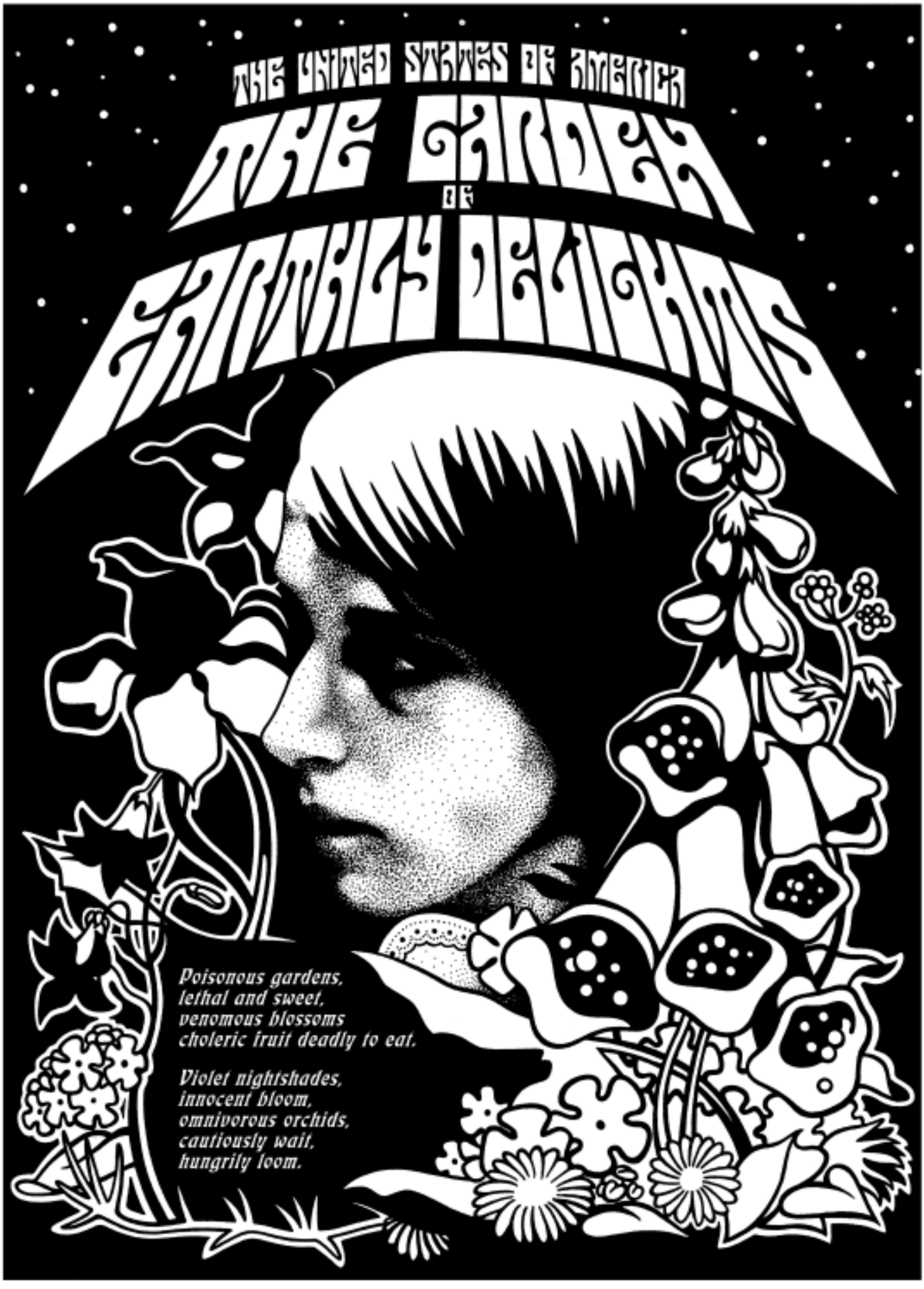

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
THE GARDEN
OF
EARTHLY DELIGHTS
Poisonous gardens,
lethal and sweet,
venomous blossoms
choleric fruit deadly to eat.
Violet nightshades,
innocent bloom,
omnivorous orchids,
cautiously wait,
hungrily loom.

