

A Sudden Rise in the Mercury: The Story of the Balloon Farm

By Mike Stax

For a band that had a Top 40 hit single, there's relatively little known about the Balloon Farm. Released on Laurie Records in October 1967, "A Question of Temperature" peaked at #37 in the national Billboard charts early the following year. But when their follow-up single flopped, the band vaporized, leaving barely a trace in terms of media coverage. Almost fifty years later, that situation hasn't changed much. Aside from a few capsule biographies in liner notes (most notably Rhino's *Nuggets* box set) and on Wikipedia and the All Music Guide, next to nothing has been written about them. The Balloon Farm has remained as enigmatic as their name.

The lack of information about the band is somewhat puzzling, given the continued popularity of their best-known song. With its quirky, robotic groove and delightfully lascivious overtone, "A Question of Temperature" has an enduring appeal that has inspired numerous cover versions. Brownsville Station recorded a version in 1973, Boston new-wavers Human Sexual Response did it in 1981, the Lords of the New Church covered it on their 1982 debut album, and Julian Cope recorded a version for a 1988 B-side—to name a few. While these artists are to be commended for their taste they all fell short. In the words of the great Dobie Gray: "the original is still the greatest."

I contacted Mike Appel, lead singer and guitarist for the Balloon Farm, and the writer of "A Question of Temperature," and he helped fill in some details on his and the band's story.

"I grew up in Old Brookville, Long Island," recounts Mike. "Horse country. My mother was a great singer and would have been Dinah Shore except for the fact that she didn't care about celebrity and gave that offer up to raise a family. She was a great singer and went by the name of Tucky Drennan. I couldn't find that name anywhere, lost to posterity I suppose. She used to listen to Hank Williams and that's how I got started. However, when I first heard Elvis Presley and especially his guitar player Scotty Moore, I was devastated and blindsided. One minute on the radio dial it was Patti Page singing 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window' and the next it was Elvis singing 'Good Rockin' Tonight.'"

Mike's mother bought him his first 45s—"Roll Over Beethoven" by Chuck Berry, "Blue Suede Shoes" by Carl Perkins, "Endless Sleep" by Jody Reynolds, and "Speedo" by the Cadillacs—and in 1958, at the age of 16, he formed his first band, the Humbugs. "We started playing mostly

instrumentals at local high schools, Glen Cove and North Shore High School,” remembers Mike. “We were the first rock band to ever play the society Piping Rock Club [an exclusive Long Island country club]. We then ended up playing to all the rich who lived on the north shore of Long Island like me.” Appel also remembers the band making an appearance on a regional TV show, Connecticut Bandstand, which aired on WNHC-TV Channel 8 out of New Haven. “I played on Connecticut Bandstand when I was 17. We were all babies. I don't know how I even scored that gig. The only one that ever saw me was my Aunt Agnes (now deceased). I know we all wore Kelly green sweaters.”

Although still all in high school, somehow the group was able to land a deal with 20th Century Fox Records. “We always were in Manhattan recording our instrumental originals and copies of other songs instrumentally,” remembers Mike. “That's how it started.” A Humbugs single appeared in October 1960 on 20th Century Fox's Studio subsidiary featuring two instrumental rockers, “How Dry I Am” and “Distillery,” the latter an early Appel composition. Appel also remembers another Humbugs record, “Brand X” on the Fields label. After a name change to the Camelots, they started recording for Al Silver who ran the successful Herald and Ember labels. The Camelots' rip-roaring instrumental “Charge” was issued on Silver's Comet label around 1963, backed with “Scratch”—both songs co-written by Appel. “Charge” was something of a local hit, and the Camelots kept a busy live schedule around New York and New Jersey. Appel recalls them backing up the Marvelettes at a theater in Newark, as well as doing backing group duties for Freddie “Boom Boom” Cannon, Brian Hyland, Jay & the Americans and Little Peggy March.

Concurrent to this, Appel was working as a songwriter for various publishing companies, and playing nights at the Cinderella Club in Greenwich Village with Tex & the Chex, a doo wop group who'd earlier released singles on Atlantic and 20th Century Fox. Playing drums for the Chex was another up and coming songwriter/musician, Alan Gordon. Gordon had recently written a song with Jimmy Woods called “Invitation to Cry.” Producers Bob Wyld and Art Polhemus heard the Chex playing the song at the Cinderella and smelled a hit. However they didn't feel that Tex (a.k.a. Rod Bristow) was the right lead singer for it, so they teamed the Chex—Appel on guitar, Gordon on drums and Everett Jacobs on bass—with a new lead singer, Gary Bonner, and took the band into Regent Studios in New York City to cut the song. The producers took the demo to Charles Koppelman and Don Rubin who promptly secured the new group a deal with Columbia Records, and renamed them the Magicians.

