

The Trauma And Triumph Of Fleetwood Mac



When Fleetwood Mac's mainspring gave away his money and became a gardener, and their prime mover joined a Jesus cult, how did the survivors pull the band together?

by Steve Ditlea

“Writers find it hard to put us in any one bag. They really shouldn't try, you know. Today we're one thing, tomorrow we're something else. We're always changing.” Sitting quietly at the end of the couch, Danny Kirwan looks up from the white guitar he's been strumming to speak his piece. His elfin eyes peer out at you gently as his voice, with its heavy British accent, trails off. The dude goes back to the riff he's been trying to work out while the others in the room divide their attention between being interviewed and watching old shots

of the World Series on TV. It's a cold autumn day outside. Inside, Roberto Clemente, looking an odd purple, hits a pop fly which is quickly grabbed for the last out of the inning.

Future games: Listening to Fleetwood Mac rap as their interest gets caught by the action on the screen: “We call that game ‘rounders’ in England, only girls play it.” The lanky guy who does most of the talking smiles as he contemplates the fact that baseball players make as much money as rock stars—and for a girl's game! Tearing himself

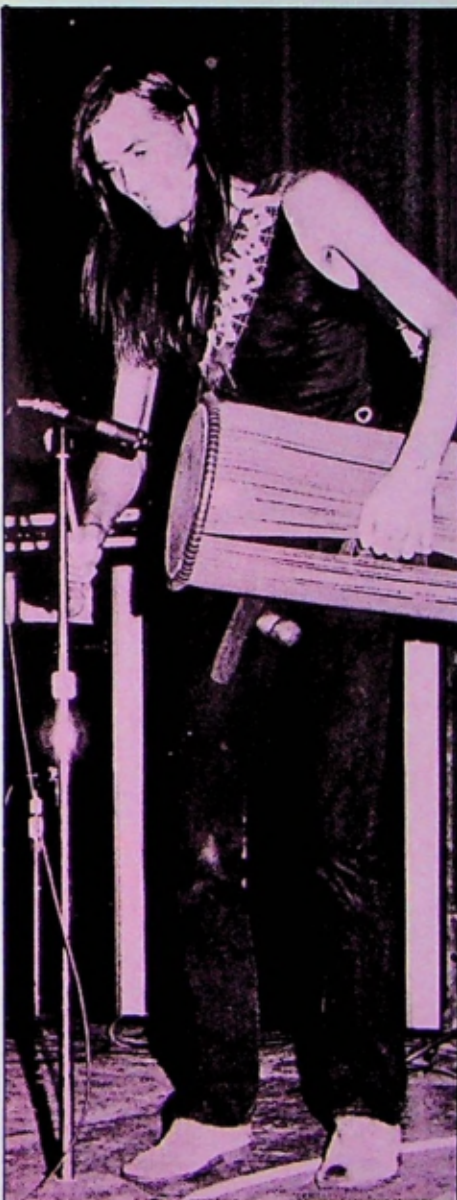
away from the game he barely understands, Mick Fleetwood picks up on Danny's last statement. “People are trying to put labels on our newest album, *Future Games*. They say it's mellower or more melodic than what we did before. They're trying to find other musicians' influences in it. We spent more time on the album and we used sixteen-track recording for the first time. But that's not so important. The people listening should just ask themselves whether they like the music or not.” He waves his long thin hand to emphasize his point, on the middle fin-

ger is a massive silver ring bearing what looks like a tall mushroom with two smaller ones on either side, or maybe it's something more basic and anatomical than that. "A musician can't ask himself what kind of music he's playing. To him it's just music."

The Wavelength: Listening to Fleetwood Mac on-stage, you can't help but feel the spontaneity and energy in their playing. A set by this band isn't the usual series of four and five minute songs strung together with an occasional long instrumental break. They like to jam, and if the audience is with them, they do only two or three numbers and spend the rest of their time improvising. Mick Fleetwood lays down a solid beat on the drums and John McVie's delicate bass gives the band a steady foundation to build on. McVie's wife Christine adds depth to their sound with her work on keyboard. Lead guitar chores are shared by Danny Kirwan and Bob Welsh. Christine, Danny and Bob trade off as lead singers, each featured on the material that she or he has written. "So many groups today are just too stylized. They will do the exact same set every night, right down to each note and gesture." The California twang in Bob Welsh's voice sounds out of place in this room full of Englishmen. The latest addition to the group, Welsh has proven himself indispensable after just a few months. You can tell that everyone in the group is on the same wavelength, as Mick finishes Bob's train of thought. "Every night we do a different set. We have no routines because people don't come expecting to hear specific cuts off an album, or a bunch of hit singles. The heavy-heavy bands have a hard time getting out of having to perform the same thing night after night. In a way it's a good thing that we never had any big hits, though we are well known. We're free to play what we want and to enjoy ourselves on-stage. And we know that people will accept what we do, even if we are musically unpredictable."

