

The History of Rock Music: 1966-1969

Genres and musicians of the Sixties

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Solo Careers 1967-69

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

Los Angeles eccentrics 1968-69

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A number of the Los Angeles eccentrics set a new standard for melodic music, in particular for baroque, gothic and psychedelic arrangements. They expanded on the mid-1960s studio experiments of Brian Wilson (Beach Boys), George Martin (Beatles) and others.

The pioneering work of jazz and rock producer [David Axelrod](#) (3), integrating funk breakbeats, orchestral arrangements and psychedelic melodies, foreshadowed the dance-music of the late 1990s. He had already composed, arranged and produced the Electric Prunes' **Mass In F Minor** (1968) when he released his first solo albums, **Song of Innocence** (? 1968 - ? 1968) and **Songs of Experience** (? 1969 - ? 1969), both based on William Blake poems. Arranged for bass, drums and strings, their dark, depressed ambience predated trip-hop. **Earth Rot** (? 1970 - ? 1970) was one of the first environmentalist albums (a suite in eight movements). A trilogy of albums each containing six long ballads each, **Seriously Deep** (? 1975 - ? 1975), **Strange Ladies** (? 1977 - ? 1977) and **Marchin'** (? 1980 - ? 1980), rank among the best funk-jazz works of the day, highlighted by ghostly grooves and instrumental sophistication, while his "neo-classical" ambitions led to an ambitious **Requiem: The Holocaust** (? 1993 - ? 1993) in four movements. Axelrod's breakbeats would be re-discovered and sampled by the leading disc-jockeys of the 1990s.

[VanDyke Parks](#) (2) was instrumental in transforming light-hearted pop music into a form of austere chamber music. An orchestral arranger for psychedelic-rock, Parks debuted as a solo artist with **Song Cycle** (? 1967 - nov 1968), whose impressionistic vignettes of ordinary life employed a cornucopia of sonic trivia and musical quotations, and sounded more like an apocalyptic fresco of the USA civilization than a pop album. Parks also led the vanguard of nostalgia-rock with

Discover America (? 1971 - may 1972), a satirical tribute to calypso. Parks' concept albums resemble Frank Zappa's collage-operettas. He applied the cinematographic technique of "montage" to the format of kitsch music.

[Jack Nitzsche](#), a veteran songwriter and arranger (instrumental in creating Phil Spector's "wall of sound"), made one intriguing album of orchestral pop: **St Giles Cripplegate** (jan 1972 - aug 1972).

[David Ackles](#) (1) an eclectic and depressed talent, could write a song about the most unpleasant subject and sing it in a tormented and macabre tone, as demonstrated on his early, unassuming albums, **David Ackles** (? 1968 - sep 1968) and **Subway To The Country** (? 1969 - jan 1970). A quantum leap forward and an awe-inspiring fresco of USA life, **American Gothic** (fall 1971/spring 1972 - jul 1972) managed to bridge Kurt Weill's decadent orchestrations and Woody Guthrie's passionate story-telling.

[Jimmy Webb](#) was an odd blend of extremes: emotional like Leonard Cohen and trivial like Burt Bacharach. Since he was a kid, other pop artists turned his songs into hits: *By The Time I Get To Phoenix* (1966), *Requiem 820 Latham* (1967), *Up Up And Away* (1967), *Wichita Lineman* (1968), *Galveston* (1969), *Where's the Playground Susie* (1969), *Met Her On A Plane* (1971), *Highwayman* (1977), *Watermark* (1978). He saved his ambitions for Richard Harris' albums **A Tramp Shining** (? 1968 - ? 1968), a suite for rock band, orchestra and choir that included *MacArthur Park*, and **The Yard Went on Forever** (? 1969 - ? 1969), both composed and arranged by Webb, as well as for his own debut album **Words And Music** (? 1970 - nov 1970).

[Kim Fowley](#) (1), who had already produced and composed a number of novelty hits between 1960 and 1964, and had invented the Runaways, vented his passion for decadent and Faustian themes on **Outrageous** (? ? - ? 1968), one of the albums that predate glam-rock and punk-rock.

Larry Fischer (1), a Frank Zappa protege', was an insane street performer, immortalized on **An Evening With Wild Man Fischer** (? 1968 - apr 1969), whose "songs" offered a mixture of autobiography, social commentary, free associations, sermons, nursery rhymes, and parody, mostly improvised and mostly unaccompanied.

