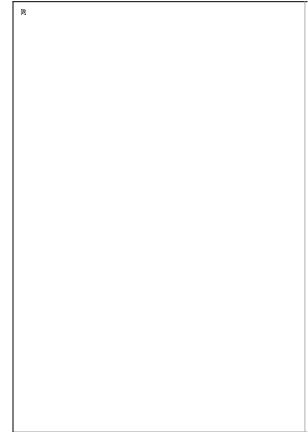


"I Did It My Way"

- written by Simon Tebbutt, appeared in Record Mirror, August 25th, 1979



(click images above for larger view)

Flying Lizards' David Cunningham explains to Simon Tebbutt how to make a hit for twenty dollars

Flying Lizards is a group; partially true variation on a theme perhaps Julian might be the piano player, the singer's name might even be Deborah, but the real focus on this outfit is the brains behind it - David Cunningham. In fact, when Julian popped in during the interview it was nearest the lizards have ever been to occupying the same room at the same time.

The group is more an idea than any concrete reality, an apparition on the sound waves which is just one of many projects, although David admits, "It's the major one this week." Such a lack of tangible substance, an advantage if you want to be flexible, can cause problems when promoting a single. The latest, "Money", is currently climbing the top 30 but people need something on the visual plane to which they can relate their outlay, in particular an appearance on a certain TV show.

"We had to get a group together for 'Top of the Pops' because you need a backing track to mime to, which is a ludicrous situation. Deborah and I could do our bits but we had to get someone to fill in the gaps visually."

Cunningham looks a bit like a young executive, a clean cut ex-messenger/Chinese restaurant waiter/art school student in a grey pin stripe and suede boots. An intellectual, enigmatic character whose carefully controlled eccentricity finds expression in grabbing a banana (for posing purposes) when he sees the photographer about to click. Influenced variously by Gestalt therapy, Presley recordings and Phil Spector, he remembers school music classes as something to be despised and disrupted.

"I didn't like playing instruments very much, I was never much good at it. But I did two years on violin, once a week on Wednesday afternoons to avoid playing rugby."

While giant hailstones pounded furiously on the roof, the sound of a thousand pneumatic sledge hammers, rendering any conversation impossible, we listened to examples of David's work as producer to This Heat and Wayne County.

"Wanna do some pictures Dave?" the photographer screamed.

Above the cacophony of the storm. "Yes, it's a Godsend," bellowed Cunningham to the surprised clicker, as he forsook the cozy comfort of the Virgin press penthouse cum attic for the dubious shelter of an umbrella in the leaky courtyard.

Flying Lizard's latest single "Summertime Blues" made a cursory acquaintance with the charts sometime last year. "Money", the newest hypnotic offering is, another old classic, receiving much the same treatment; a bleak, skeletal electronic staccato, the lyrics reduced to a flat ominous sounding dialogue and laid over the top. The sparse vocal arrangement was, in fact, more of a

rationalization than any deliberate decision.

"Deborah can't sing you see, can't really string it together. She's very unfamiliar with rock music, which I think is good. We all seem to grow up with the same culture today."

Here followed one of the endless tangents and digressions which pepper David's quirky and idiosyncratic conversation, a deep structural analysis of Western TV culture, impenetrable to the uninitiated and therefore beyond the scope of the interview.

David is a little like a musical scientist, constantly experimenting with electronic hardware in an attempt to achieve new sounds and effects. "Summertime Blues" came about almost by accident, the result of tinkering around in the evenings.

"I was messing around with a lot of tape recorders when I was a student (he did a video, sound and a film course at Maidstone). I did a lot of experimental music with tape and things, working on an LP called 'Grey Scale'. I'd do that in the daytime and in the evening I'd just muck about. I did 'Summertime Blues' at that time. It was simply playing around"

With the aid of a diagram and various physical gestures the intricacies of making "Money" was explained to me. This bizarre process apparently involved throwing objects like rubber toys, cassettes, Chopin's sheet music and a telephone directory, into the piano in order to achieve a kind of banjo effect. This was then recorded in the piano player's front room.