Like Mercury: Listening to Fleetwood Mac on record is like trying to capture a drop of quicksilver under your thumb. The group reflects creative energy and sparkles with the polish of accomplished musicianship. Yet little of it sticks in your memory; no one tune or phrase is captured indelibly in your mind. The music flows on enjoyably and elusively hard to seize. So much of the group's music seems familiar and often highly derivative, yet it is obviously different in what it does. Fleetwood Mac represents a type of

creative force often neglected in the era of super-groups: the classic rock band. Most recognition has been given to those groups which have been consistently innovative. By placing a premium on originality,



Mick Fleetwood, drums: "Here I am talking to you, and we're both total strangers. After this interview is over, I will never see you again."

we have given a higher value to results than process, to producing new content rather than exploring the evolving medium of rock. The classic rock band stays behind the vanguard, charting half-explored territory, preferring to work with old themes and genres as befits a classical esthetic. In its own way, the classic rock group aspires to excellence, to producing good music. No hype, no gimmicks, no wild invention, no fancy engineering tricks, just music. If all of this sounds vaguely familiar, it should, because that's what most white blues groups were into

just a few years ago. And that's where Fleetwood Mac started.

Ditching Mayall: The group formed in 1967 with three former members of John Mayall's Blues Breakers. As Mick Fleetwood tells it, "It wasn't a conspiracy or anything. It's just that when I left Mayall after playing with him for all of three weeks, I wanted to start another group. John McVie had played with Mayall for about three years, and Pete Green had been with him for two. He's the one who replaced Clapton about the time of Mayall's *Hard Road* album. We all just drifted together." Green's musical ideas dominated the group, even after the addition of two other lead guitars in the persons of Danny Kirwan and Jeremy Spencer. The group was almost called Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac, but that would have been too egotistical. As it is, the group's name derives from Mick and John's last names and not, as would seem more obvious, from a kind of Chevrolet and from a brand of truck. In its earliest incarnation, the group's trademark was hard blues with three lead guitarists, Kirwan and Green often playing harmony, and Spencer walking on stage midway through the set. When it came to recording, Spencer was often reluctant to play what for him had become overly familiar material. As a result, Spencer seldom appeared on the group's early releases.

The path forward: On its first two albums, *Fleetwood Mac* and *English Rose* (both recently re-released by Epic as a double album titled *Black Magic Woman*) the group evolved from just using the blues as a backdrop for Peter Green's nimble guitar work and fine vocals to laying down a sound where everything was up front, including some horns and piano. They also advanced from merely reworking old blues tunes to turning out some new pieces of their own. The two standout cuts, "Black Magic Woman" and "Albatross," were originally released in England as singles and made the charts. But it took Santana to popularize "Black Magic" in the U.S., and no one ever put "Albatross" across here.

Blue Horizon recently released another double album, *Fleetwood Mac in Chicago*. To make it, the white blues group flew to America to team up with several top Chicago bluesmen, including Otis Spann and Willie Dixon. "Mike Vernon set up the sessions in Chicago at the Chess studios," recalls Mick Fleetwood. "It seemed like an exciting prospect to record with the people our music was associated with." How success-

ful were those sessions? Mick only shakes his head: "I don't know. It was so long ago. I guess it's up to a listener to decide for himself." Even a listener with little interest in blues will find some fine music on the album, with many moments where the group really starts cooking together. Fleetwood Mac's first album on Reprise, *Then Play On*, showed a shift towards softer blues, with more harmony on the vocals. Danny Kirwan emerges as Pete Green's equal when it comes to turning out original material. "I guess I was never into as heavy a sound as Pete. I would write ballads and simpler songs. My music was more hit material because it was easier for people to listen to," says Danny, sounding almost apologetic. Shortly after the release of that album, the group went through a set of changes which would greatly influence their sound.