A former member of the Kingston Trio and songwriter for the Monkees (*Daydream Believer*), [John Stewart](#) assembled at least one notable solo album, the moving **California Bloodlines** (? 1968 - may 1969).

[Norman Greenbaum](#) unleashed one of the greatest grooves in the history of music, *Spirit In The Sky* (1969).

Post-Greenwich 1967-71

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One of the most erudite and sensitive songwriters of all times, [Laura Nyro](#) (3) devoted her career to intimate, introverted, self-analyzing songs. Her intense, intricate phrasing was the sonic equivalent of a psychoanalytic session, testing the deep, deep recesses of her psyche. Nyro embodied both the city's musical melting-pot (folk, gospel, soul, blues, jazz, musical, classical) and the city's

neuroses and alienation. Nyro's music was essentially tragic, and quintessentially urban. She was famous for being shy and reserved, and for mostly wearing black. She was only 17 when she recorded her debut album, **More Than a New Discovery** (jul/nov 1966 - jan 1967). Her masterpiece, **Eli And The Thirteenth Confession** (jan/feb 1968 - mar 1968), was a song cycle about a girl's transition from teenage to adulthood, relying on impeccable gospel-soul constructions. **New York Tendaberry** (sep 1968/jul 1969 - sep 1969) was less intense but more musical. Of all the vestals to parade on the stage of pop music, Nyro remains the most awe-inspiring.

[Arlo Guthrie](#) was briefly popular for the colloquial rant *Alice's Restaurant* (1967), that mixed Woody Allen comedy and Jack Kerouac chronicle, and for the quintessential "easy-rider" anthem *Motorcycle Song* (1968).

A veteran of the Greenwich Movement, [Eric Andersen](#) (3), is one of the men who can claim to have invented the modern singer-songwriter. In an era when most folksingers were either writing chronicles of daily life à la Woody Guthrie or singing anti-Establishment anthems à la Bob Dylan, Andersen displayed a fluent romantic vein. His art triumphed with **Blue River** (? 1971 - feb 1972), that ranks among the masterpieces of the era. **Stages** (dec 1972/feb 1973 - apr 1991), only published eighteen years later, is equally stunning, as is the later **Ghosts Upon The Road** (? 1988 - ? 1989).

[David Peel](#) (10) was one of the most militant and underground folk-singers in the age of the student riots. He was a modern minstrel of the white lumpenproletariat, who terrorized the Lower East Side with live performances at street corners, accompanied by random street musicians. This political bum was obviously mimicking street preachers, except that his religion was marijuana, his Bible was rock'n'roll, and his mission was to expose the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. His semi-improvised albums (or, better, public "happenings") followed in the footsteps of the Fugs' grotesque agit-prop cabaret and Frank Zappa's satirical operettas. Peel's hysterical, sarcastic and insolent tone, his spartan/spastic combo of guitar, harmonica and tambourine (which mainly contributed rhythm), and the naive enthusiasm of everybody involved (responsible for some of the most hair-raising backing vocals in the history of music), created a new kind of folk music. His masterpiece, **Have A Marijuana** (dec 1968 - ? 1969), a demented sabotage of protest songs, hillbilly, blues and square dances, was an epic insult to common-sense. Ahead of his time, Peel played folk music with the emphasis of punk-rock and the arrangements of lo-fi pop; and he played it with divine negligence.

The Velvet Underground's original drummer, [Angus MacLise](#) (1), released one of the most surreal albums of the late 1960s, **The Invasion Of Thunderbolt Pagoda** (? 1968/? 1972 - dec 1999), a mixture of raga, acid-rock and minimalism.

[Bob Neuwirth](#) (1), a staple of the Greenwich Movement of the 1960s, wrote songs for Janis Joplin (*Mercedes Benz*) and many others, but didn't release a single album during the best years of his life. He fulfilled his potential with the solemn, philosophical, mournful ballads of **Back to the Front** (? 1988 - ? 1988).