"Then I took the tape to Brixton and put the other bits on there, using a borrowed drum kit. The knock on the record is a snare drum and tambourine being played together, I was hitting the snare drum with a stick. I was in a different room to the tape recorder so I just got a very long mike cable and took the mike out to a very echoey room right next to the toilets and overdubbed it. There isn't any bass drum on the record, it's just a bass guitar being hit with a stick. Then we put the guitar solo and backing vocal on and put it back onto the Vox, and that was the master tape really."

So now you know. I think. Anyway for the lesser wits I shall be marketing copies of this exclusive diagram, under the title of "Be a Do It Yourself Flying Lizard", available at a very reasonable price.

Actually one fact to emerge from this is a major consideration when making a Lizard's record, namely that "it doesn't cost more than 20 quid to make." Cunningham is too keen to encourage the DIY musical enthusiast, making light of the skill involved.

"I don't think it's difficult, all you need is a two track and a four track tape recorder, a mixer, six quid for the tapes and your tube fares," he laughed. "I reckon anyone could make a record like that if they've got a Barclaycard."

"Summertime Blues" was made nearly three years ago but initially rejected by Virgin. Then the management, drawn by the unarguable business logistics of small outlay equals low risk, decided to put it out.

"Actually it sold 10,000 up to Christmas and it's probably done another 10 since. It's selling like a jazz record which is great," said David with obvious pleasure.

Flying Lizards is merely one of the man's many projects, although he's shelved as much as possible for the next three months, "because I've been wrecking myself." He became involved in production when he used to mix live groups at college and has recently been working with the Electric Chairs (plus and minus Wayne County), This Heat, The Pop Group, the Passage and others.

But his main interest and ambition is to follow up the "Grey Scale" experimental album which he considers, "by far the hardest thing I do. It was a sketch book really, a bunch of things I was working on and I kind of jammed them all together and pressed 500. It's never going to sell more than that in a year anyway," he lamented.

He believes experimental music would sell a lot better if it was taken seriously enough. Countering suggestions that it's self indulgent avant garde elitism, an incomprehensible musical variety of Pseudos Corner, he pointed a very specific finger of blame.

"I suppose people don't know it exists. They read that Ian Dury's the new thing and go out and buy an Ian Dury album."

Using historical examples, the erudite Mr. Cunningham argued for the use of recorded sound as an art form in itself, a form that's as yet under-exploited.

"Presley's 'Hound Dog' is tremendous, there's so much echo on it. I just thought a record should be that, using everything available, the editing and so on. You're dealing with time so play with it, make time go backwards, make it overlap itself. The Presley recordings, there's so much echo on them it's unnatural. They're recording, not a performance, if you see the difference."

Not surprisingly, although he is keen to expand the concept of the Lizards (there may be an album early next year), the area of potential development is the electronic media as opposed to

any form of live performance.

TV is so easy, you turn up at two, you're out by 10:30 and you've played to 15 million people or something. The logistics of that, well they attract me a lot more than playing a gig. And TV is the minimal gesture, you've only got to do that," he made a minimal gesture, "if you do that at the Hammersmith Odeon no one's going to notice."

Then followed a diatribe against performing live and the nature of the audiences. I have merely included highlighted selections such as, "I hate gigs" and "I don't even like going to other people's anymore" and the piece de resistance "I hate it. They're all full of people who are a bit mindless, hangers on, it's just the atmosphere of people going to gigs just to be hip."

Now 24, David Cunningham traces his artistic influences to a form of drawing; "I'd just draw the folds in people's clothes and leave out the rest," which caused him to fail his art "A" level. A sometimes perverse but self assured personality, he turned to music "because I was looking for new tools to enable myself to draw" and started using pretty much the same technique.

This time though it doesn't look as if he'll fail anything. He's best summed up by the magazine headline he was holding for the camera, "Looking To the Eighties With Confidence."

- interview by Simon Tebbutt/1979

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