Fondly remembered by those of a certain age here in the UK principally for their remarkable contribution to the 'Rock Machine Turns You On' compilation on CBS, *'I Won't Leave My Wooden Wife For You, Sugar'*, the United States of America were much more than a one-track band, in much the same way as they were much more than a one *person* band. Formed and master-minded by experimental composer Joe Byrd, in Dorothy Moskowitz the United States of America featured one of the most captivating vocalists in rock, and together they penned some truly memorable songs – 'The American Metaphysical Circus', 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' and 'Coming Down' to name but a few personal favourites.

Dorothy Moskowitz recently took the trouble to answer some questions for the Terrascope.

PT: Dorothy, let's begin with your musical background…

DM: I'm largely self-taught. When relatives heard me pick out tunes as a child, they advised my mother to get me "theory." She had no idea what "theory" was, but the first teacher I had gave me reams of theory papers. Unfortunately, the teacher left out the part about what my fingers were supposed to be doing. Forever struggling with classical technique, I gave up piano after about five years. The little theory I had, plus the harmony I took in high school was the sum of my formal training until I graduated college. All through high school, I worked as an accompanist in a children's dance studio directed by a retired Ziegfield Girl. I somehow worked up a Broadway rehearsal style, learning what it meant to "vamp 'til ready" and "comp" in stop time. I also learned a lot of popular songs. When I got to college, I was asked to write music for different events. I never knew how very little I knew about the process. Instead, I blithely forged ahead in ignorance, directing and arranging music for the *a cappella* group, writing the songs for two musicals, winning a ballet score competition and composing the school's Alma Mater. Had I gone to a place like Oberlin, where there were serious musicians, I might never have had the audacity to do what I did. As it turned out, Barnard College taught me audacity, if nothing else. Its lack of music reputation wasn't a stumbling block. It was actually an opportunity in disguise.

I did have some informal mentoring by composer Otto Leuning at Columbia, and I studied privately with John Mehegan, jazz pianist and theoretician. At UCLA, I studied both North and South Indian music, music of the Americas and took classes in African, Asian and Balinese music.

When and how did you first get in touch with Joseph Byrd? How were The United States of America born?

I first met Joseph Byrd in the spring of 1963 and he began the USA sometime in 1967. My first job after college was as a secretary in the Red Seal (classical) Department of RCA Victor Records. The company would give employees free tickets to fill or as they say 'paper' the house for their concert artists. It was at one such event that a mutual friend from college introduced us. We 'courted and sparked,' to put it quaintly. He even helped me move from my rather humble RCA Victor position to a production job at Capitol, where he was working. We worked on some albums together at Capitol, and after a few months, we sped off together to California, he in pursuit of a higher degree at UCLA, and I in pursuit of adventure.

In a sense, the USA's roots go back to the early days in Los Angeles. Joe brought with him a New York avant-garde cachet, a background in electronic music from his Stanford days, and composing skills he'd gleaned from working with composer Barney Childs at the University of Arizona. He attracted immediate attention. Exciting musicians, dancers and visual artists sought collaboration with him. The talent pool for what eventually became the USA was sourced from this group. I became the willing helpmate, assisting in producing concerts and performing in several of them myself. Unhappily for me, the relationship ended in 1966, and I returned to New York. Oddly enough, we remained friends. When Joe formed the USA the following year, he asked me back to LA to sing. We had both moved on to new relationships, so that it didn't seem to be a particularly awkward idea.

How come you chose that name? Did you take part in choosing it?

I wasn't around for the name selection. I did arrive in LA in time for a brief discussion over whether the band should be "United States" or "United States of America." The first alternative might connote a union of different artistic viewpoints. It could also suggest diverse mental states. It would have been a fashionable, but essentially harmless choice. The name "United States of America" on the other hand, was more provocative. Using the full name of the country for something so common as a rock group was a way of expressing disdain for governmental policy. It was like hanging the flag upside down. During the war in Vietnam, most of the people I knew felt that disdainful gestures like that were essentially humanitarian and patriotic.

How did you end up recording for Columbia?

Elektra records showed some interest in us, and there may have been one other company, but the only clear offer at the time was from Columbia, as I recall.

How did people react to your album, when it was first released?

People thought us snooty, loud and obnoxious.

Did it get any airplay?

