided by a George Martin. This is just to say that, contrary to starry-eyed rumors, not *everything* the Zombies designed by themselves was truly zomb-a-licious — like anybody else, they improved by trial and error.

Chris actually redeemed himself well enough already on the band’s second single: ‘Leave Me Be’ was a worthy successor to

'She's Not There', with which it shares the main theme (obsession over a lost love that still haunts the protagonist) and even some of the chords, but not the same psycho-fury — White has a much more tranquil role for Blunstone, which is even played upon in the opening line ("if it seems that I'm too quiet..." — yes, it *does* seem that way, Colin, turn this thing up!). Interestingly, Argent plays a supportive role on the song, ceding the spotlight to Atkinson's silver-ringing guitar — short, precise, tonally juicy little riffs for which he has a *much* better feeling than for any kind of blues-rock soloing. The little guitar solo he plays, echoing Blunstone's vocal melody with a tone that's half-Shadows, half-Buddy Holly, hits as hard as any contemporary George Harrison lead break, and wins me over even more than Blunstone's vocal performance.

Although the song on the whole is not as gut-wrenching as 'She's Not There' (though people who love their pop more quiet and introspective than hysterical may disagree), it is notably better than the B-side, 'Woman', which, I suspect, Rod Argent tossed out of humility, intentionally losing to his partner in compensation for the previous single. It's not uninteresting — the opening guitar riff has the same sequence as the Animals' 'Baby Let Me Take You Home', but turns it into the main basis for the entire song, except for the chorus, which is «sewn» onto the song from the sort of Isley Brothers-style fast R&B groove which the Animals also liked a lot ('Shout', 'Talkin' 'Bout You', that sort of thing). So you could, in fact, think of 'Woman' as a sophisticated Animals tribute — even Rod's organ solo sounds eerily like an Alan Price contribution — but we have already established that the Zombies are not too good with tributes, and it also gives Blunstone another pretext for unleashing his nasty, unsympathetic R&B voice (that "I can't conce-e-e-e-de, oh no!" thing is just ugly).

Both 'She's Not There' and 'Woman' but, for some reason, not the other two songs, would later find themselves included in **Begin Here**, but we are not quite there yet. First came the 4-song EP **Kind Of Girl** which, in addition to the already mentioned cover of 'Summertime', had three originals, all of them by Argent — the title track, one of the most Beatlesque numbers in the band's repertoire (except for the sissy-melancholic E minor mood of the verses); 'Sometimes', whose beat and melody are a tad too close to the Dave Clark Five's 'Glad All Over' for comfort, but still leave plenty of space for some Zombie-style sighing and crying; and 'It's Alright With Me', perhaps the single most impressive rock'n'roll-style car to come from the guys — craftsmen will probably be mostly impressed with its brave switch of tempo and time signature for the bridge, but I'm just a sucker for its jumping-jehoshaphat riff and how it tricks me into thinking there's a chorus coming up when, in fact, the chorus has just ended and we're in for the next verse.

Then, in January '65, came the Zombies' second chance at achieving immortality — 'Tell Her No', their second and last Top 10 single for a long, long while. Quite clearly influenced by Bacharach (notice how close the little "no-no-no-no-no" arch is

to the "sha-la-la-la-la" bit in 'Baby It's You?'), it's much more of a courteous minstrel song than the Edgar Allan Poe-style ghostly darkness of 'She's Not There', but melodically, it's even less predictable, and a great example of how a melodically complex, twisted, choppy, jazzy passage (you can almost feel the deep ancestry of Gentle Giant rooted in the intricate path that the verse's base melody takes with the "tell her no, no..." phrasing) can make a pop song *more* commercially attractive rather than *less* so. Best of all, the song has far more energy and flair than the average Bacharach number, and is arranged without the least sign of schmaltz. Or maybe best of all is that this time around, Chris White comes out with a worthy competitor for the B-side: 'What More Can I Do' — a fine ode to the art of being afraid to make a commitment, where you just gotta love the way the verse paranoidly builds up to explosive release. You know how the problem with instrumental breaks in pop songs is that they so often feel «tacked on» just for formal reasons, not really having anything to do with the song in question? Well, this is a great example of the absolute opposite — Argent's organ and Atkinson's guitar solos are like a fully natural, transformative extension of Blunstone's "*what it is that stops me from loving you the way it should be, oh oh oh wow SHREDDING ORGAN SOLO*". Very short, very up to the point, very kick-ass (though, once again, like on 'Sticks And Stones', they needed to get Eric Clapton for this guitar break — Atkinson can't do crazy-solo stuff to save his life, no matter how hard he tries).

