



The Zombies in
West London, 1965:
Hugh Grundy,
Colin Blunstone,
Paul Atkinson,
Chris White, and
Rod Argent (from left)

The Zombies



**AN ORIGINAL BRITISH
INVASION BAND, THEY
MADE A HANDFUL OF
SMASH SINGLES AND
ONE OF ROCK'S MOST
EXQUISITE ALBUMS**

BY ROB BOWMAN

This year's induction of the Zombies into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is at once a celebration and a culmination of one of the oddest and most convoluted careers in the history of popular music. While not the first band to have two smash hits right out of the box, they may be the only group who proceeded to then fail miserably with their next ten singles over a three-year period before finally achieving immortality with an album, *Odessey [sic] and Oracle* (1968) and a single, "Time of the Season," that were released only after they had broken up.

Even then, it would be a year after the album's initial release that, through the intercession of fate and the idiosyncratic tastes of a handful of radio listeners in Boise, Idaho, "Time of the Season" would become a million-selling single and remain one of the most beloved staples of classic-rock radio to this day. Even more ironic was the fact that, despite that hit single, the album *Odessey and Oracle* was still met with indifference. Decades later, succeeding generations of critics and an ever-growing cult fan base raised *Odessey and Oracle* to its status as one of the most cherished and revered albums of late 1960s British rock. As the album approached its fiftieth anniversary, four of the five original Zombies (guitarist Paul Atkinson passed away in 2004) went on tour, playing it in its entirety for sellout crowds throughout North America and the United Kingdom. Quirky, delicate, and melancholic in the extreme, there is simply no other album in the annals of pop or rock that sounds anything like it.

The story starts in 1961 in the small town of St. Albans in Hertfordshire County, England, located about forty minutes north of London. The original members were keyboardist Rod Argent, vocalist Colin Blunstone, guitarist Paul Atkinson, drummer Hugh Grundy, and bassist Paul Arnold. The plan was that the classically trained Argent was going to be the lead singer while Blunstone was brought along as a potential rhythm guitarist. When Argent, during a break, sat down at a piano and banged out a raucous version of the Tchaikovsky sendup "Nut Rocker," Blunstone immediately blurted out, "You're mad. Why aren't you playing piano in the group?" Blunstone then took a stab at singing a lead vocal. Argent was similarly gobsmacked, telling *Mojo* in 1997, "When he opened his mouth, I couldn't believe it. God, what a great voice! In one rehearsal, the whole thing had changed round."

Originally called the Mustangs, the group weren't ready to play in public for another year. When they found out there were a number of other bands using their chosen moniker, a name change was in order. For a hot minute they were the Sundowners, then Paul Arnold suggested the Zombies. Within the first few weeks of playing live, Arnold left and was replaced with Chris White. As with most of their British compatriots, the Zombies' early repertoire consisted of covers of Motown hits such as the Contours' "Do You Love Me?" and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "You Really Got a Hold on Me," alongside the work of Solomon Burke, Sam Cooke, the Impressions, and Bo Diddley.



One of their most acclaimed covers was a slightly ethereal version of Gershwin's "Summertime."

Although the Zombies had become a going concern on the local circuit, all five members were intent on going to university in the fall of 1964 and, until fate intervened, the group had planned to part ways at summer's end. The spanner in the works turned out to be the Herts [as in Hertfordshire County] Beat Music Contest: With the unprecedented success of the Beatles and the so-called Mersey Sound, *Watford Observer* journalist Patrick Stoddart wrote an article entitled "Is There a Watford Sound?" It didn't take long for the *London Evening News* to put up a £250 cash prize and for the event to be organized by the Watford Borough Council. After competing for eight weeks with eight different bands each week, the Zombies came out on top. Though immediately offered a recording contract by Decca, they instead signed with Marquis Music's Ken Jones, who produced the group's recordings and then leased them to Decca.

While the Zombies had planned to issue their popular cover of "Summertime" as their first single, Jones suggested the group also write a few songs for consideration. Both Chris White and Rod Argent took up the mantle, with White's Beatlesque "You Make Me Feel So Good" ending up as the B side to Argent's incandescent "She's Not There." The latter's opening lyric, "No one told me about her," was inspired by a recently released John Lee Hooker track called "No One Told Me." Argent then borrowed the chord sequence from Brian Hyland's "Sealed With a Kiss" to set his newly minted lyrics to music.

"It went from D [major] to D minor but with unusual root bass notes," Argent relayed to *Mojo* in 1997. "I liked the sound of that little change so I started messing with it on the piano." The keyboard Argent employed was a Hohner pianet, which was the first electric piano that could cut through the din of a full electric band. It proved to be a very important sound on the early Zombies' records.