This is really a sad subject because I've never heard myself singing USA material on air. Over the years I've been able to get radio time for some small projects of my own with just a few phone calls or an interview or two. Not so, with the USA. Maybe we didn't have enough of a grass roots following; maybe Columbia thought our work was too drug-inspired to market us. This always bewildered me, since there was no proselytizing, and the electronic effects on the record owed more to our interest in new music than to any substance we may have abused.

Are you aware of any existing live recordings from back then?

We were taped at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington in the winter of '68 by some local TV station. I never got a copy and I doubt it could be found today.

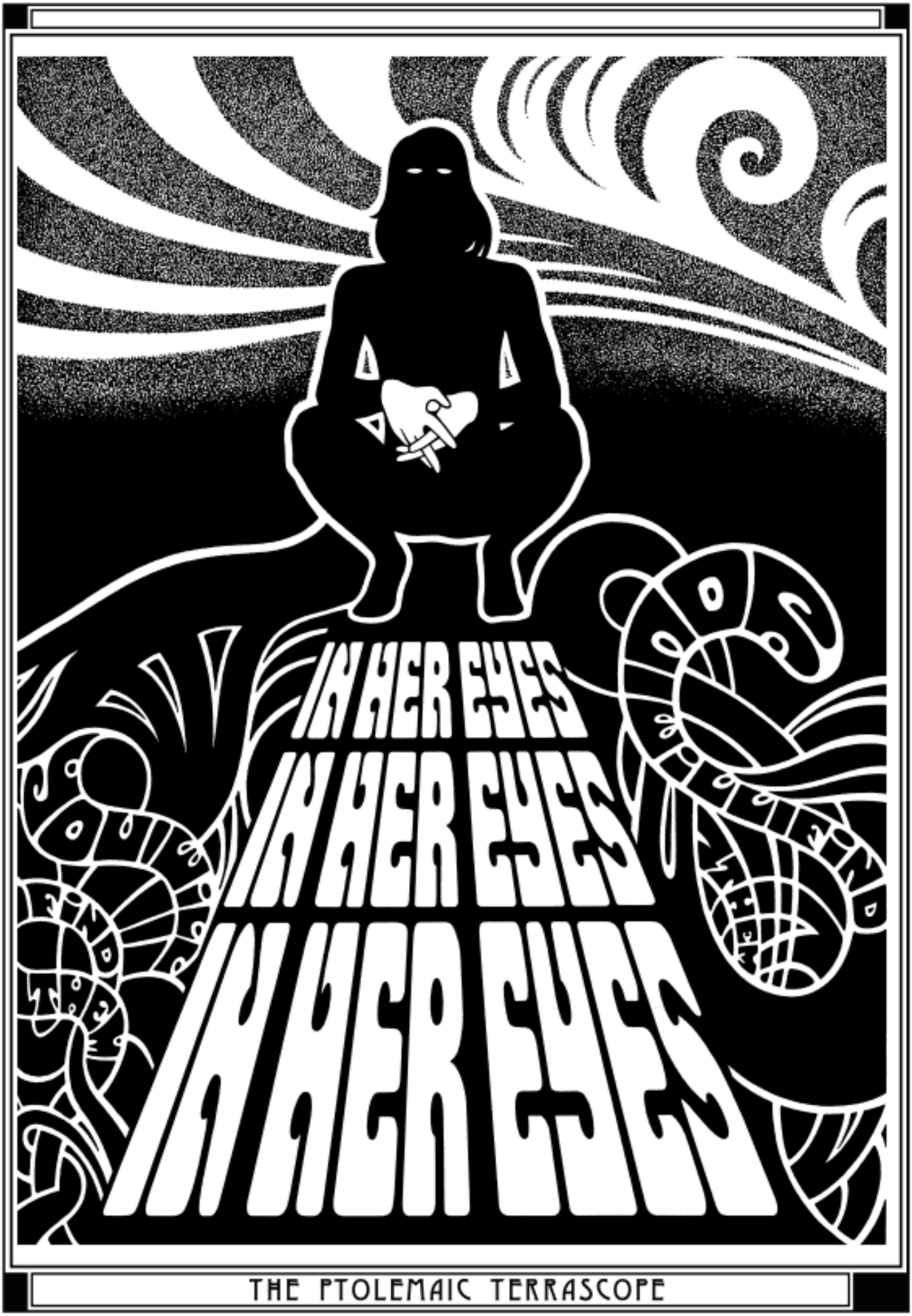
What's your opinion of producer David Rubinson's work? At the time he was already known for his collaboration with Moby Grape, but was basically at the beginning of his career. Also, what about remix engineer Glen Kolotkin?