However, the timing couldn't have been worse for Appel. Having graduated from St John's University in the summer of '65 with a BA in Business Arts, he suddenly became eligible for the draft. Sure enough, he received an induction notice, and wound up serving six months in the

United States Marine Reserves. The Magicians recruited a new guitarist, Allan “Jake” Jacobs, and a new bass player, John Townley (replacing Everett Jacobs, who left at the same time as Appel), and Columbia issued “Invitation to Cry” in the autumn of 1965. While they didn’t score chart success with the Magicians, Alan Gordon and Gary Bonner went on to form an immensely popular songwriting partnership with hit songs like “Happy Together,” “She’d Rather Be With Me” and “Celebrate.”

Meanwhile, after completing his military service, Appel reconnected with Everett Jacobs and formed a new group, the Un-Four-Given, along with Richie Sanchez, Danny O’Connor (“It was an Irish last name, I think it was O’Connor,” says Mike). The Un-Four-Given played gigs in Long Island, and also in the city at the Cinderella Lounge, where Appel and Jacobs had played the previous year with Tex & the Chex. “We would do six half-hour sets, 30 minutes on and 30 minutes off,” remembers Mike. “It was a Mafia place. The owner, John, was an OK guy and always paid us properly. There was never any evidence of muscle or hoods hanging around.”

In October 1966, Dot Records released a single by the Un-Four-Given featuring two Appel compositions. “Cry, Cry (Cry Little Girl)” is a moody mid-tempo number with a nifty Eastern-flavored guitar hook, while “Love Me to Pieces” is a happy Mersey-flavored toe-tapper in the early Searchers vein. “Southern Peer International would have been the publisher because they had a studio on the 7th Floor offices at 1619 Broadway,” says Mike. “I used to record all our demos there. I even met my wife there, who worked in the copyright department with Buddy Holly’s wife, Maria.” Copyright records show another song from this period, “Too Young to Live (Never Too Young To Die),” co-written by Appel and Jacobs in July 1966. “I vaguely remember that song but have no idea whether we ever actually recorded it,” says Mike, adding: “You guys know more about me than I do about myself!”

Interestingly, there was an earlier single bearing the Un-Four-Given moniker—or more accurately “the Unforgivens”—a collaboration with the Les & Larry Elgart Orchestra released on Columbia in 1965: “The Early Bird Catches the Bomb” b/w “Brand New World,” both songs written by Appel. “We recorded the Les and Larry Elgart Orchestra in Columbia’s big studio called the Church because it could handle big sessions like that and it was previously a church,” remembers Mike.

Around this time Appel attracted the attention of the songwriting and production team Hugo & Luigi, famous for their work with Sam Cooke, Perry Como and Elvis Presley as well as big hits like “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” by the Tokens and “Shout” by the Isley Brothers. Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore were cousins and had an office in the Brill Building where Appel first played them some of his songs. “Hugo & Luigi were the greatest guys,” he remembers, “and totally

unlike my father. They were actually interested in my songs. They liked them and signed me to a production and publishing contract. It was a great place to work because everybody who was anybody walked through their doors.”

Another group on the New York scene at the same time as the Un-Four-Given was Adam. To give themselves some mystique, they all went by the first name Adam. So Ed Schnug became Adam Schnug, James Fitzsimmons Adam London, and drummer Donald Henny Adam Dawson, while Adam Mintzer (a.k.a. Adam Taylor) was apparently the only ‘real’ Adam in the band. Adam London had previously recorded as Jimmy London (the cool, harmonica-laced Mersey-style “Chain of Love” on Karate in 1965) and prior to that had been a member of Joey & the Ovations, who released a rare doo wop disc on Hawk. A single by Adam appeared on Mala in December 1966. “Eve,” co-written by the entire group, is a pulsating freeform raga rock workout with scurrying “Eight Miles High” guitar runs, finger cymbals, thumping drums, and wild, moaning vocals—a spectacular record—while the B-side, “Where Has My Little Girl Gone” (written by Taylor) is an orchestrated pop ballad.

Both sides of the Adam single were published by Peer-Southern Music, so it’s likely that this is how Schnug and Henny crossed paths with Appel to start a new band in early 1967: the Balloon Farm, along with bass player Jay Saks (who’d replaced Everett Jacobs in the Un-Four-Given), and a keyboard player, Pat, whose last name Appel can no longer remember. “The keyboard player was just a little mad man and I forgot his name!” confesses Mike. “He played the Hammond B3 organ and he sang. He was always into some kind of mischief.”

