

Roll Back the Hands of Time

Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band Meets King Penett

by Mitchell Schneider

Tonight along Manhattan's Riverside Drive, whose faded elegance hauntingly suggests glamorous bygone days, mounds of snow leftover from a week-old blizzard are hardening into tiny icebergs, and the winds must be gusting up to 60 m.p.h.—a shopping bag lady or two are nearly lifted into the air. Inside, in their publicist's apartment, Stony Browder Jr. and August Darnell—the composer/lyricist team of Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band, dressed as though they just stepped out of the 30's and 40's: wide-kneed pleated pants, snazzy suit jacket, slouch cap—are looking at the cover of the *New York Post*, whose headline screams, FIND RADIATION FROM SATELLITE. "So what are we supposed to do," laughs Stony, his high cheekbones threatening to break through his face. Sitting back on the sofa, he crosses his legs, and considers a perhaps more bizarre subject: *Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band Meets King Penett* (RCA).

"There is a certain almost idiotic dedication in this band to things that are long gone," says Stony, accidentally knocking to the floor an empty wine glass, which the dog of the house insists is food. "Ever since childhood, we've always been fascinated by the old Hollywood movies—the ones with Bogart, Lauren Bacall, and Hedy Lamarr—and the whole big band sound."

Almost as busy as a Busby Berkeley Hollywood musical, the Savannah Band's second album draws its influences from the 30's, 40's, and early 50's, at times combining them with some 70's disco. Throughout, one hears the big band horns, the south-of-the-border rumba and samba, lead singer Cory Daye's octave-leaping swing vocals, plus, according to Stony, some harmonies derived from early Connie Francis records.

Considering the record's overall smooth flow, one would probably never guess that the album—five months in the making—was recorded amid hairy political, creative, and emotional battles within the group. "Our initial success," explains August, referring to their June '76 self-titled debut album, which went gold and produced two major hit singles ("Cherchez La Femme," "I'll Play the Fool For You"), "swoll our heads so that we all couldn't meet in the same room—and that's an honest-to-God fact. While making the record and living in California, Stony and I



Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band are August Darnell, Mickey Sevilla, "Sugar Coated" Andy Hernandez, Stony Browder, Jr. and Cory Daye.

battled for about a month for leadership of the group—I withdrew my lyrics at one point, and that held up recording. Plus there were romantic arguments between Stony and Cory. Not to mention fights between the other group members over production points. We had meeting after meeting at each other's apartments—we were living at a singles complex in Burbank—to try and iron things out." Stony elaborates. "I think this is the first time in the history of RCA where they let a group go into the studio to do their own production without anyone supervising where the money was going. Had they done that, they would have seen that many nights were spent at \$120 an hour throwing chairs across the room, fighting with your lead vocalist in the singing booth, and having your engineer storm out of the studio. Even though making the record often resembled therapeutic sessions, it was still fun."

Especially for August, what's frustrating about the new record is that, so far, radio program directors are responding to it as cautiously as they did to the first one, probably because it's more intricate and heavily emphasizes the south-of-the-border inflection. "The same sincerity was put

into this one—it's just that we're speeding to the degree that we've changed and moved to the next level. And the people may not have gone that fast. So, without enough radio exposure, how are they going to know what to make of this album?"

Also preventing the Savannah Band from entering the ranks of superstardom is the fact that the group has never toured. "We're recording artists first," asserts August, "and feel that a live show would be a drop in the dramatic presentation of our albums. But arrangements are being worked out for a possible tour in the late Spring.

Amid the sounds of the dog barking, the telephone ringing, and a parakeet chirping, Stony says, "The greatest compliment I've heard yet is from my friend's 10-year-old kid who thought the first album sounded like a children's record." Says August, a former junior high school English teacher, "There's no heavy messages in this music. This is no looking glass, no mirror reflection of the terrible times, or anything like that. This is entertainment, not reality." For proof, go ahead and consult Carmen Miranda and Ricky Ricardo. And forget about the shopping bag lady from right down the block. ●

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