I respect David's work and I'm glad that he was able to accomplish so much in his prime. In 1967, he was at the early part of his career and had already produced Mongo Santamaria, Taj Mahal and Herbie Hancock, in addition to Moby Grape.

I first met David when I auditioned for the part of Adelaide in a Columbia College production of "Guys and Dolls" in the spring of 1962. I was a senior at Barnard, he still a junior at Columbia. Later we shared a lunatic moment when he arranged for us to perform some jazz at the "Lion's Den," a dingy campus hangout. When Joseph Byrd and I decided to move to California together, we asked David to replace us at Capitol Records. There was a short time in the summer of '63, when the three of us worked together on a Time-Life American History series there. This was David's entrée into the recording industry and his getting us signed to Columbia four years later was probably a form of payback. I am, in turn, grateful. On the other hand, he was having some health problems just as we were beginning our touring and we didn't seem to be one of his main priorities when he got back on his feet. I don't know how things might have turned out if he'd been able to focus on us more.

The final mix took place in New York with Joseph and David together. I guess that's where Glen Kolotkin came in, but I wasn't there so I don't really know much about his contribution. The person who engineered the sessions in LA was Dave Dillard, as I recall. He was a true professional. It wasn't until years later, when I'd gotten a lot more studio time under my belt that I realized just how competent he was. I've since been in situations where entire tracks have been omitted, where echo effects spookily appear from nowhere, where people clip the end of a "decay," where getting a drum mix eats up most of the session time. I never imagined the idiotic things that could go wrong in a studio because I was so green at the time. Dave was never judgmental, even when we seemed outlandish in our process.

Did you ever plan to release singles?


IN HER EYES
IN HER EYES
IN HER EYES
SOUL
FIND THEM
FIND THEM

Nothing was planned at the time we recorded, but there was a single released later in Europe. I found out about it by accident. I was playing at the London School of Economics, of all places, in 1971 or '72 and a fellow came up to me and asked in the thickest of Norwegian accents, "Would you sign my USA record, please, you were far-out to my mind."

Most of the USA songs' lyrics were the fruit of your and Joseph Byrd's joined labour. What was your writing method?

Joe pretty much designed the songs while I filled in the blanks, as the need arose. In "Garden of Earthly Delights" for example, I remember his writing the music, the lyrics for the first verse and chorus. We collaborated on the other lyrics. I came up with the title and made some subtle changes in the rhythmic accents.

With "Coming Down," I remember contributing mostly to the second and third verses and bending the melody line a bit as well. In "Hard Coming Love," Joe wrote the title and first verse. I'll take full credit for the all of the lame doggerel that follows. Interestingly, I recall Joe's incorporating one of Country Joe McDonald's devices for the harmony. The repeated V -IV blues change in the refrain is really similar to the one in "Not So Sweet Martha Lorraine." I should know. Several years later I was playing it myself in McDonald's Allstar Band.

Had you any definite literary reference, even if not strictly connected with the sphere of music?

My line in "Where is Yesterday" — "Snows of winters long ago return again" is a gloss on "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" And Joe probably took "The cost of one admission is your mind" s from Hermann Hesse, other than that, I don't know.

Are you interested in literature?

I read a fair amount, but most of it is non-fiction, sorry to admit. I range from mythology to musicology and back again with brief incursions into cultural history. Actually that sounds pretty pretentious. I'm really just a prole with a big vocabulary. Once in a while, I'll plough through some Dostoevsky or a Bronte novel that I may have neglected when younger, but for the most part, I relish gossip about literary geniuses more than I actually enjoy the fruits of their labour.

One writer who has always astonished me for his incredible range is Robert Louis Stevenson. He could spin an adventure like "Kidnapped," create an evil archetype in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," and still have the delicacy and sentiment to craft "Child's Garden of Verses."