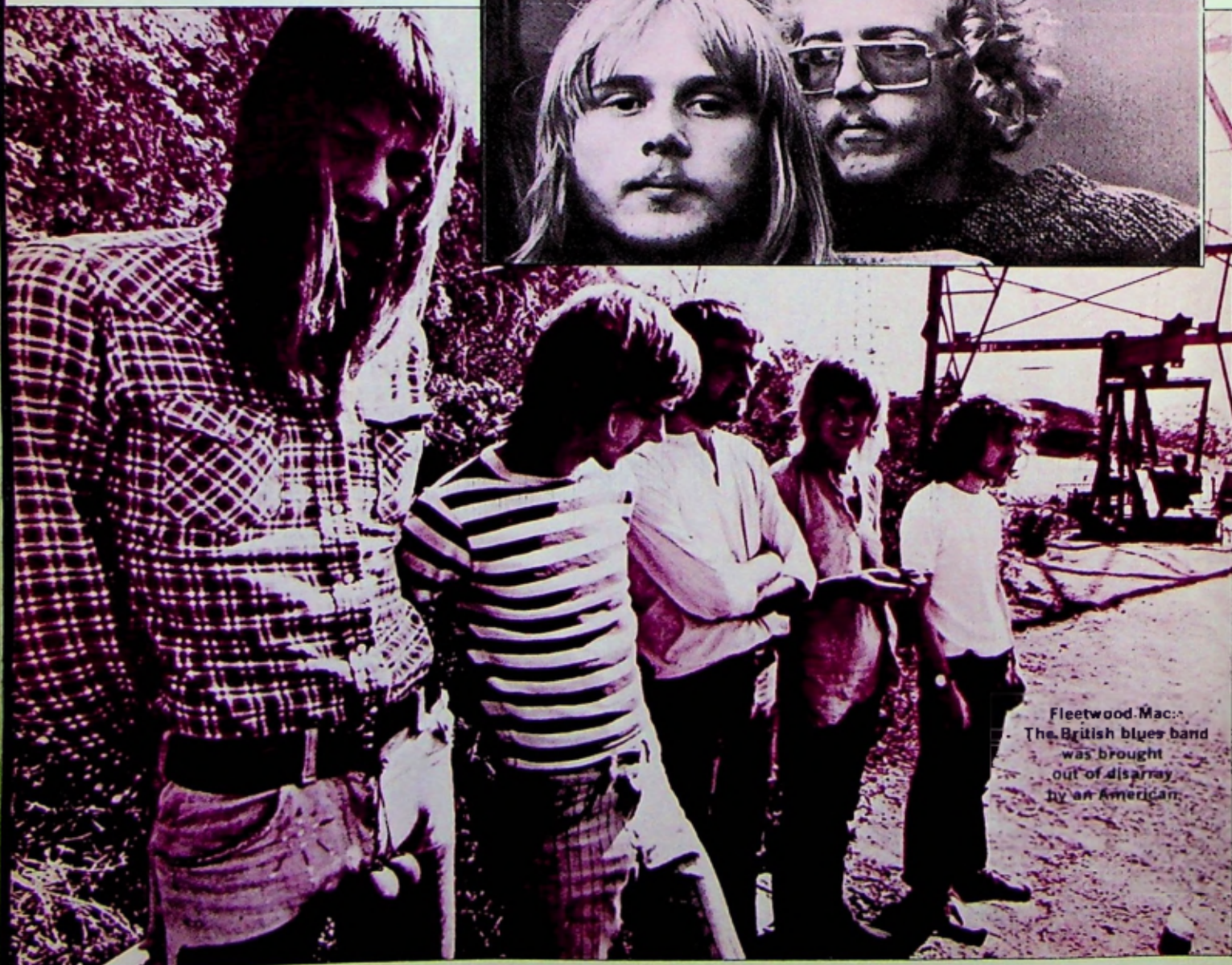
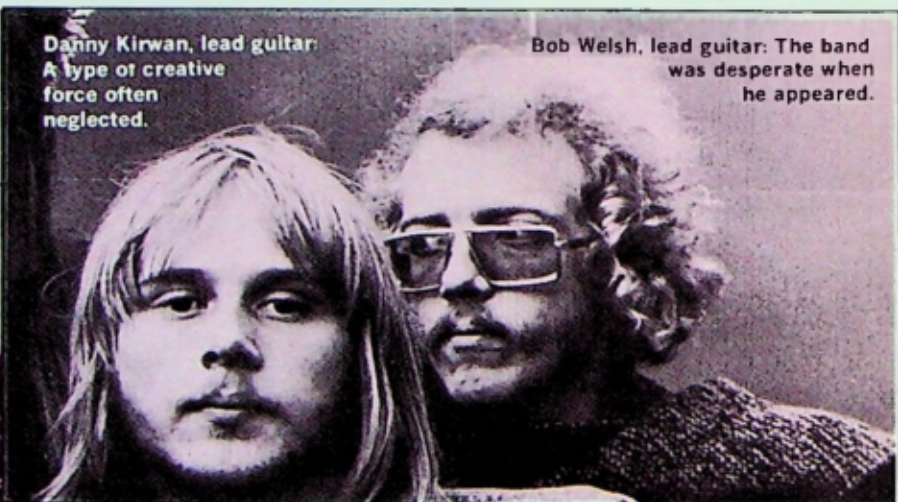
Sensitive disaster: Peter Green, the mainstay of the group, decided to give away all his money, retire from the scene, and abandon music entirely. Mick comments sadly: "Pete's now working at a regular job. He's a gardener not far from where we live in England. He was always very sensitive, maybe too sensitive for this business. He was always questioning everything. Why did people ask him to do certain things? Why did he play this music or that? He did a bit of drug and that made him even more sensitive. I hope he goes back to music. I think he may even feel like getting back into it, but he doesn't know

how to go about it without being hurt again." Mick pouts a little and sends out a piercing glance. "This is all such a strange business. Here I am talking to you, and we're both total strangers. After this interview is over, I will never see you again. And yet I'm called upon to talk to you as candidly as I can. Somehow you adjust to this sort of thing. Pete couldn't continue and make the best of what he thought was an impossible situation."