"She's Not There" was a nearly perfect single. It opens with a jazzy bass line, a catchy piano hook, and a stutter step drum part, where beat four is slightly anticipated via a snare hit a fraction ahead of the beat (overdubbed during the mix), while the regular snare hits beat four right on the beat and the hi-hat accents the following off-beat. It was one of the oddest but most infectious grooves of the day. The piece gradually builds from the verse, through the pre-chorus, to the all-out four-on-the-floor harmonized full chorus before easing back to that slinky bass line and doing it all again. The caper was the climactic final section, where Blunstone's breathy vocal reaches up to a high A, sounding vulnerable, outraged, and heartbroken all at once.

Recorded in June 1964, just over a month later the song was premiered on the British television show *Juke Box Jury*. That night, George Harrison was a guest judge. Years later guitarist Paul Atkinson recalled being glued to the television to watch George's response. "Well, it's really very good," the Beatle said. "Very well done, Zombies. Thumbs up!" "She's Not There" peaked at Number Twelve in the U.K. and reached Number Two in the U.S. Within a few months, "Tell Her No," also written by Argent, did nearly as well, topping out at Number Forty-Two in the U.K. and reaching an impressive Number Six stateside.

Inexplicably, despite playing Murray the K's Christmas Show at the Brooklyn Fox, appearing on the first episode of *Hullabaloo*, and then embarking on a multi-week Dick Clark Caravan of Stars tour, the



Argent, Atkinson, Grundy, Blunstone, and White (from left), on *Top of the Pops*, 1965

group's debut album, titled *Begin Here* in the U.K. and retitled *The Zombies* with five different tracks in the U.S., stalled on release. So did those next ten singles. Despite massive success in, of all places, the Philippines, where they could play for audiences of 30,000 and more, the grind of playing smaller and smaller venues at home and seeing release after release fall into the abyss led the group to decide to bring things to a close, albeit in a rather odd fashion, in mid-1967.





Rather than simply fulfilling their remaining commitments before calling it a day, Rod Argent and Chris White wanted to record a second album (their first in three years) where they would produce the group without worrying one whit about commercial success. With Decca having let their contract expire, the group negotiated a one-album deal with CBS Records in the U.K. and went to work at Abbey Road in June 1967.

Work would continue on and off through December, the group using Olympic whenever Abbey Road wasn't available. Come mid-December, the Zombies played their final gigs, announcing their breakup publicly in March 1968 and releasing *Odessey and Oracle* a month later. The misspelling of "Odyssey" was an inadvertent accident by artist Terry Quirk, who created the work's gorgeous psychedelic cover. Somehow no one in the group or at CBS Records



noticed the mistake until it was in the stores. In the U.K., "Friends of Mine," "Care of Cell 44," and "Time of the Season" were issued as singles before the album was released. All three tanked, as did the album.

That might have been the end of the story if Al Kooper, formerly of the Blues Project and Blood, Sweat and Tears, and now working A&R for Columbia Records in the U.S., had not heard a copy of the album and convinced the company that it contained at least three hit singles. Begrudgingly, Columbia released the album on the Date subsidiary in June 1968. Kooper's first choice for a single was one of the most unusual recordings the group ever made, "Butcher's

Tale (Western Front 1914)." Written by Chris White about a soldier in World War I, Kooper must have assumed that people might relate the lyrics to the Vietnam War. Sung by White in what can best be described as a shaky, beaten-down voice over musique concrète lifted from Pierre Boulez, tape manipulation, and the sounds of an old American pump organ, the fascinating but enigmatic recording had absolutely no chance of radio play.

Kooper's second choice for a single, "Time of the Season," did much better. Rod Argent recalls adapting the bass line from Ben E. King's "Stand by Me" and alluding to the Zombies' earlier cover of "Summertime"

Generations of critics and an ever-growing cult fan base raised *Odessey and Oracle* to its status as one of the most cherished and revered albums of late-1960s British rock.



In Abbey Road Studios, recording *Odessey and Oracle*, 1967. Inset: Back on the street, West London, 1965.



with the lyric “Who’s your daddy? Is he rich like me?” The title, itself, was the result of a mishearing of a line in Smokey Robinson’s “Tracks of My Tears.”

