



BAND ON THE RUN

By Paul Gambaccini

I wanted the scoop. Every rock journalist in the Western world wanted to get Paul McCartney's first post-Beatle interview. The difference was that I had a chance.

Paul had not given an interview since he had revealed the break-up of the Beatles in the press release for his May 1970 solo album *McCartney*. During the three years that had passed John Lennon had raised the bar for confessional interviews in his conversations with *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner. These became famous on the page and, later, on radio as *Lennon Remembers*. Lennon had been undergoing primal therapy with its creator Arthur Janov, and infused his reminiscences with emotional outbursts. Some of these were interpreted as criticisms of his former partner, and mainstream journalists seeking good gossip wanted to know Paul's reaction to John's publicized thoughts.

Music writers like myself had additional interests. We couldn't figure out what strategy the leading songwriter of the sixties was following. In 1970 he released his solo debut, followed by the 1971 duet album *RAM* by "Paul and Linda McCartney", the clearly rushed 1972 group effort *Wild Life* by "Wings" and the more conventionally produced 1973 "Paul McCartney and Wings" LP *Red Rose Speedway*. No pattern was apparent.

Paul's singles schedule was even more difficult to interpret. After a world hit with "Another Day" and an American number one with "Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey" in 1971, McCartney issued in 1972 the most varied trio of singles in rock history. "Give Ireland Back to the Irish", a response to the Bloody Sunday massacre, was straightforward political protest and was predictably banned by the BBC, to such an extent that chart presenter Alan Freeman could not even speak its title when he came to it in the countdown. He was only allowed to refer to it as "a record by the group Wings".

If there could be an antithesis to "Give Ireland Back to the Irish" it would be the follow-up "Mary Had a Little Lamb", an utterly innocuous rendering of the familiar children's rhyme Paul claimed was inspired by his daughters singing at the family table. Many rock critics howled that the writer of gems such as "Yesterday" and "Let It Be" had been reduced to nursery nonsense. A few reviewers stood apart from the pack and theorized that McCartney had his tongue lodged in his cheek, feeding the critics of "Give Ireland Back to the Irish" the most uncontroversial single imaginable. If so, he startled them again next time with "Hi Hi Hi", which drew another BBC ban because the lyric sheet supplied by his record company quoted "get ready for my body gun" instead of what Paul said was the actual line, "get ready for my polygon".

The post-Beatle work of Paul McCartney was proving worth watching, but no one could figure out what they were seeing. Was Paul the most controversial of the former Beatles, even more rebellious than John Lennon, or was he the least threatening, even safer than the spiritual and philanthropic George Harrison?

The truth, as so often is the case, was less satisfying than conspiracy theory. There was no pattern in Paul's behavior. He was simply living in the moment, recording what he felt like when he felt like it. This satisfied neither historians looking for a long term plan nor commercial interests, but artistic freedom was a prerogative of someone with his track record.

BAND ON THE RUN was set up by a return to chart form, RED ROSE SPEEDWAY. It went to number one in America, propelled by the giant number one single "My Love", a tribute to Linda which captured the romantic feelings of millions of listeners. The critical consensus was that, although RED ROSE SPEEDWAY was not in itself a classic album, it had put Paul McCartney back on the path to making one. Expectations were further heightened by the quality and success of the James Bond theme "Live and Let Die".

While promoting RED ROSE SPEEDWAY Paul and his new band Wings performed a series of British concerts. After the Oxford date he held a press conference, with Linda by his side, at the Randolph Hotel. I attended and noted that, while not completely comfortable, he was now willing to take uncensored direct questions from the media.

The time might be near for me to nab my dream exclusive. With the approval of ROLLING STONE's London editor Andrew Bailey, I suggested a major piece to McCartney's publicist Tony Brainsby. I repeated the invitation whenever I interviewed another of Brainsby's artists. My opportunity came when Paul, a ROLLING STONE reader, was ready with his next album. He understood the central role of what we called "the paper" in the music world and thought it the natural outlet for a discussion of the album, which had been recorded in September and October, 1973 in Lagos, Nigeria at EMI Studios and at Ginger Baker's ARC Studios.

When I attended Paul's triumphant Hyde Park concert in July 2010, my companion asked how I had originally met my namesake. I explained the circumstances of the ROLLING STONE interview and mentioned that it was conducted over six long sessions in London and New York. With that, my friend and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. Today "exclusives" are often obtained in what are called "junkets", days in which stars sit in a hotel suite with room service while journalists are wheeled in and out for strictly timed fifteen or twenty minute sessions. That an artist would devote hours to a single interview and do so in two different countries is today difficult to imagine. Paul McCartney was that professional. He was so committed to the process that he invited me to meet his children, which seems highly unlikely today. One-year old Stella removed my watch and placed it on her ankle, demonstrating unusual design sense in an infant.

In those days interviewers were encouraged to have a thorough knowledge of an artist's new work before meeting him. I was given a white label of BAND ON THE RUN to listen to for a week before speaking to Paul. Nowadays this practice would be considered a leak with potentially catastrophic piracy implications. In 1973 it was standard operating procedure.

