

According to Marcus, The Band's old-timey sound provided its audience – the rock generation, the counterculture – with a way to reconnect with 'America' culturally at a time (1968–70) when it was most alienated from the US politically, on account of Vietnam, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Nixon's election and the shootings of student protesters at Kent State. A similar impulse towards healing and reconciliation motivated a much more frivolous-seeming outfit that would strike an unexpected chord with the Woodstock generation: Sha Na Na.

Formed in early 1969 by students at the Ivy League Columbia University, this fifties-revival group was prompted into existence by the discord that had overrun the college in April 1968, when student anti-Vietnam War protesters occupied university buildings, leading to counter-protests, 'a police riot' and the closure of the campus for the remainder of the term. Sha Na Na's mastermind George Leonard – at the time a twenty-two-year-old cultural-history student, now a college professor – yearned to bridge the divide in the student body between anti-war liberals (many of whom were members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)) and patriotic jocks (some of whom were in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)). The solution he came up with was to remind everybody what they had in common: rock'n'roll. It was the music they'd all grown up on, indelibly linked to a happier time – the fifties.

'The Columbia riots had been a ghastly experience,' Leonard recalls. 'Like the Civil War, but on campus. The university authorities dithered for a long time and then they let the cops go in. My brother Rob saw it and said he was crying because the police were beating people with these long flashlights.' Rob Leonard was president of Columbia's a cappella group The Kingsmen, so George persuaded them to transform their glee club into a fifties song-and-dance troupe and to stage a spectacular called *The Glory That Was Grease*. Leonard's pitch – made first to The Kingsmen, then

to the student population – was, ‘Jocks! Freaks! ROTC! SDS! Let there be a truce! Bury the hatchet (not in each other)! Remember when we were all little greaseballs together.’

In preparation for the show, Leonard left flyers in college dorms and communal areas: ‘Hey you hoods, so you’re a sophisticated college guy, huh? Bullshit. You know who you are, greaseball. Face it, deep down inside you somewhere there’s still the same greasy kid standing on the corner in his continental jeans watching the 8th grade girls . . . singing “Duke of Earl” to himself . . . For one glorious night revert to type . . . Grease your hair back with KY, roll up the sleeves on your T-shirt.’

Leonard’s aim was to evoke what he later called ‘the pre-political teenage Eden’ of the fifties. But this was a consciously fabricated myth and didn’t reflect how people would have felt at the time. Greasers – known in the fifties as hoods, short for hoodlums, or JDs, short for juvenile delinquents – were folk-devil figures. Most likely the majority of the students on campus would have been scared of them as children in the fifties and unlikely to have been from the same social class. ‘Everyone remembered clearly that hoods had been rough,’ says Leonard. ‘They knew what the fifties had been, but they still took the myth. I guess they needed it.’ Other aspects of Sha Na Na’s performance were equally falsified. The dance routines that Leonard choreographed bore little resemblance to how bands moved or kids danced in the fifties, but instead mish-mashed elements of Busby Berkeley’s mass symmetries, the soul moves Leonard had seen at the Apollo Theater in Harlem (just a few blocks north of Columbia University) and bits of ballet (he’d been studying dance). Not only that, but the group’s repertoire of rock’n’roll classics was played at ‘twice the speed of the originals: I insisted we do the music the way it was remembered instead of the way it was.’ Even the word ‘greaser’ was anachronistic, not part of common parlance in the fifties. Leonard may have been indirectly influenced here by S. E.

Hinton's teenage fiction classic *The Outsiders*, which was published in 1967 and, while set in the present, depicted a fifties-like mid-American town whose youth are bitterly divided between working-class 'greasers' and smartly dressed middle-class 'socs', short for 'socials'. With hardly any archival resources to draw on – no videos or readily accessible movies, just a few faded memories and record sleeves – Leonard was necessarily fictionalising the recent past. 'Did we actually feel nostalgic for the fifties? No. The whole thing was very deliberately made up. Amateur historians write about history, professionals make it up!'

From their borderline ridiculous stage moves to their name – a mangling of the refrain of The Silhouettes' 1957 hit 'Get a Job' – Sha Na Na were camp as hell: closer to a Gay Pride float or scene in one of John Waters's 'cute'-period movies like *Hairspray* than the earnest harking back of Creedence and Lennon. In interviews at the time, Leonard described himself as a fan of Susan Sontag and claimed to be directly inspired by her 'Notes on "Camp"' essay. Today he downplays her influence – 'Sontag was just summing up, and summing up well, what was already in the air, what we were already living' – and instead pinpoints Andy Warhol ('a huge star to us, just ordinary guys in the dorms') as the real guru of the era.