As for the rest of the band: “Eddie was a very magical little guy,” recalls Mike. “He even dressed in a way that made girls love him. He was never without a girl on his arm. Jay Saks wasn’t really into it too much. He took it as a lark and later got a somewhat regular job at RCA Records’ Red Seal Division, which was their classical music division; he became a conductor for RCA.” As for their drummer, Appel says, “Donny’s a bit of a dreamer, but quite artistic in his own magical way.”

The Balloon Farm was also the name of a night club on St Mark’s Place in the East Village. The Velvet Underground had played there in April 1966 as part of Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable when it was called the Dom. Bob Dylan stopped by, groked the silver Mylar balloons hanging everywhere, and nicknamed it the Balloon Farm. Other sources contend that Dylan imagined speech balloons hovering over the heads of the patrons. Whatever the case, when the Velvets went on tour in the summer of ’66, Albert Grossman took over the lease for a while and renamed it that. The venue had most likely reopened as the Electric Circus by the time

Appel and his cohorts decided to take the name for their band in 1967. “We never played there,” Mike confirms.

“The Balloon Farm was not what I would call a working band,” explains Appel. Although they did play some live shows, the band was conceived more as a vehicle for recording original material. “A Question of Temperature,” co-written by Appel, Schnug and Henny, was one of the first songs to emerge from the new alliance. “I came with the framework for the song and the guitar riff and then everybody pitched in with the rest of the music,” remembers Mike. “I think, being a wordy guy, I wrote the lyrics.”

Right away, it was clear there was something special about it. It was different—weird even—but also catchy and commercial. “When you don't have preconceived notions about how to go about something, you sometimes fall into a very creative state and do things you could not have done if you had been musically trained,” reflects Mike. “All of us loved music, but none of us were trained. Thank God!”

Appel played the song for Peter Schekeryk, the husband and producer of folk singer Melanie, who was also under contract to Hugo & Luigi. (Schekeryk had also been a member of the Magic Plants with future Left Banke member Tom Finn.) “Peter knew Doug Morris who was head of A&R at Laurie Records at the time,” recounts Mike. “Doug knew that Peter was getting hot as a producer—Melanie had been signed by Clive Davis at Columbia—and as a result gave us a shot to go into the studio with the song. Then Doug liked the recording on its own merit and released it on Laurie. In fact Doug Morris and I became fast friends.”

Having been involved with so many different recording sessions, Appel doesn't recall where the single was recorded. “I don't remember whether we recorded it ODO Recording, Dick Charles, or Associated Recording studios,” he says. “It could've been Stu Phillips or some other studio. It could be that Laurie Records had its own studio and we recorded it there. It could also have been Allegro because I recorded stuff at Allegro with Bruce Staples who produced Tommy James & the Shondells there.”

Schekeryk produced the session with Appel's assistance, playing up the song's inherent quirkiness with a punchy, metronomic backbeat, and some squiggly Theremin embellishments. “We used a Theremin because the Beach Boys did in ‘Good Vibrations,’” says Mike. “Brian Wilson used it melodically; we used it like wackos! I sung lead, background, and played lead guitar.” Along with the dominant fuzz guitar hook, Appel also played the atmospheric volume swell accents on the bridge section. “It wasn't a volume pedal,” he reveals. “I moved the volume up and down by moving the volume knob on the guitar itself while I picked out the

notes of the 'volume guitar solo'. The volume knob was moved by my right hand's pinky and the thumb and index finger of my right hand plucked the individual notes out. The left hand obviously had to depress the correct notes as well."

For the B-side, the band cut a slow burning, Young Rascals-flavored number, "Hurtin' For Your Love," credited to Appel, Schnug, Henny and Saks. As Mike remembers, it was thrown together quickly in the studio. "I started playing something and then Jay Saks started playing something on the organ and it went from there. I wrote all the lyrics. That's about the extent of my memory."

The single was issued by Laurie in October 1967 with the A-side unintentionally misspelled as "A Question of *Tempature*" on the initial pressing. It took several months for the record to take off, but it eventually cracked Billboard's Top 40 in February of the following year, peaking at number 37. The single was also released in several other countries, including the UK (on London), France (on Disques Vogue) and Germany (on Ariola).