I was staggered by the brilliance of the album. I had committed myself to interviewing McCartney regardless of the quality of his new work, so it was a bonus that I loved the record. So did our ROLLING STONE Records Editor, Jon Landau, who in a perceptive review "got it". He identified several of the reasons BAND ON THE RUN was a great album, famously concluding that it was "(with the possible exception of John Lennon's PLASTIC ONO BAND) the finest record yet released by any of the four musicians who were once called the Beatles."

McCartney revealed that "Band on the Run" was inspired by a phrase uttered by George Harrison at an Apple meeting, "If I ever get out of here".

"He was saying that we were all prisoners in some way ... 'If we ever get out of here,' the prison bit, and I thought that would be a nice way to start an album."

When asked directly if "Band on the Run" was an image appropriate for Wings, a group searching for a configuration, role, and geographic centre, McCartney was stymied.

"Our band? I've been thinking about that since you asked me yesterday. I don't really know, to tell you the truth. It's just a good flow of words. I really don't analyze stuff, and if I do I remember what it meant about three months later, just lying in bed one night."

To Jon Landau and millions of record buyers, the connection was obvious, but a lot of assumptions about Paul McCartney are not in his own conscious mind. To take another example, the marvelous "Let Me Roll It" is so evocative of Plastic Ono Band records it must be a musical reference to John Lennon's solo work and probably a loving personal message, yet in our interview McCartney denied this was so. When I suggested that one of the reasons the Beatles broke in the United States as suddenly and spectacularly as they did was that Americans were hungry for happiness after their deep mourning for the assassinated President Kennedy, Paul said simply "I never thought of that. No, I don't think so."

If ever there was proof that great oaks from tiny acorns grow, "Picasso's Last Words (Drink to Me)" was it. As Paul recalled, "we were in Jamaica on holiday and we were staying in a little house outside Montego Bay, and we read in the local newspaper, THE DAILY GLEANER that Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen were in town filming PAPPALON. They were just along the coast from us. We were saying it would be great to meet him, have dinner with him, so Linda rang up. She's good at that; I'm always a bit embarrassed."

"We got friendly and were chatting away. We'd been talking about songwriting, and Dustin was saying he thought it was an incredible gift to be able to write a song about something. People think that, but I always maintain it's the same as any gift.... I was saying 'It's the same as you and acting, when the man says "Action!" you just pull it out of the bag don't you? You don't know where it comes from, you just do it! How do you get all of your characterizations? It's just in you.'

"We went back a couple of days later and he said, 'I've been thinking about this, I've seen a little thing in TIME magazine about Picasso, and it struck me as being very poetic. I think this would be really great set to music."

Apparently Picasso had said to his dining companions "Drink to me, drink to my health, you know I can't drink any more", went to paint and, at three a.m., to bed. In the morning he was found dead.

Rising to Hoffman's challenge, McCartney picked up his guitar, strummed a couple of chords and started singing "Drink to me, drink to my health". Dustin jumped out of his chair and said to his wife "Annie! Annie! The most incredible thing! He's doing it! He's writing it! It's coming out!"

Composition is one thing, recording another.

"We thought we'd do this Picasso number, and we started off doing it straight. Then we thought, Picasso was kind of far out in his pictures, he'd done all these different kinds of things, fragmented, Cubism and the whole bit. I thought it would be nice to get a track a bit like that, put it through different moods, cut it up, edit it, mess around with it --- like he used to do with his pictures."

"Picasso's Last Words (Drink to Me)" went from being a catchy song to a work of art. After the basic theme was established, McCartney inserted reprises of "Jet" and "Mrs. Vanderbilt", fragments of French dialogue, and variations on the chorus. Ginger Baker and studio associates joined Paul and Linda in filling tin cans with gravel and using them as shakers. The total effect was of a summation of the life of a great artist working in many styles. One could imagine a faltering mind in its final throes recalling life out of sequence and at different speeds.

"Picasso's Last Words (Drink to Me)" was a perfect microcosm of the making of BAND ON THE RUN, an example of how necessity, or at least challenge, can be the mother of invention. The album is a famous example of Paul making a record with few musical forces, his only companions throughout the album being

Linda and Denny Laine. It evokes visions of Paul McCartney laying down bass lines, singing lead vocals, going behind the drums, sitting at the keyboard and in general being a British Stevie Wonder.

This was not how the record had been planned. Only three-fifths of the anticipated musicians made it to Lagos. As Paul explained, he and Wings guitarist Henry McCulloch had a musical tiff --- "I was asking him to play something he didn't really fancy playing. We all got a bit choked about it, and he rang up later to say he was leaving." Drummer Denny Seiwell pulled out on the eve of the group's departure for Nigeria.

"I don't know quite why," McCartney mused. "He was a bit nervous about coming to Africa. We're all going to record and if the drummer won't come, what do you do? You don't say 'Well, we'll see you when we get back, thanks a lot we understand.' You say 'Well, er, ummmm,' and he leaves."

The choice of Lagos as recording location was also an improvisation.