Could you please tell us something about "Song For The Dead Che"? It sounds like a pretty love song, but I believe there's something deeper hidden there…

Che refers to Che Guevara and the song is a tribute to him. The reference to "Oriente rainfall" should give that away. That's about as 'deep' as I can go, since I didn't write the song, merely improvised a few notes in the interlude.

Do you still play your album? How do you feel playing it? Is there any song in particular you are really fond of?

I didn't play the album for many years. Then one day a fan (April Ledbetter, I recall) came up to me when I was playing with a band called Steamin' Freeman in San Francisco's North Beach. She had found a remaindered copy of the album in an old record store wanted me to sign it. I went home and dug out my scratched edition. It wasn't half bad. Some of it was embarrassing but some of it really stood up over time.

My favourite cut is "Where is Yesterday." It represents the best synthesis of our talents and if we were given the chance at a second album, I think we should have gone in this direction.

Could you please tell us more about the Indian record on Folkways that you helped create?

There were Japanese, Balinese, and African teachers at UCLA, but the most compelling were the Indian musicians. There was Harihar Rao, who taught North Indian music and Gayathri Rajapur, a remarkable singer /Gottuvadyam virtuoso from South India. Joseph was officially enrolled in the department. I was officially enrolled in another department altogether, but I managed to sneak in on the ethnomusicology classes. Joe and I became quite close to Gayathri and in fact the three of us shared an apartment together for a period. We studied both North and South Indian music and Joseph became reasonably adept at South Indian drumming. I think it must have been his idea to do a recording with Gayathri and Harihar. He asked me in to play Tambura, wrote some scholarly liner notes, and shipped the whole package off to Folkways. I'm sure it's still available. Gayathri has since gotten her Doctorate and teaches and performs in Hawaii.

After the USA's split up, you collaborated with Country Joe Mc Donald, in his All Star Band. Do you have fond memories of that experience?

Absolutely. After the bickering and lack of support I experienced in the USA days, it was heady indeed to find myself playing at unique venues in far-flung places (Great Lakes, Stockholm, Daytona, Paris, Long Island, Frankfurt, etc.)

Not all of the touring with McDonald was glamorous, but we always felt that there was someone we could turn to.

With the USA, we were out on our own if something went wrong. In Washington for instance, Joe Byrd was assaulted for no reason when he got off the plane. We didn't have the resources to pursue legal redress. If that had happened with Country Joe, I'm sure there would have been someone to speak up for him. With Country Joe, there was always "The Belmonts" to do the advance work, the books, to front for us with clueless European promoters, to switch us out of flea bitten hotels in a trice. They were really part of the band and I've remained good friends with both Bill and Janice Belmont to this very day. I often refer to the "Country Joe" days as an example of the kind of musical life I had before raising a family and doing children's music. I almost rarely refer to the USA, even though I get far more Internet inquiries about it.

Back to the USA's album: in retrospect, United States of America is a very beautiful post-Sgt. Pepper record that many say was ahead of its time. It has been taken as a model by some contemporary bands, basically by European groups (the name of Broadcast comes immediately to mind). What are the reasons why, in your opinion, the USA's LP is still a landmark in music, now that almost forty years have passed since it was first issued?

It's hard to comment on something that I was actually never really aware of. I would think that 'landmark' record is one that breaks new ground, achieves an immediate following, and continues to maintain influence over time. Les Paul comes to mind in this regard. The USA, on while ahead of its time, virtually sank like a stone at its initial release. The reputation remained eclipsed for decades. It was likely the re-releases in the early 90's put us on the map. In a sense this makes us a 90's band and only latterly rediscovered. I doubt that we influenced anyone of our own generation.

Do you listen to any contemporary bands and artists? What kind of music do you like to play at home?

I often listen to the local college stations, which play an eclectic range of trance and techno pop music. I listen to the jazz station as well. I love Russian composers-Stravinsky, Shostakovich, even Rachmaninoff, so I usually avoid local classical radio which typically plays shallow Baroque by Bach's second cousins, or something like that.

When I'm partying or just casually hanging, I usually turn on Brazilian Jazz. I've studied Portuguese, just so I can learn to sing some of it. For several years, I performed in the Oakland Symphony Chorus and needed to study scores we were learning at the moment. It made me a bit weary of classical music, except for Haydn, who will always be a thrill.

Dorothy, what do you devote yourself to, nowadays? Are you still in touch with the rest of the members of the USA?