German chanteuse [Nico](#) (112), who sang with the Velvet Underground in New York before returning to Europe, invented a style of singing that has little to do

with rock music: a style that belongs to no particular place and no particular time, a style that may as well be medieval or romantic, Indian or Middle-eastern, a style that is mainly "enunciation", a style that sounds by turns like Greek chorus, Shakespearian monologue, Schubert-ian lied, Gregorian psalm, Elizabethan song, exotic chant. Her lugubrious litanies (which invented gothic rock more by accident than by design) sway between the lament of a buried alive and the stately invocation of a priestess. The staging of these funereal cries quoted from Goethe's metaphysical allegory "Faust", from Wedekind's expressionist drama "Lulu", from Brecht's epic theatre, from French noir cinema, from Dali's surreal paintings. She straddled the line between aristocratic and prostitute with the elegance of a ghost.

Her first masterpiece, **Marble Index** (sep 1968 - sep 1968), introduced gothic, archaic, exotic and neo-classical elements into rock music, but it could not be farther from being sensationalistic: Nico sang about a childhood trauma, in the grip of lacerating loneliness, monotonous, slow, too weak to soar, too weak to add emotional or melodic value to her godless liturgy. She sang, perhaps, about the childhood trauma of an entire (cursed, doomed) race. John Cale's arrangements (no percussions, emphasis on keyboards), whose delicate impressionism transformed each song into a chamber sonata, and Nico's androgynous look increased the shock.

Her second masterpiece, and one of the greatest albums of all times, **Desert Shore** (? 1970 - dec 1970), went even further, evoking the desolation of an icy and empty universe, as if after a colossal catastrophe. Stronger doses of urban neurosis further depressed her voice, but also lifted the shamanic/prophetic tone to another dimension. The sense of the ancient became more than a smell of death: a smell of the otherworld. The anemic, moribund, suspenseful atmospheres penned by her church-like harmonium and Cale's viola belonged to a catacomb. By now, it was more than fatalism: it was eternal angst. It was fear, both bleak and majestic, leading to a mental paralysis that was both childish and cosmic. Each song was an enigma, and the singer a sphinx. But she was also an explorer, albeit an explorer of the inner world. Nico's cadaveric, petrified voice wandered through the labyrinth of a wasted mind, scouring inner landscapes made of nightmares, visions and nameless shadows for the ultimate meaning. Or, better, Nico lived on another planet, and was the Homer who sang about the apocalypse of planet Earth, as viewed from up above.

Her rosary concluded with **The End** (? 1974 - nov 1974), **Drama Of Exile** (may 1981 - jul 1981) and **Camera Obscura** (apr 1985 - jun 1985) that tried to modernize her sound (the ultimate oxymoron).

Canada 1968-69

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Besides being a professional poet, [Leonard Cohen](#) (12) also created a body of musical work that proves him one of music's supreme poets. The fact that his lyrics are among the most accomplished in musical history is actually a mere footnote: what makes him such a great musician is the gentle and shy atmosphere that emanates from his folk ballads. Cohen watches life go by "like a bird on a wire", but turns the stories he sees into metaphysical visions of a Dante-esque world and into profound meditations on the human condition. His existential philosophy found in his colloquial style a vastly more effective medium than the convoluted prose of many of his century's philosophers. The **Songs Of Leonard Cohen** (aug 1967 - dec 1967) were drenched in infinite tenderness, barely whispered and discreetly arranged. Cohen's unique style

triumphed in the fragile lullabies of *Winter Lady* (flute, harpsichord) and *Sisters Of Mercy* (rattles, accordion, xylophone), that sound like good-night songs for children. Turning from social tragedies to individual tragedies, Cohen merged the tone of the medieval minstrel (Donovan) and the tone of the visionary preacher (Dylan). **Songs From A Room** (oct 1968 - apr 1969) and **Songs Of Love And Hate** (nov 1970 - apr 1971) increased the dramatic emphasis, but fundamentally continued to swim upstream, against the prevailing attitudes, carving a niche for a kind of subdued, lo-fi, intimate, personal dirge. Thanks to that invention, Cohen can be considered one of the most influential singer-songwriters of all times.

The country-music element was stronger in the catchy and sorrowful ballads of [Gordon Lightfoot](#) (1), whose epic *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* (1968) was followed by simpler tunes such as *Minstrel Of the Dawn* (1970), *If You Could Read My Mind* (1970) and *Sundown* (1973), and would evolve in the solemn *Summer Side Of Life* (1971) and *Carefree Highway* (1973).