Interestingly, a couple of songs composed by the Balloon Farm writing team (Appel, Schnug and Henny) were recorded by other artists during this period. In Australia, singer Robby Snowden recorded "Sunshine Rides on a Trolley" (a.k.a. "Sunshine Rides on a Trolley Car") for a single on Clarion label in 1967, which was a minor hit in Melbourne and his home town of Perth. Then, in March 1968, "Soul Seekin'" was the A-side of a single by Bobby Lewis, best-known for his 1961 hit "Tossin' and Turnin'." Released on Mercury, the record was produced by Peter Schekeryk for Hugo & Luigi Productions (the flipside was a Melanie Safka composition, "Give Me Your Yesterdays").

After "A Question of Temperature" slipped off the charts, work began on a follow-up. Rather than taking the easy route of following up their hit single with a soundalike, the band went for a completely different sound working with innovative composer and arranger Charlie Morrow. Morrow's background was in the avant-garde or New Music field, but he had recently been making forays into commercial music, composing advertising jingles and also working as a consulting arranger on Simon & Garfunkel's *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme* album [see sidebar story for a more detailed look at Morrow's work during this period]. Appel had first contacted Morrow through an ad in the *Village Voice*, and he'd offered advice on how to best achieve the electronic effect Appel had envisioned for "A Question of Temperature." For the follow-up single Morrow was engaged as an arranger. "We got together and he had some songs and I wrote some arrangements," remembers Charlie. "The Balloon Farm work was the focus of that. It was rather simple and straightforward. I listened to the songs and decided on what

instruments might be needed, and then we recorded them. It went very smoothly, step by step.”

Two songs were the main focus of the first sessions, “Hurry Up Sundown,” written by Appel and Henny, and “Farmer Brown,” a light, old-timey novelty song by Appel. “The Lovin’ Spoonful’s ‘Daydream’ was the inspiration for ‘Farmer Brown’s Ole Mill Pond,’” says Mike. “It wasn’t nearly as good. I was a copycat.” For the session at Allegro Sound Studios on April 3, 1968, Morrow hired trumpet players Fred Mills and Allen Dean, trombonists John Swallow and John Clark, tuba player Toby Hanks, and flautist Tom Nyfenger to play his arrangements. “Those are all symphony players and studio players, a great, great band,” remembers Morrow. “I’d come up through the New Music scene, as you know, and so these were people I knew who were interested in contemporary music. John Clark was the guy from the Metropolitan Opera.” Morrow’s notes also show that he brought in a keyboard player, John Castinovo, for a session on March 27. The rest of the music was played by the Balloon Farm band members. “The guys were very good musicians who took their work seriously,” remembers Charlie. “I remember in that group of people, everybody was very professional. I remember that after this I did work with the Rascals, and they were so much more silly. They were always joking—not during takes or anything, but in between. But Mike really maintained a certain kind of pseudo-decorum. I just liked it very much. It was very much like classical music in that respect, coming in and doing your job.”

Although Schekeryk was listed as producer, Morrow remembers it was Appel who actually ran the session. “I don’t think [Schekeryk] even was there,” he recalls. “I think he booked the studio. Mike was in charge, and Mike and I did it. The fact is that Peter was an executive producer. He was a business guy, and Mike is a really musical guy, and he’s a really good songwriter too. That’s what I really loved about working with Mike Appel was that he was so musical and he always wanted everybody to do their best. On the other hand, he wanted everything to be very clear. He was looking for clarity, and he wanted it to be understandable.”

“Farmer Brown” had been the intended A-side, but when Laurie issued the single towards the end of April, the more original and appealing “Hurry Up Sundown” was the plug side. It’s a moody, slow-building number tastefully embellished with horns and finger-picked acoustic guitar; Appel’s lead vocal has a similar vibe to Ralph Scala of the Blues Magoos. Not hit single material like its predecessor, but a song that grows on you with repeated listening.

Coinciding with the release of the single, the Balloon Farm played as part of a “Spring Cavalcade of Stars” package tour along with the Box Tops, Sly & the Family Stone, John Fred & His Playboys, and the 1910 Fruitgum Company. “It was basically a Midwest tour,” remembers

Appel. “We toured as far north as Flint, Michigan, to New Orleans, Louisiana. I remember seeing flames come out of one of the engines of our jet. It was quite frightening.” According to Appel’s recollection, Don Henny left the band prior to the tour and was replaced by a drummer remembered only as Howie (his last name, again, forgotten).

Charlie Morrow worked with the Balloon Farm on several more occasions in 1968. “We used to meet regularly to work on recordings,” he remembers. “We met I guess at Hugo & Luigi’s in the Brill Building.” His notes show a number of mostly unreleased songs, most composed by Appel and Henny: “Balloon Man,” “Chalk Talk,” “Love Went Straight to My Head,” “Girl in the City,” “If She Were My Girl,” and “Two of A Kind” (more on which later). Presumably some of these were in contention to be the third Balloon Farm single, or even tracks for a possible album. However, when “Hurry Up Sundown” flopped, Laurie lost interest, and by the end of 1968 the band appears to have more or less dissolved.