Performed in the spring of 1969 at Columbia's Wollman Auditorium, *The Glory That Was Grease* was a huge success. It was quickly followed by *The First East Coast Grease Festival: Grease Under the Stars*, staged on the steps of the Low Memorial Library at Columbia and drawing five thousand kids – not just from the campus but from other Ivy League colleges on the East Coast. More Sha Na Na gigs followed, one of which was caught by Jimi Hendrix, who was blown away and wangled them onto the bill at Woodstock. Sha Na Na performed on the final day as the act before Hendrix. The film crew had fallen asleep because it was 5.30 a.m., but they woke up just in time to document Sha Na Na's rendition of the Danny and the Juniors classic 'At the Hop', the

troupe bopping and jiving in their Brylcreemed DAs, with cigarette packets rolled up in their T-shirt sleeves.

Within a few months of Sha Na Na's appearance at Woodstock, the back-to-the-fifties fad gathered further momentum with a pair of one-day rock'n'roll revival festivals – unconnected with each other – that took place in Toronto and New York in the autumn of 1969. Staged at Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum on 18 October, the First Rock Revival filled the 4,500-capacity hall, with thousands more eager to see the line-up (Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, The Coasters, The Shirelles and, yes, Sha Na Na) turned away. When Haley stepped onstage there was an eight-minute ovation. By October 1970, the Rock Revivals had graduated from the Felt Forum to the 20,000-capacity Madison Square Garden itself. Promoter Richard Nader found himself the mogul of a rock'n'roll nostalgia industry, staging concerts all over North America. His concept was widely copied, and he himself branched out to do Big Band Festivals catering to the pre-rock generation's nostalgia for the days of Duke Ellington and Guy Lombardo.

Nader became proactive, tracking down groups that had dispersed, such as Dion and the Belmonts and The Five Satins, and persuading them to reunite. Participating in the revival concerts was rewarding in terms of income and attention, but it was not always a joyous experience for those whose careers it resuscitated. Fifties heart-throb rocker Ricky Nelson wrote the hit single 'Garden Party' about playing one of Nader's Madison Square concerts in 1971 and getting booed by the audience. They wanted to see the teenage idol of their youth. Instead they got the grown-up Nelson, who'd moved with the times, sported long hair and bell-bottoms, and whose current group, The Stone Canyon Band, played country rock in the early-seventies style.

By October 1974, Nader's Rock Revival was the longest-running concert series at Madison Square Garden. Looking back, Nader explained that his original concept in 1969 had been to

the movie's end, the fate of all the characters is described: John Milner the drag-strip racer is killed by a drunk driver a few years later; the Buddy Holly lookalike Terry is missing-in-action in Vietnam; the goody-two-shoes Steve is claimed by adult mediocrity; while Curtis is described as a writer living in Canada (a hint that he was a draft dodger). *American Graffiti*, then, is a snapshot of Sha Na Na's 'pre-political Eden': the movie captures the golden sunset of the fifties, just before the sixties – with all its high hopes and crashing disillusion – kicked off full-steam in 1963.

But Sha Na Na's innocuous rewrite of the fifties really blossomed with the TV series *Happy Days*, which launched in 1974 and was effectively a spin-off of *Graffiti*, with Ron Howard reprising his Steve character in the form of the wholesome Richie Cunningham. *Happy Days* in turn spawned the spin-off fifties retro-comedy hit *Laverne & Shirley*. Also heavily influenced by Sha Na Na was the hit Broadway musical *Grease*, set in a late-fifties high school and soon transformed into a saccharine 1978 movie starring John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John. Sha Na Na got payback in the form of a cameo appearance in the film, performing at the high-school hop. By this point they also had their own mega-successful eponymous TV series.

LET'S DO THE TIME WARP AGAIN

'Innocence' is not the only thing that seventies musicians sought and found in the fifties. As fifties revivalism continued and diversified in the second half of the seventies, two other 'essences' of rock'n'roll came to the fore. Some bands, like The Cramps, focused on rockabilly's febrile sexuality and 'real gone' frenzy, making a fetish of obscure artists, those who'd never made it out of the Deep South. Others homed in on the histrionic excess of rock'n'roll's more pop-tastic and produced side, figures like Phil Spector, Roy Orbison and Del Shannon.