[Joni Mitchell](#) (25) was not only the voice of the female revolution, but also one of the most innovative musicians of the era. Despite her hippy roots, she developed an aristocratic, austere, "adult" way of singing (often complemented by neo-classical piano playing), and used it to vivisect her own anxiety, while chronicling the psychological insecurity of her generation and of her sex. This ambitious program eventually wed her confessional style with fusion jazz and other non-rock idioms. Most of her art is autobiographical, dedicated to her own maturation and evolution, obsessed with the mission of finding a universal, historical meaning for her personal history. If **Clouds** (? 1969 - may 1969) and **Ladies Of The Canyon** (? 1969/? 1970 - apr 1970) were still folk-rock albums imbued with "West-Coast sound", **Blue** (mar 1971 - jun 1971) marked a monumental step forward: it injected the stream of consciousness into the folk ballad, and her voice became a finely-tuned instrument, capable of both colloquial and operatic deliveries. This introspective diary relied on piano-based compositions that were intense, convoluted and slightly neurotic. Another paranoid self-analysis, another formidable act of her autobiographical drama, **For The Roses** (sep 1972 - oct 1972) closed that era of experimentation. **Court And Spark** (? 1973 - jan 1974) was a much lighter and softer work, although it showed her prowess at absorbing elements of soul and jazz. Self-indulgence triumphed again on **Hejira** (? 1976 - nov 1976), her second masterpiece, and another stunning musical application of the stream of consciousness. Her subsequent ventures into jazz and electronic arrangements were presumptuous and unfocused, with the notable exception of **Night Ride Home** (? 1989/? 1990 - feb 1991).

Perhaps no other artist in the history of rock music has produced so many distinguished works in so many different styles and over so many years as [Neil Young](#) (27). The spectral landscape of *Last Trip To Tulsa*, off his debut album, **Neil Young** (aug/oct 1968 - nov 1968), introduced a minstrel lost in an unexplored moral universe. **Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere** (jan/mar 1969 - may 1969) elaborated on that theme and achieved a formidable synthesis of "voices" in stately, extended, psychedelic, hard-folk ballads such as *Cowgirl In The Sand* and *Down By The River*. The mellow and melodic folk-rock and country-rock of **After The Gold Rush** (aug 1969/jun 1970 - aug 1970) and **Harvest** (jan/sep 1971 - feb 1972) lent musical credibility to the apocalyptic angst of **Tonight's The Night** (early 1971/late 1973 - jun 1975), and **On The Beach** (late 1973/early 1974 - jul 1974). **Tonight's the Night**, perhaps his

masterpiece, was the ultimate testament of the post-hippy depression, an elegiac concept that sounded like a mass for the dead. The electrifying lyricism of **Zuma** (jun 1974/aug 1975 - nov 1975) and *Like A Hurricane* (1977), the anthemic hysteria of **Rust Never Sleeps** (? 1976/oct 1978 - jun 1979), the social fresco of collapsing values **Freedom** (jul 1988/jul 1989 - oct 1989) and the obscure meditation of **Sleeps With Angels** (nov 1993/apr 1994 - aug 1994) continued his life-long moral crusade.

Neil Young constitutes with Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen the great triad of "moral" voices of USA popular music. As is the case with the other two, Young's art is, first and foremost, a fusion of music and words that identifies with his era's zeitgeist. Unlike the others, though, Young is unique in targeting the inner chaos of the individual that followed the outer chaos of society. While Dylan "transfers" his era's events into a metaphysical universe, and Springsteen relates the epic sense of ordinary life, Young carries out a more complex psychological operation that, basically, bridges the idealism of the hippy communes and the neuroses of the urban population. His voice, his lyrics, his melodies and his guitar style compose a message of suffering and redemption that, at its best, transcends in hallucination, mystical vision, philosophical enlightenment, while still grounded in a context that is fundamentally a hell on earth.

The various aspects of Young's career (the bucolic folk-singer, the liberal militant, the post-hippie moralist, the apocalyptic guru, the universal pessimist, the melancholy loner, the alienated rocker) are merely stages of a long calvary, which is both individual and collective.