At a point when many consider retirement, I decided to begin a teaching career. I thought that being around youngsters would keep me lively and musically useful in my old age. I learned to conduct, to arrange for young players and actually finished a formal teaching credential at 62. It's pretty exciting to start little ones on their first instrumental experience. I taught flute for a time, but have really found my niche in brass. Recently, I've been working on a book called "The Singing Brass," to help my beginners think and breathe like singers. They don't

... you will find them in her eyes, in her eyes, in her eyes.

 Thank you, Dorothy. Dedicated to Betty.

know that I really was a singer, and when I tell them, I doubt if they believe me. It's still fun. You probably know that the arts are the first thing to be cut from schools during economic downturns, so this cherubic adventure may not last too long.

Throughout the 80's and 90's, I wrote music for children's theatre, did some radio work, wrote pieces for a Japanese Fusion company, etc., and I may return to freelancing, should the curtain fall on my music program. I do sing on occasion, but I'm much more involved with teaching and writing. I'm working on my own trumpet playing too—and seem to be as inspired by Chet Baker today as I was when I first heard him decades ago.

As far as contact with the USA, I've been in touch with Ed Bogas on and off over the years, in fact we did some commercial work together. David Rubinson and Iexchanged e-mails several years ago, but there have been no contacts with anyone else.

Why did the USA disband?

There were many reasons for the USA's breakup, but it's really not fair to criticize any organization or person without reconsidering how I myself might have done things differently. I'm nothing, if not fair-minded. Why should I blame our booking agents Columbia Artists Management? How were they to know that billing us opposite the Troggs wouldn't be a whole lot of fun? I mean we were both "rock" groups, right? Getting heckled by Troggs fans can be character building. I shouldn't have been so darned sensitive.

It wasn't our producer David Rubinson's fault that he lost interest in us. He adored us when Michael Agnello was still in the group. I should have been more imaginative. Who knows? Maybe if I had threatened a hunger strike or offered to hurl myself into freeway traffic, Mike might have been persuaded to stick it out a little longer.

Was Columbia Records at fault for being unsympathetic? I should say not. They were just trying to market us. We were the ones who were sanctimonious when we refused to lie about our ages. We were the ones who were rigid for insisting that the title "Love Song for the Dead Che" not be laundered. Record distribution depends on such compromises. Everybody knows that.

I missed a great publicity moment when I got sick and the late Bill Graham threatened us angrily for requesting a rain check. Like a little trouper, I flew up from L.A. to do the show. Silly me. There I was at the Filmore, gasping from an allergic reaction to penicillin and running a fever from strep. I should have toddled onstage in pajamas, commandeered the mike, and whispered for a volunteer to get me to emergency. But I didn't. I just had no sense of fun at the time.

Could I blame the opportunistic camp followers who stole our trucks and equipment and costumes? Not me. I was thrilled to have fans. Some of my dearest friends were sociopaths. Why play favorites? As for the band's internal conflicts, fisticuffs and power struggles, all I needed to do was to stage a few fierce tantrums of my own during our recording and touring. That way I could've kept up with the pack.

People would have learned early on that that there were limits to my patience. The end of my interminable fuse probably came as a shock to everyone. No doubt it was misleading to appear so obliging for so very long. Sorry about that.

Somehow this all reminds me of a song I wrote a few years ago:

SHAME ON ME

Intro (rubato)
I 'been a low-down, dirty deceiver,
An' I sure 'seen better days.
Now you see me try, yes indeed I try
To repair my evil ways. . .

(Verse, country two-step)
Shame, shame, shame on me
Buddy you had better put the blame on me.
Shame, shame, can't you see,
I am guilty and I need to be the Bad Guy.

Down on bended knee,
Beggin' you to lay a little blame on me.

Shame, shame, shame on me,
I am guilty and I need to be the Bad Guy.

I keep on tellin' you it's my fault,
I 'been evil; I 'been bad.
You keep on tellin' me it's your fault,
An' it's makin' me pretty ma-a—ad-

Don't go pardonin' me
Don't go tellin' me I ought to be free
Shame, shame, shame on me
I am guilty and I need to be the Bad Guy.

*Dorothy was interviewed by **Iker Spozio** and **Jesse Edwards**,*