The Spirit of the Age

*All God's Children: Songs From The British Jesus Rock Revolution 1967-1974*
(3CD, Grapefruit/Cherry Red)

If you are of a certain age, then you lived through the UK version of 'the Jesus Rock Revolution' in the late 1960s and early 70s, although you may not have noticed. Unlike the blissed-out hippy version in the USA, particularly California, which saw loads of groovy acid-rock bands such as The Sheep, Crimson Bridge, Agape, Earthen Vessel, quirky singer-songwriters in local clubs and crazy preachers on the streets, along with mass seaside baptisms, the UK managed to tone it down a bit. The homegrown version mostly consisted of a lot of folk singers, the mainstream commercial stage musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*, and allowed itself to be steered towards the censorious, homophobic and conservative by the likes of Mary Whitehouse under her Festival of Light moral crusade. Even Cliff Richard got in on the act with a couple of gospel albums on EMI. (*Wash your mouth out* – Editor.)

There was, however, some genuine musical talent, and a few songs are included in this 3CD set. Out of Darkness played excruciatingly loud hard rock in the flesh (I saw them empty an initially packed church hall in West London), and if their first album didn't capture the energy or sound, a retrospectively released live album certainly did. Parchment were a folk trio from Liverpool who hit the charts with 'Light Up the Fire', a song that eventually made its way into various hymn books, but here they are represented by an untypical wimpy song called 'Son of God'. I'm surprised that Grapefruit, purveyors of all things fuzzed out and psychedelic, didn't include something from their *Shamblejam* or *Hollywood Sunset* albums,both of which include some epic rock tracks.

In fact, I'm generally surprised by what is and isn't included here. In the main it's not an anthology of Jesus Rock, it's a compilation of music that includes references to Jesus*,* no doubt because discussions of spirituality were in the air and those two musicals were in the news at the time. So we get a pick of tracks by Lindisfarne, Unicorn, the Strawbs, Clifford T. Ward, Roy Wood, The Kinks, Genesis, Fairport Convention, Jethro Tull, Gerry Rafferty, Kevin Coyne and Richard Thompson. All good, and punctuated by several stunning pieces of music and lyric writing: Bill Fay's 'Time of Last Persecution' (the title track from his first album) remains strange and questioning, The Hollies execute a reasonable version of Judee Sill's 'Jesus Was a Crossmaker', Magna Carta's 'Lord of the Ages' is the best track they ever did, and the Moody Blues' 'Minstrel's Song' is an understandable enough inclusion given John Lodge's ongoing Christian faith. Perhaps the standout track, however, is Medicine Head's mystical and enigmatic 'A Guiding Hand' from their first album.

But, but, but... what a missed opportunity to explore a complex and neglected area of musical history. The UK version of Jesus Rock did not simply miraculously emerge from coffee bars and churches but was inspired and catalysed by visitors from America. Liberation Suite played heavy rock with additional brass instruments and toured the UK several times, singer Larry Norman – often credited/blamed for singlehandedly inventing Jesus Music – toured and sometimes lived over here, and his mate Randy Stonehill did the same. (Norman also released an album, *Streams of White Light*, of satirical covers of songs that namedropped Jesus, several of which are on the album under review.) The Sheep toured a musical, *Lonesome Stone*, lived in a bus and helped precipitate the Greenbelt Festival that this album's booklet mentions (and which continues to this day). The appalling All Things New, basically a band of mates having a good time playing rock covers, were involved with setting up and running Greenbelt, and for some unfathomable reason are included here.

Even if one didn't want to trace the US/UK links or obtain permissions from American labels, there are various major omissions. Malcolm & Alwyn were a Christian Simon & Garfunkel signed to Pye (who also released those two great Parchment albums I mentioned earlier), and both Ishmael & Andy and Fish Co. were active before this compilation's 1974 cut-off date, in fact the former duo's album *Ready Salted* was released in 1973. Both, in a way, are more important for what group members went on to achieve later on: Andy Piercy fronting the version of After the Fire that was signed to CBS, and Steve Fairnie at the helm of various bands, including an electrified Fish Co, Writz, Famous Names, The Technos and art pranksters Casual Tease.

Gordon Giltrap, who gets a track here, was briefly musically involved with Larry Norman and Graham Kendrick but soon abandoned religion. Graham Kendrick went on to leave songwriting behind in favour of producing endless choruses and hymns, but Grapefruit missed out on licensing a track from his best album *Paid on the Nail,* which features Peter Roe's strange Moog synthesizer accompaniment. The likes of Nigel Goodwin reading a poem, Judy Mackenzie and especially The Pilgrims, seem from a bygone age, whenever their work was released. Water Into Wine Band's *Hill Climbing for Beginners* in 1973 was an acid-folk classic (later reissued by Kissing Spell) but they had to deal with their US record label insisting on a cleaner, less psychedelic mix before they would release it! And by 1974, folkie Pauline Filby had left her folk roots behind and was fronting Narnia, a proggy rock band that included two later members of After the Fire. Their eponymous album included a couple of classic keyboard-driven songs, as well as some unfortunately more simplistic rock and mindless boogie. The Mighty Flyers were also active, with *Low Flying* *Angels* released in 1974*,* although it wasn't as rocky as they would later become. The band included musicians such as Tony Hudson and Nick Brotherhood who would play in several other Christian bands in due course.

It's hard to see Ramases' and Quintessence's tracks here as anything except hippy new age spirituality, partaking of pick'n'mix religion at will. There are a thousand other hippy bands that could have been crammed in here on a similar premise, but maybe hippy spirituality was where the action was, and not in the church halls and coffee clubs of 1960s UK? Maybe UK Jesus Rock happened later, except by then everyone's agenda had changed and bands like U2 were more interested in discussing faith & doubt as part of everyday life, and being part of the mainstream music business. When I interviewed music writer Steve Turner in 2018 for an article in *Punk & Post-Punk* journal, he suggested that 'Overall there was a feeling of Christians trying to catch up.'

In a way, they never did. Unlike America and its CCM marketplace, the UK couldn't financially support a musical subculture of Christian rock and it soon abandoned attempts to do so, with the few remaining record companies drifting instead towards marketing praise and worship albums by wholesome looking groups or individuals, whilst musicians who had religious beliefs simply got on with being in bands, often rejecting any specific mention of Jesus or church. Perhaps an anthology of the next decade might be even more interesting, obscure and musically varied?

Rupert Loydell

Medicine Head: His Guiding Hand
EMBED: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4Nta4BgAWY

Parchment: Death in Jerusalem
EMBED: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70oHRBns23c