Young did to the lyrical song what Dylan did to the protest song: just like Dylan wed the emphasis of Whitman's poetry and the optimism of Kennedy's era with the themes of public life, Young wed Emerson's humanism and the pessimism of the post-Kennedy era with the themes of private life.

On top of this, Young invented the distorted, cacophonous, nightmarish style of guitar playing that would be influential on the grunge generation.

Young is also unique in his schizophrenia, which runs at several levels. First and foremost, one has to deal with the live/studio dichotomy of his career. Charged with the sonic equivalent of a nuclear reaction, the "live" Young albums seem to come from a different artist, a musical terrorist, a true punk. Within the studio album, one has to deal with another dichotomy: the pretty, linear, smooth country-inspired ballad, and the ugly, noisy, acid-inspired jam. These two modes rarely coexist: they alternate, they compete for control of Young's career (and mind?), each studio album being dominated by either of the two.

As a matter of fact, his alter-ego may well be a more creative musician than Young is, as **Dead Man** (mar 1995 - feb 1996), a movie soundtrack which is a rare specimen of ambient psychedelic music, and **Arc** (jan/apr 1991 - sep 1991), a collage of "found" segments from his live performances, further clarified his status as a crafter of sound as opposed to mere songwriter.

Texas 1967-69

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[Townes Van Zandt](#) (3) was a poet of intimate, gentle, tormented, emotional ballads. His mostly acoustic art borrowed elements from country, blues and tex-mex, and initiated the great Texas singer-songwriter school of the 1970s. **Our Mother the Mountain** (? ? - ? 1969), his masterpiece, a parade of desolate vignettes that recast universal themes as private stories, **The Late Great Townes Van Zandt** (? ? - ? 1972), his best-seller, and **Flyin' Shoes** (? ? - ? 1978) were

uniquely dramatic, poignant and focused.

[Mickey Newbury](#) (1) was also part of the legion of Texas singer-songwriters that greatly expanded the format of country music, notably with his **Looks Like Rain** (? ? - ? 1969).

Britain 1967-69

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A number of British singer-songwriters introduced new forms and praxes that would be influential on future generations.

One of the most eccentric characters of this generation was the Scottish composer [Ivor Cutler](#) (1), whose **Ludo** (? 1967 - ? 1967), a collection of 17 brief pieces for harmonium, bass and percussion, and **Dandruff** (? 1974 - ? 1974), a collection of 45 pieces for harmonium, do not quite fit in any category.

In 1967 [Scott Walker](#) (2), who had been a pop star a` la Beatlemania (radio-friendly refrains for mass consumption, a marketing campaign focused on his cute looks), began crafting solo albums that wed easy-listening to philosophical meditations in lugubrious settings. **Scott 4** (? 1969 - late 1969), in particular, created a new form of ballad, predating David Bowie, Julian Cope and trip-hop. His achievements continued with **Climate of Hunter** (oct/dec 1983 - mar 1984), his bleakest album, and **Tilt** (? ? - may 1995), his most experimental work.

Before he died in 1974, [Nick Drake](#) (12) managed to record only three albums, but that meagre repertory is enough to rank him among the most influential singer-songwriters of all time. He turned the tables on rock and folk music, projecting emotions outside in instead of inside out. If rock music had emphasized the emotional aspect of music in ever more creative ways, Drake did the opposite: his music seems to cancel out the emotional factor, his voice sounds neutral, anemic and indifferent, the arrangements spectral and almost "silent". Silence is, indeed, the ultimate referent of Drake's "minimalism". Drake had little to say, and he said it using minimal means. Surprisingly (and this was Drake's great discovery), his almost voiceless whisper conveyed stronger emotions than most magniloquent music. Drake's lost, tenuous, taciturn manner scoured the terminal states of melancholy, angst and despair for a reason to live this life. There was something terrifying in those frail notes: Drake's music was the equivalent of a suicide letter. Drake fumbled blindfolded on the edge of the abyss, and his songs were the thoughts that accompanied him while waiting for the fall. The lyrical, elegiac and naive **Five Leaves Left** (jul 1968 - sep 1969) was already representative of the drama that developed via **Bryter Layter** (jul 1970 - nov 1970), mildly revitalized by soul and rhythm'n'blues spices, and that reached its climax with **Pink Moon** (oct 1971 - feb 1972), Drake's masterpiece and one of the most depressing albums of all time.