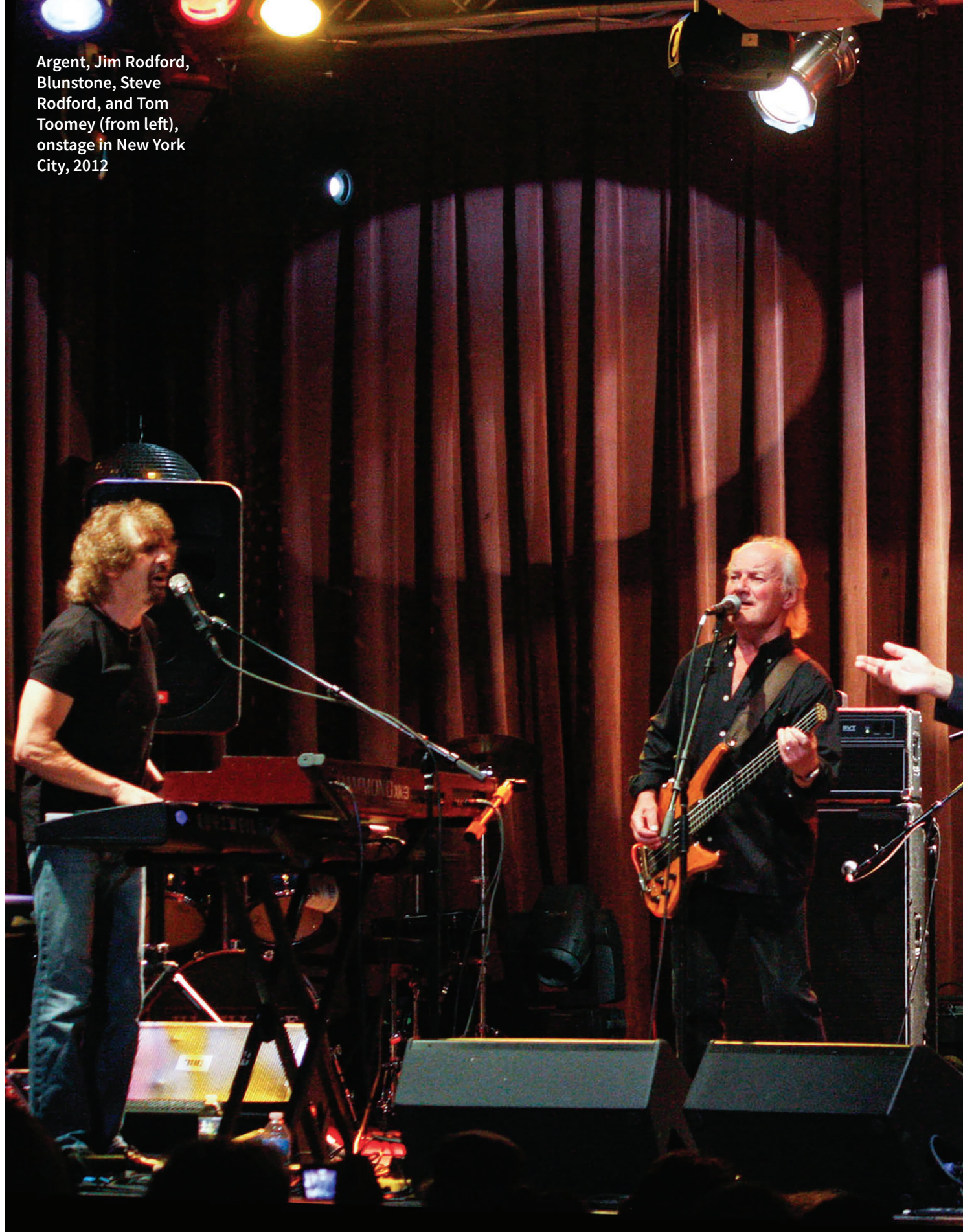
As was the case with “She’s Not There,” the groove crafted for “Time of the Season” was singularly unique. The snare plays only on beat four and its off beat; the bass doubles the snare and in addition plays on beat one; a handclap is heard on the off-beat after one; and the bass and Argent sighing “ahh” are heard on the off-beat after two. Absolutely no one is playing directly on beat two or three. Combined with Blunstone’s otherworldly vocal and the enigmatic lyric “Let me try with pleased hands to take you in the

sun to promised lands,” the recording is simply irresistible. It zoomed to Number Three, selling well over a million copies.

As a whole, *Odessey and Oracle* is a beautifully fashioned series of vignettes set to meticulously crafted soundscapes, featuring such unusual instruments as tack piano, pump organ, Mellotron, musique concrète, and anything else the group could dream up. Argent and White had, indeed, created their masterpiece. The finished album rivaled *Pet Sounds* in terms of its delicacy, quirky yet short and exquisite melodies, virtuosic vocal harmony and counterpoint, and highly original arrangements and orchestrations. It is no wonder the album continues to bring about awe, joy, and bliss to each generation of new listeners.

Despite the incredible success of “Time of the Season,” the group members moved on. They never supported the album with a tour. Argent and White formed the highly successful prog-leaning group Argent, Blunstone enjoyed a successful solo career in

Argent, Jim Rodford, Blunstone, Steve Rodford, and Tom Toomey (from left), onstage in New York City, 2012



the U.K., and Atkinson and Grundy both eventually worked A&R for Columbia.

In 1997, Ace Records in England released *Zombie Heaven*, a four-CD set compiled and produced by Alec Palao. At the set's release party, the five original members reunited for a couple of songs. By 2001, Argent and Blunstone were touring together under their respective names, finally adopting the Zombies

moniker once again in 2004. Between 2015 and 2017, Chris White and Hugh Grundy reunited with Argent and Blunstone, and regularly played the entire *Odessey and Oracle* album to rave reviews and increasingly large audiences.

Although it took over a half a century, with their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Zombies' time of the season has finally arrived.



SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



The Zombies
1965 (Parrot)



Odyssey and Oracle
1968 (Date/Columbia)



Zombie Heaven
1997 (Big Beat/Ace)