Next Appel became involved with New Beat Management, a newly-formed company headed up Mark Alan. “The New Beat operation will encompass publishing and production as well as booking and management,” reported *Billboard* magazine on November 16, 1968. According to the news story, Appel would handle the company’s “affairs and production,” including outside productions for a number of record labels like Kapp, Columbia and Atlantic. Although the Balloon Farm were listed as one of the groups signed to New Beat—along with the Illusion, Neon, Man, the Exiles, Celebration and Mike St Shaw—there would be no more records under that name. Instead, Appel’s next release would be in a new guise: The Huck Finn.

Issued on Kapp in December 1968, the Huck Finn single featured two excellent Appel compositions: “Two of a Kind” and “We’ll Catch the Sun.” Co-written with Don Henny, the upbeat, bubblegum-tinged “Two of a Kind” was actually a Balloon Farm recording from earlier that year with an arrangement by Charlie Morrow (who until recently was completely unaware it was ever released), while “We’ll Catch the Sun” is a pleasant harmony pop number with a couple of stomping garage rock sections. “I was Huck Finn,” says Appel. “I wrote the songs and produced them although the Slater brothers got co-production credit. They were managers and never saw the inside of the studio.” Alan Slater was a vice-president at New Beat and his brother Robert also worked there. During this period, Appel and Slater also co-produced a single for Atco by Mike St Shaw & Thee Neon, a Jerry Lee Lewis tribute combining “Great Balls of Fire” and “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On.” Mike played guitar on the B-side, “Joint Meeting,” which he co-wrote with Johnny Roesch.

In 1969 Appel left New Beat and signed a deal with the Wes Farrell Organization as a staff writer and producer. Jimmy Cretecos became his songwriting partner and over the next few

years they wrote songs for such artists as Paul Anka, Carolyn Franklin (Aretha's sister) and the Partridge Family (including the Top 10 hit "Doesn't Somebody Want to Be Wanted"). Appel was also heavily involved with the first album by Sir Lord Baltimore. "Jim Cretecos and I put an ad in the *Village Voice*," he remembers. "They answered the ad and we went to see them rehearse and were knocked out by them. They had no titles for songs and couldn't write lyrics to save their lives, but boy could they play their asses off! Jimmy and I came up with every title and wrote all the lyrics to all their songs on their first album."

Co-produced by Appel and Cretecos, *Kingdom Come*, was released on Mercury in 1970 and is now regarded as one of the greatest hard rock albums of all time. However, when the band signed a management deal with Dee Anthony they severed their ties with Appel and Cretecos, who were also not paid for their contributions. "The second album was an abortion," remarks Appel. "I don't have the time to spell it all out but it was the dumbest thing they could've done."

Of course, Sir Lord Baltimore wasn't the only act Mike Appel can lay claim to have discovering. In 1971 he was on the lookout for singer-songwriters when a guy from New Jersey showed up in his office for an audition: Bruce Springsteen. The following year, Mike became his manager, signed him to a production contract, and helped get him a deal with CBS. Appel went on to produce Springsteen's first two albums and co-produce his third, *Born to Run*, before the two of them parted company under a cloud of lawsuits. But that's a story that's been told many times before, and one which goes beyond the scope and timeline of this story. However, I will add one further note on that topic. In 2014, Springsteen wrote and recorded a song called "Hurry Up Sundown." Coincidence? Maybe.

The only member of the Balloon Farm Appel is still in contact with is Don Henny. When I sent Henny an email requesting an interview, his one-word response was "Why?" My explanation evidently did not pass muster as after that he fell silent. After leaving the Balloon Farm, he wrote some songs with Mike Sorafine of Apple Pie Motherhood Band, one of which, "He Turned You On," appeared on their second album, *Apple Pie*, released on Atlantic in 1969.

Jay David Saks went on to a hugely successful career in classical music, working as a producer in RCA's Red Seal division, a VP and executive producer at Sony BMG, and the music producer at the Metropolitan Opera. At the time of writing he's won 13 Grammy awards.

According to Appel, Ed Schnug is deceased (I've been unable to confirm this), while the whereabouts or full identities of the barely remembered Pat and Howie remain a mystery—at least for now.

The final word goes to Mike Appel, whose cool disposition, he assures me, is still hanging by a thread. "I get a kick out of how many people know 'Question of Temperature.' It always makes me smile because it was my first song that I wrote, played and sung lead on that charted."