[Roy Harper](#) (2), the "sophisticated beggar", specialized in sprawling, delirious, epic-length pieces, first tested in *McGoohan's Blues* (1969), and particularly on **Flat Baroque And Berserk** (sep 1969 - jan 1970), that codified his mixture of Donovan's tenderness, Syd Barrett's lunacy and David Peel's sarcasm, while maintaining an intensely nostalgic view of England. The four lengthy suites of **Stormcock** (? 1970 - may 1971), possibly his masterpiece, featuring string arrangements, soared towards Tim Buckley's cosmic landscapes. Notable among

his later logorrheas were *The Game* (1975), perhaps the most musical and certainly the hardest rocking, and *One Of Those Days In England* (1977).

Scottish guitarist and vocalist [John Martyn](#) (13) was one of the most original advocates of a folk-rock-jazz fusion. As a vocalist, his free-form delivery could compete with Tim Buckley's. As a guitarist, his technique borrowed (in a creative way) from jazz and Indian music. His first naive attempt at fusing folk and jazz on **The Tumbler** (? 1968 - dec 1968), perhaps influenced by Donovan's albums of the previous year, and the appropriation of jazz orchestration within the format of the folk-rock song, first attempted on **Stormbringer** (summer 1969 - feb 1970) and **The Road To Ruin** (? 1970 - nov 1970) and perhaps influenced by Van Morrison's contemporary album, opened the road to the first mature formulation of his art, **Bless The Weather** (may 1971 - nov 1971). Vocal acrobatics, guitar overtones and jazz arrangements merged with sublime elegance on **Solid Air** (nov/dec 1972 - feb 1973), his first masterpiece. **Inside Out** (jul 1973 - oct 1973), his second and supreme masterpiece, delved into eastern mysticism and further expanded song structures to approach the free-form jam. After **Sunday's Child** (aug 1974 - jan 1975), Martyn displayed his enormous talent only occasionally: *Small Hours* (1977), *John Wayne* (1986), *Cooltide* (1992). Mostly, he now gravitated towards Phil Collins' disco-soul and electronic new-age music.

Greek-born [Cat Stevens](#) (3) coined a sound that was unusual by being, at the same time, pensive, ethnic, melodic and rhythmic. The philosophical ruminations, psychological studies and bittersweet parables of **Tea For The Tillerman** (jul 1970 - nov 1970) led to the elegiac and introverted ballads of **Teaser And The Firecat** (mar 1971 - oct 1971), which could be tenderly impressionistic as well as vividly epic. Mediterranean and Slavic influences emerged more clearly in the forceful, noisy melodramas of **Catch Bull At Four** (may 1972 - oct 1972) and in the suite *Foreigner* (1973).

A few veterans of the early British Invasion managed to reinvent themselves in the age of progressive-rock.

[Rod Stewart](#) (2) was the raucous, hoarse, smoky blues singer who turned heads in Jeff Beck's band before he joined the Faces. While the Faces struggled, Stewart took their ideas of soul-rock fusion and launched a solo career in a more commercial vein with **Gasoline Alley** (? 1970 - jun 1970) and **Every Picture Tells A Story** (nov 1970 - may 1971), collections of ballads that borrowed from folk, country, blues and soul. Stewart would later convert to glam-rock, disco-music and whatever fad happened to rule the charts.

With his solo albums recorded in California, **Winds Of Change** (? 1967 - aug 1967) and particularly **The Twain Shall Meet** (? 1968 - apr 1968), [Eric Burdon](#) (1) continued his Homeric task of singing the feats of his generation, except that the focus became the hippy civilization of San Francisco. He adapted the anthemic form coined with the Animals to the loose, extended structures of acid-rock, and later successfully merged that lysergic inspiration with his passion for rhythm'n'blues on **Love Is** (oct 1968 - dec 1968) and at least one of the collaborations with the band War, **The Black Man's Burdon** (? 1970 - dec 1970).

Former Cream bassist [Jack Bruce](#) (1) displayed his songwriting skills on **Songs For A Tailor** (apr/jun 1969 - sep 1969), an original attempt at creating a folk-

rock song as austere as classical music and as atmospheric as jazz, and the prelude to his jazz career.

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