

The GoldeBriars: Strange & Kooky Folk

THE GOLDEBRIARS – S/T / Straight Ahead! (Collectors' Choice) CDs

THE GOLDEBRIARS STORY: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO JEZEBEL? by Dotti Holmberg-Waddell (Apple Core Publishing) CD-Rom eBook

Formed in Minnesota in early 1963, the GoldeBriars were ostensibly part of the folk movement. They'd made their way up through the coffeehouse scene, played their share of hootenannies, and had a repertoire that included plenty of "trad, arr." material. Yet they don't sound like any folk group you've ever heard. Comprised of vocalist/guitarist Curt Boettcher, singing sisters Dotti and Sheri Holmberg, and guitarist/banjoist Ron Neilson, their sound was based around Boettcher's esoteric jazz-based harmony arrangements, the three voices double-tracked for a full, sweet flavor that was decidedly more pop than folk.

They didn't look like a folk group either: they looked strange. Kooky even. Not so much Greenwich Village as Greenwich Village of the Damned. Dyed black hair—the men with short bangs, the women's hair bobbed, with dark eye make-up for an exotic, Oriental effect. Their clothes, too, were mostly black, the men sometimes wearing odd home-sewed tunics over their black turtle-necks, like emissaries from a bizarre future world—or extras in a low-budget science fiction movie. The men would also wear a single gold earring for what they sometimes referred to as their "modern gypsy" image. Pretty weird stuff for 1964.

The GoldeBriars' two albums have now been reissued by Collectors' Choice, each with plenty of bonus material plus liner notes by Dotti Holmberg. While some of the material sounds a little staid or even cute—*too* cute—more than 40 years down the line, both albums have much to recommend them, especially if you're a fan of Boettcher's work. The first stirrings of the "sunshine pop" style he would elaborate on and perfect with the Ballroom and the Millennium can be heard right here.

Highlights of their self-titled debut album,

originally released on Epic in early 1964, include a gorgeous version of "Shenandoah," "Come Walk Me Out" (a.k.a. "Morning Dew"), "Voyager's Lament" and "Railroad Boy," on which the vaulted cathedral ceiling of the Columbia 30th Street NYC studio, a converted church, make their already ethereal harmonies sound like some kind of magical celestial choir.

Their tight, ultra-brite white renditions of spirituals like "Old Time Religion" and "A Mumblin' Word" haven't aged quite as well, but the vocals are always beautifully done. There are also a full dozen previously unreleased bonus cuts, all dating from 1963-64, the most enjoyable being the delicate "My Song," one of Boettcher's very first compositions.

The second album, *Straight Ahead!*, appeared later that year, by which time the GoldeBriars had toned down their more folkie elements in favor of a more "straight ahead" pop approach, aided by the collaboration of a couple of Brill Building songwriters, Bob Goldstein and Beverly Ross. The album includes one of their very best tracks, "Sea of Tears," a very commercial Boettcher/Goldstein composition with some dazzling harmonies and an achingly sweet lead vocal by Dotti Holmberg. Other standouts include a lovely Boettcher solo piece, "Haiku," and the doo-wop flavored

"Castle on the Corner." "Queen of Sheba" is one of their kookiest novelties, and may be a little too cute for some tastes, but the playful and inventive arrangement is a lot of fun and is probably a good representation of the band's live act.

By the time they began recording their third LP in early 1965 the band were pursuing a more pop-rock oriented sound and had expanded to a six-piece with the addition of an electric bass player, Tom Dorholt, and a drummer, Ron Edgar. The group broke up before the album could be completed, but several tracks from those sessions are included as bonus material on *Straight Ahead!* "Nothing Wrong With You That My Love Can't Cure," a vibrant piece of commercial folk-rock, is probably the best of the batch, along with the unusual "The Last Two People on Earth" (the only survivors of a nuclear holocaust ponder the task of repopulating the Earth), "Tell It To the



Wind," and a feisty take of Bob Dylan's "Walkin' Down the Line." Some of these tracks actually sound like a slightly folkier, more American version of the Honeycombs, as Boettcher's voice in this context bears a strong resemblance to Dennis D'Ell's. Other tracks from this period, such as "June Bride Baby" (issued as a single in 1965) and "Licorice," flirt with the girl group pop sound and show just how far the band had moved away from their folk music roots. ("Licorice," in fact, was intended as a follow-up song to the Chordettes' 1958 smash "Lollipop," which had been co-written by Ross.)

For a closer look at the GoldeBriars and their music, turn to *The GoldeBriars' Story: Whatever Happened to Jezebel?*, a nicely packaged CD eBook by Dotti Holmberg. The title refers to the group's mascot, a Tiki fertility goddess from the Marshall Islands, considered the group's "fifth member." The eBook (a 199-page PDF file you can scroll through on your PC or print out for easier reading) includes Dotti's own account of the group's story, supplemented with her journal entries from back then, scrapbook pages (often featuring beautiful collages) and a variety of Boettcher's cartoons and sketches. Written in a light-hearted, chatty style, the book is an absolute delight, filled with amusing stories about the group's struggles and adventures, and various behind-the-scenes glimpses of their recording sessions. The author doesn't reveal much in the way of dark, dirty secrets—in fact, she steers well clear of any details about the band members' personal lives—but you will get to read all about the amusing exploits of their second mascot, a kinkajou honey bear, which would sometimes get loose and terrorize unsuspecting audience members.

Although Holmberg doesn't go into much detail on the subject, there's also mention of Sean Bonniwell, who, having just left the Wayfarers, was briefly the band's road manager. Soon afterwards he persuaded Ron Edgar to leave and form the Ragamuffins with Sherie Holmberg's husband Keith Olsen. The trio—soon to become the Music Machine—adopted a similar black-haired, black clothed image to the GoldeBriars, substituted a single black glove for the gold earrings, and—well, there the similarity ended. The Music Machine were never remotely cute or kooky; they were dark, moody and monolithic.

The CD also includes lyrics to all the GoldeBriars' songs, plus Dotti's solo recordings (issued by Sundazed a few years back). There's even a video clip of them performing "Saro Jane" on TV and an audio file of a previously unreleased Dotti solo track from 1966. Best of all, after immersing yourself in *Whatever Happened to Jezebel?*, you'll come away with an entirely new perspective on the group and a deeper appreciation of their music. You can order it at www.goldebriars.com. (MS)



The GoldeBriars, electric edition, 1965. L to R: Tom Dorholt, Murray Planta, Dotti Holmberg, Sheri Holmberg, Curt Boettcher, Ron Edgar. (Photo courtesy Dotti Holmberg-Waddell)