And all of this finally, only now leads us to the Zombies' first LP — though, admittedly, we have already talked about more than half of the songs on it, starting with all the disappointing R&B covers and ending with songs from singles that did end up on it, somewhat randomly. As it sometimes happened, the American variant, simply called **The Zombies**, came out earlier than the UK version — and included both 'Tell Her No' *and* three songs off the **Kind Of Girl** EP, while the UK version, assuming that fans had already bought both the single and the EP, replaced them with extra covers.

Of the five remaining songs that had not yet been mentioned, only the last R&B cover, that of Phillip Mitchell's 'Can't Nobody Love You', is expendable — for the exact same reason (Blunstone's voice is not fit for blue-eyed soul; make sure to revert to the classic Solomon Burke version for the proper experience). Otherwise, Argent's 'I Remember When I Loved Her', with its acoustic guitar and hushed vocals, feels like a morose sequel to 'And I Love Her' — in a world where everything has eventually gone dead wrong, and the singer's loving feelings are just memories, impersonated by Rod's evocative «puffy cloud» organ solo. 'The Way I Feel Inside' daringly begins with a few echoey steps towards the mike and then becomes an acappella vocal test for Blunstone — quite a challenging decision for a tune that almost seems to beg for a nice Merseybeat arrangement (it bears some melodic similarity to 'Do You Want To Know A Secret', but is actually far more complex). And 'I Can't Make Up My Mind' and 'I Don't Want To Know' are two more sophisti-poppy tales of insecurity,

jealousy, betrayal, and paranoia.

On the whole, I think I am less qualified to talk about the musical innovations of all those early Zombies classics than to simply express my feelings on their artistry — the kind of artistry that you couldn't find anywhere else, not so much ahead of its time as outside its borders. The only other band to match the kind of vulnerability and exquisite softness that Argent, White, and Blunstone expressed in their creations was probably the Kinks — but the Davies brothers operated on a wholly different musical bedrock, one influenced by folk and music hall rather than classical and jazz. Furthermore, Ray Davies had relatively little interest in writing silly love songs, and quickly moved on to social portrayal, whereas White and Argent, on the other hand, were more than interested in turning silly love songs into modern day troubadour maldit-comiats.

Look at all these songs — in most of them, the protagonist and the lover are always separated, either never having known each other properly ('What More Can I Do') or because fate drove them apart ('She's Not There'); happiness of physical and spiritual union is not something these guys can claim serious expertise on. But I wouldn't even call the Zombies masters of the «breakup genre» — more like of the «endless separation genre». Love, in the Zombies' songs, is usually a Platonic ideal that is unreachable by definition, except you always end up trying to reach it anyway and getting burned in the process. This feeling was not totally unknown to the Kinks, or the Beatles, or even the Stones, but only the Zombies put it emphatically on a pedestal and used all of their knowledge of «high class» music legacy to become its troubadours. So is it any wonder that once the general public finally caught on to what they were all about, it dumped their records? The general public rarely likes to be kept in a state of terminal yearning sadness, which explains perfectly well why it **Began Here** and ended more or less in the same place — keeping the Zombies off the charts at a time when many of their much less musically interesting peers raked in fame and fortune. The good news is that as the Sixties on the whole become a museum, we can finally reinstate Argent, White and Co. back where they belong; paradoxically, as the Beatles and the Stones grow a bit smaller, so do the Zombies grow a bit larger.

