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Love and Revolution: an Appreciation of Marty Balin

Further evidence that there is no God: Henry Kissinger is still with us at 95, but we just lost revolutionary artist, poet and vocalist Marty Balin at age 76 (after losing his Jefferson Airplane collaborator Paul Kantner at 74 in 2016).

I know I am not alone in feeling great sorrow at his passing. I also trust that I am not alone in feeling appalled and angered, but not overly surprised, when the soulless corporate media in this country treated his death as a footnote.

Marty Balin deserved better – much better. His was the stirring, soaring voice of the cultural rebellion of the 1960s and 70s, which unabashedly remained a part of him until his passing on September 27, 2018.

In American pop culture, he became better known for his romantic, admittedly syrupy love songs, especially his big hits from the mid-70s and early '80s – e.g., “Miracles,” “Count on Me,” and “Hearts.” He is also justly remembered for his earlier, more poetic paeans to love and heartache, in such Airplane recordings as “Coming Back to Me” and “Today.”

One can't help but be moved by such earnest expressions of the heart, and Balin continued writing and recording such love ballads until the end. To be candid, one has to be in the right romantic mood to appreciate some of his mushier, middle-of-the-road ballads, and, personally, I can enjoy them only in limited doses. But to quote Paul McCartney: “Some people wanna fill the world with silly love songs.

And what's wrong with that?”

Nothing, really. I presume that they probably helped Balin pay the bills.

Moreover, while some of his love songs were simplistic, others, like the little-appreciated 1983 release “[What Love Is](#),” demonstrated that Balin never lost his ability to explore and express the depth and complexity of that most precious emotion. And whether simple or more involved, Balin’s songs always rang true because his voice rang with sincerity. Even the most simplistic of his love songs show us a man who genuinely bared his heart and soul to the world – mushiness and all.

But there were other dimensions to Balin that have received far less recognition – because they were dangerous to the status quo.

He captured – and shredded — the soulless character of modern consumerist culture in songs like “Plastic Fantastic Lover” and “3/5ths of a Mile in Ten Seconds.”

With Grace Slick and Paul Kantner, he guided us through an acid-enhanced Saturday afternoon journey, in “After Bathing At Baxter’s.”

He was the clarion voice for youth rebellion on such classic anthems as “Crown of Creation,” “We Can Be Together,” “Have You Seen the Saucers,” and the always uplifting “Volunteers.”

Younger folks probably don’t know this, and many folks my age have probably forgotten, but the cultural rebellion of the ‘60s and early ‘70s was about more than peace, love and dope. There was a period from 1969 – ’72 or so when talk of “revolution” was in the air. A nation had witnessed Mayor Daley’s goons cracking the heads of antiwar protestors in the streets of Chicago in August 1968. The peace movement was growing, resistance to racism was becoming more militant, and, while most remained committed to the course of peaceful mass protests, organizations like the SDS, the Weather Underground, the Black Panthers and other groups began to reflect the boiling anger and frustration that many felt about the senseless violence of the Vietnam War and persistence of racism and poverty.

“Volunteers” was released about a month after the “Days of Rage” in Chicago manifested some of that anger and frustration in the Fall of 1969. Mind you, I do not endorse the strategy and tactics that were adopted by the Weather Underground. But there was something to be said for making the war-mongering U.S. ruling class experience a little fear and trepidation that maybe it had gone too far, and that things might be getting out of control.

The Airplane, with Balin, Kantner and Slick, became the most prominent voices of that revolutionary fervor, especially Balin, who urged audiences to “Fight back! Fight back!” whenever “Volunteers” was played.

Alas, the talk of revolution was mostly just that – talk. As was the case in France in ‘68, revolutionary sentiment went a mile wide but, for most, was only skin deep. It was much more about angry posturing than serious organizing. For most, it was a passing fad, like mini-skirts and bell-bottom jeans. By 1972 or so, talk of revolution had peaked. Rock artists like Neal Young and Steve Miller started writing about the virtues of living in the country, or other apolitical subjects. A substantial percentage of the same folks prating about revolution in 1972 were voting for Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Matters were not helped by the fact that most, though not all, of the militant leaders of the time did not have a very coherent vision of the future or coherent view about what “revolution” even meant. As reflected in “Volunteers” (and “Crown of Creation,” “What About Me?” by Quicksilver Messenger Service, “Five to One” by the Doors, etc.), there was an unfortunate tendency to view “revolution” in generational, rather than class terms — and that soon ran into its limitations. A revolution of “youth” doesn’t exactly lend itself to an actual plan for a better society, not to mention the obvious problem that youthfulness is a temporary condition.

But revolutionary sentiment was more than just skin deep for Marty Balin. Even when he and Jefferson Starship were riding their mid-1970s wave of popularity, “Volunteers” remained a staple of their repertoire. They presented new works, like “I Want to See Another World,” co-written by Balin, mixing Kantner’s sci-fi visions of literally escaping to another world with aspirations for building a better world, founded on love.

In the mid-1980s, Balin and Kantner wrote “[America](#),” for their one-shot album as the KBC Band (with Jack Casady), urging young people to not be afraid of anything or anyone in struggling for a new revolution in America.

When the Jefferson Airplane came together for a reunion album in 1989, Balin adapted and sang a marvelous rendition of Bertolt Brecht’s “[Solidarity](#),” urging workers of the world to unite, and reminding us that:

All the gang of those who rule us
Hope our quarrels never stop
Helping them to split and fool us
So they can remain on top.

Balin later recorded an even better version of the song on his 2010 solo album, “Blue Highway.”

When a new version of Jefferson Starship re-formed in the 1990s, Balin wrote “[Let It Live](#),” noting the “countless voices crying out” to save the “precious cargo” of “Spaceship

Earth,” and wondering out loud whether it was “all that much to ask” for working people to be able to survive as “they struggle to raise their children.”

On “Blue Highway,” Balin delivered a powerful rendition of Bruce Cockburn’s “[If I Had a Rocket Launcher](#),” decrying the horrors of war and the determination to put an end to it.

From its opening verse:

Here comes the helicopter

Second time today

Everybody scatters

And hopes it goes away

How many kids they’ve murdered

Only God can say

If I had a rocket launcher

If I had a rocket launcher

If I had a rocket launcher

I’d make somebody pay

I would be remiss if I did not mention Balin’s sheer talent as a vocalist. To be sure, there are live recordings of the Airplane where their vocals sound a little ragged or their harmonies were not quite with it. And there is necessarily a degree of subjectivity in whether one appreciates the stylings of a given vocalist or character of a given set of vocal chords. However, in my opinion, when he was at his best, Marty Balin was not only a brilliant vocalist; he could rival any of his contemporaries, even Janis Joplin, in the power, exuberance and raw emotion expressed in his voice. An excellent case in point is his performance on the epic Airplane live album, “Bless It’s Pointed Little Head,” where his soaring vocals on “The Other Side of this Life” “It’s No Secret,” and “Plastic Fantastic Lover” provide the perfect counterpoint to Jack Casady’s thundering bass and Jorma Kaukonen’s masterful guitarwork.

Marty Balin, lover and revolutionary, may you rest in peace. The corporate media may not appreciate you, but a lot of us regular folks sure did. Thanks for being a champion of love, peace and justice. Thanks for your artistry. Thanks for leaving behind a rich musical legacy that will continue to inspire those who continue to want to see another world.