After Pete left, the group needed someone to round out its sound. They didn't have to look much further than John McVie's home, where his wife Christine had settled

Danny Kirwan, lead guitar:
A type of creative force often neglected.

Bob Welch, lead guitar: The band was desperate when he appeared.



Fleetwood Mac:
The British blues band was brought out of disarray by an American.

down to the unglamorous existence of a housewife. Under the name Christine Perfect, she had been voted the outstanding female vocalist in England when she sang with Chicken Shack. Deciding to go off on her own, she encountered six months of uninterrupted hassles with her back-up bands. Finally, she decided to call it quits and settle down at home. She welcomed the opportunity to work with Fleetwood Mac, but contract difficulties kept her from getting on the group's next album, *Kiln House*. By the time of the recording, Jeremy Spencer had emerged as the motive force behind the band; the album reflects a drastic shift from blues to old-timey rock 'n' roll. With echoes of Elvis and Buddy Holly cropping up throughout, *Kiln House* was Spencer's skillful homage to rock. With another album under their belts, the group set out for what they hoped would be their most successful American tour at the beginning of 1971, and ended up going through its heaviest changes yet.

Disaster number two: "We settled into our hotel in Los Angeles at the very start of the tour and Jeremy went out to get a book like he always did," Mick remembers. "He was always a reader, a philosopher type. He went out and never came back. For three days we tried everything to find him. There were bulletins on TV, FBI notices out, all that cops and robbers stuff. The funny thing was that we had been stopped on the street at one point by a group of religious people, Jesus freaks. That was as much of a possibility as the unpleasant ones you can think of. So we began checking out all the religious groups around. Danny and our manager finally found him; he had joined a group called the Children of God. Jeremy's basic attitude had been leading up to that. But the change was so radical, it's hard for other people to accept. Yet everyone who joins them seems to do it in the same way." A call went out for Peter Green to come over and help save the tour, but when Fleetwood Mac returned to England they were in disarray. Spencer had given the group direction, and suddenly they had none. Green went back to his retirement, and it looked like nothing but bad times ahead. "When Jeremy was with us, it was still like a desperate effort to make up for the loss of Peter, and everyone felt terribly inadequate and insecure. We were all pulling the band in different directions," says Christine. Then a mutual acquaintance introduced them to Bob Welsh. "Bob has been instrumental in bringing us



John McVie, bass

Christine McVie,
keyboard
and vocals

together as a unit. He is like a breath of fresh air to us, because we were all on the verge of cracking up when Jeremy left."

The bail-out: Bob Welsh looks out of his trapezoidal gold-framed glasses and continues the saga. "I had played with an R&B band for four years in L.A. and Las Vegas. Finally, it became just too much to handle, so three of us from the group split for Europe to hide out. We played a little and I did some producing. And then I was introduced to Mick." Mick smiles as he recalls their meeting. "We were looking for someone to play with us, but we didn't know the first thing about auditioning people. It was more embarrassing for us than for the people we were listening to. When we met Bob, it was more of a social situation. Almost immediately, we knew that he was perfect for us."

Everyone in the group seems to be as enthusiastic about Welsh. In two months of rehearsal after his joining them, they were able to generate most of the material on the *Future Games* album. "We're freer and more positive now about our material," chimes in Danny. The album marks an important turn for the band: besides featuring Welsh's writing (including the title cut) and playing, it also gives Christine her first airing on record with Fleetwood Mac.

Out, demon: The talk turns to the group's outlook and attitudes. "If there's any leaning I suppose it's toward an emotional content in the music," says Mick.

Danny looks up again, having set down his guitar: "the band isn't trying to make any statements except 'out, demon, out!'" Everyone laughs. It's Bob's turn to comment. "My only statement is in 'Future Games,' and that's 'I hope to hell everything's all right in thirty years.'" Some more laughter in acknowledgement of this heavy thought. It's Mick Fleetwood who sums it all up for them. "The band is just into what we're doing, and that's the music we're playing." Everyone nods in agreement for Fleetwood Mac.

A public relations man who has been sitting quietly to one side passing around a bottle of wine gets to his feet and throws his voice into the center of the room. "I hate to take you boys away from the television, but there's a record dealer's convention coming up, and we have to take your pictures." With a look of resignation, Mick Fleetwood lifts himself from the couch. Music is business. Performing is not enough.