"Lately we've gone to two different places to record, just for the fun of it," Paul explained. "We've been to Lagos and to Paris and in both of the places they say 'Why did you come here? You've got much better studios in England or America, you must be daft!' And we say, 'Well, it's just for the fun of it, it's just to come somewhere different for a different type of turn-on, that's all.'"

The "turn-on" nearly turned into a "turn-off". Although the vast majority of the Nigerians the McCartneys met were friendly, a couple were threatening. In addition, one of the nation's most famous citizens, Fela Ransome-Kuti, former member of Ginger Baker's Air Force and eventually the subject of a Tony-winning musical, assumed Paul had come to Lagos to appropriate African music for European profit. This was a disappointing accusation, since Paul considered Nigerian music "unbelievable. When I heard Fela Ransome-Kuti the first time, it made me cry, it was that good."

The spat made McCartney reluctant to use local talent on the album.

"We were going to use African musicians, but when we were told we were about to pinch the music we thought 'We'll do it ourselves then, so there's no question about it.' Then we were back in London working at Air Studios and this old friend from the past named Remi Kabaka turns up. And he's from Lagos! He played on one of the tracks, a bit of percussion on 'Bluebird', so he's the only one who ended up doing anything on the album."

The three central performers, Paul, Linda and Denny Laine, were depicted with six celebrities on the album sleeve, dressed as prisoners caught in a spotlight during a jailbreak. The photo was taken west of London in Osterley Park, Brentford.

James Coburn, the only American in the photo, was a leading actor who had just released PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID. John Conteh was, like McCartney, from Liverpool. He had been a 1970 Commonwealth Games boxing champion and was on his way to international distinction. Clement Freud, grandson of Sigmund, was a well-known gourmet and radio humorist who had been elected to Parliament in 1973. Christopher Lee was an actor noted for work in horror films. In 1973 he found a broader following with THE WICKER MAN. Kenny Lynch was a solo singer from London who appeared on the Beatles' first British tour, headlined by Helen Shapiro in early 1963. When Lynch released "Misery" he became the first artist to cover a Lennon-McCartney song. Michael Parkinson was in 1973 already one of Britain's top television interviewers. He would go on to devote an entire edition of his show to McCartney.

BAND ON THE RUN was released in December, 1973. The album was preceded by a single from the same sessions, "Helen Wheels", the story of Paul and Linda motoring from Scotland to London in their Land Rover, "Hell on Wheels". As it had been for the Beatles, it was Paul McCartney's customary though not exclusive practice to keep singles separate from albums. He thought it unfair to ask fans to buy the same song twice.

Furthermore, he only wanted a track on an album if it fit the mood or concept. "Helen Wheels" did not have this relationship with BAND ON THE RUN.

Nonetheless, it appeared on the American version of the LP. Capitol Records executive Al Coury, excited that releasing a single of "Money" had boosted sales of Pink Floyd's DARK SIDE OF THE MOON in the US, convinced McCartney to allow the top ten hit "Helen Wheels" to appear on the American album. It was inserted innocuously on side two, before the sequence leading to the record's conclusion. By working "Helen Wheels" onto the album Coury arranged the unintended feat of making the alliteratively-named Sailor Sam, who also appears on "Band on the Run", the first of McCartney's fictitious characters since Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band to appear on two tracks of the same LP. In this remastered version of BAND ON THE RUN "Helen Wheels" appears as it always did in Britain, separately from the original nine tracks.

Although the album charted immediately, it was what the industry called a "grower". No single appeared until it had been out for two months, but when "Jet" was released the album benefited. "Jet" was an instant international hit. Even though the subject matter was intentionally obscure, the song was extremely commercial, a perfect "out of news" record for radio.

As Paul explained in our interview in a section edited out of the ROLLING STONE copy --- call this the Director's Cut --- "We've got a Labrador puppy who is the runt of a litter. We bought her along a roadside in a little pet shop, out in the country one day. She was a bit of a wild dog, a wild girl who wouldn't stay in. We have a big wall around our house in London and she always used to jump the wall. She'd go out on the town for the evening, like LADY AND THE TRAMP. She must have met up with some big black Labrador or something. She came back one day pregnant. She proceeded to walk into the garage and have this litter ... seven little black puppies, perfect little black Labradors, and she's not black, she's tan 'Jet' was one of the puppies."

The success of "Jet" led McCartney and an excited Al Coury to an unprecedented decision. There had never been more than one single taken from a McCartney album. Now "Band on the Run" was issued as a single to follow "Jet". It went to number one in the US and three in the UK, helping the album to climb to the top in both countries. BAND ON THE RUN was number one in America for three separate chart "runs" totaling four weeks and lodged at the top in Britain for seven weeks of the summer, ending 1974 as the UK's best-selling studio album of the year. The LP spent more than two years on the album charts of both countries. "Band on the Run" won the Grammy Award for "Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Duo, Group or Chorus".

Sixty percent of a band recording in an unfamiliar country had made a multi-million selling classic album. Paul McCartney was restored to critical and commercial Valhalla. And, oh yes, I had my scoop. It was a win-win for everyone named Paul.