

Let It Rock

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BADFINGER: “Wish You Were Here”

W.C. Koerber

On April 24th of this year, Pete Ham hanged himself at his home in Woking. Whatever the private reasons which motivated the Badfinger guitarist's suicide, they made little impact in the public sphere. The music press took little notice of his death. *Melody Maker* printed a drab 150 word obituary on page 5 of its following issue. Badfinger's last album, containing some of Ham's finest work, remained unreleased in Great Britain.

Professionally, Badfinger had fallen on hard times. The group had reached a moderate peak of success in England and especially the United States in 1972, when “Day After Day” topped the singles charts and *Straight Up* followed in the album charts. But they were part of the Apple corporation, which meant that they were caught in the inefficiency, corruption and general chaos which accompanied the demise of The Beatles. Consequently, they were never able to capitalize on their fleeting popularity in the charts. They rarely played concerts and suffered from the worst (i.e. least) promotion in the U.S. In the summer of 1972, they headlined at outdoor concert in New York's Central Park and it rained. With cloud draped midtown skyscrapers as a backdrop, Badfinger played a magnificent set before a mere eight hundred people.

By 1973, Badfinger was another languishing act in Apple's mismanaged stable. Recognising the need for new direction, the group followed the lead of former Apple mates James Taylor and Jackie Lomax, signing with Warner Brothers. Yet the parting with Apple was more philosophical than acrimonious. On *Ass*, their last album for Apple, Badfinger sang farewell in “Apple Of My Eye”:

*And now the time has come to walk alone,
We were the children; now we've overgrown
You're the apple of my eye,
You're the apple of my heart,
But now the time has come to part*

The album cover portrayed an ass (four legged) wearing stereo headphones, about to stride off toward a horizon, enticed by an enormous carrot in the heavens. Badfinger as innocents, lured by the forbidden fruit in the Beatles garden of Eden, and metamorphosed by the ensuing knowledge into mere beasts of burden no longer seeking the *Apple*, but the more lowly carrot, in the world's oldest con-trick? An interesting thought, and if Badfinger followed the enticing carrot of success to a new label, the goal remained as elusive as ever. Their first Warner Brothers contained, in fact, the very thing the group needed – a good single. Unfortunately, it sank without a trace. Warner Brothers were being very conservative in their approach to *Badfinger*, and they weren't getting the promotion they so badly needed. To complicate matters, Apple had the publishing rights to the single and both companies released their Badfinger albums almost simultaneously. As a consequence, both albums were lost in the shuffle. *Badfinger*, on Warner Brothers, sold a dismal 3,500 copies. Badfinger's popularity had reached a nadir right in the middle of a professional and artistic transition. Whether from sharing the Bangladesh concert stage with Harrison, Clapton and Jesse Ed Davis, three prima donnas of the guitar, or simply through a desire to showcase the extraordinary virtuosity of Pete Ham and Joey Molland, the musical sound of Badfinger, began to depend on aggressive, extended guitar work to underpin the melodic superstructure.

Scarcely anyone noticed the transition, of course. Consumers weren't buying and the critics who had been so enthusiastic toward the earlier Badfinger albums were skeptical of both *Ass* and *Badfinger*. The inevitable result was that Warner Brothers didn't even release *Wish You Were Here* in Great Britain.

Wish You Were Here should have been a complete success for Badfinger. It recaptures all the vitality of their classic *No Dice* and *Straight Up* albums and assimilates the new musical maturity towards which they groped in *Ass* and *Badfinger*. It bristles with potential hit singles.

On the album's cover, Badfinger portray four drunken sailors on shore leave in a seedy Hong Kong bar, caught with glazed eyes and tawdry tarts in a souvenir photo ironically stamped "Wish You Were Here". The overall effect is stunningly macabre, While the Stones did the same sort of scene for their "Honky Tonk Woman" single, they were wide awake and consciously decadent – entirely at home in the nether world of burned out, omnivorous women. Badfinger, on the other hand, are wide-eyed innocents, feigning experience, but more likely to get VD from the exploits than the cynical honky tonk blues. Where the Stones projected insouciance, Badfinger projects vulnerability.

Vulnerability cuts through most of the songs on the album. Pete Ham's opening cut, "Just A Chance", is an urgent restatement of the cover photograph:

*You may say it's not a great romance
But all we want from you is just a chance
To try – any way we can*

It is compelling, driving opening, with punctuaton by the Average White Horns.

Ironically, Pete Ham confronts his vulnerability with strength and optimism. He encourages a son in "Dennis" that "there's a way through" and that obstacles "look like weeds but they're really flowers/ and they'll soon be gone". He exults in the private joys of love in "Know One Knows," an obvious choice for a single that could have done for Badfinger what "Jive Talkin" did for the Bee

Gees.

It is in the compositions of Joey Molland that vulnerability is confronted with despair. In "Got To Get Out Of Here," he questions the existence of people beyond the walls which confide him, even if he needs them: "got to be others near / maybe someone fills the space behind the wall / maybe not at all."

In the final composition of the album, both Ham and Molland abandon themselves to a general, confused anger, born of a thwarted desire merely to understand. It is easily the meanest song Badfinger has composed and it pulses with tension. As gently as they said goodbye to Apple, with bitterness do they depart in *Wish You Were Here*. Ham sings:

*If they would only let us know
Then we'd know just how far to go
But instead, they just tell us no, tell us no*

And Molland screams in reply:

*Should I smoke or should I die
Somebody just tell me why
Should I laugh or should I cry?
Won't somebody help me?*

Wish You Were Here could be Badfinger's finest album, and that is saying a great deal. It deserves to be heard and Warner Brothers should release it. Pete Ham's suicide will in all probability generate no legends. But his talent will be sorely missed by those who knew his music, and *Wish You Were Here* should surely be his epitaph.