

# Marty Balin

The Summer of Love's chief romantic celebrates a half-century of *Good Memories* with Jefferson Airplane BY MIKE GREENHAUS

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**ARTIN BALIN** has every right to claim the title of the Summer of Love's founding

father. Along with guitarist Paul Kantner, he formed Jefferson Airplane in 1965 as the house band for The Matrix, a San Francisco club he co-owned and oversaw, and served as the band's co-lead singer and romantic ambassador throughout their half-decade sonic metamorphosis. So it's only fitting that the 74-year-old Ohio native, and current San Francisco and North Florida resident, marked the Airplane's golden anniversary with both a career retrospective and a collection of new love songs.

"The new songs are basically the music I've been writing and adding to my live show over the last two years," Balin says in January, while preparing for a few dates with his tight, limber acoustic trio. "Every time I write a new song, I add it to the show—working them up live still makes a huge difference. Once I get going, I can't stop—sometimes our sets will last for three hours. With a trio, it's easy: 'Follow me, guys!'"

*The Greatest Love* arrived just before Valentine's Day, only two months after Balin dropped another release, *Good Memories*—a freshly recorded, acoustic-driven, double-disc survey of Balin's Jefferson Airplane and Jefferson Starship singles and album cuts like "It's No Secret," "Blues from an Airplane" and "Hearts." Doubling as something of an Airplane family primer, *Good Memories* follows the band's evolution from their folk roots to their psychedelic '60s peak and groovy '70s singles like "Miracles" and "Runaway," which sound refreshingly haunting when stripped of their studio gloss.

"I was recording *The Greatest Love* but doing some of these old Airplane songs live with my



Marty Balin: Jefferson Airplane's original voice

band," says Balin, who remained in the Starship orbit through the late-'70s hit-making days, despite his reluctance to tour. He also continued to appear with Kantner's version of the group into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Somebody thought it would be a cool idea to celebrate Jefferson Airplane's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year by putting those oldies, but goodies, on an album. So in the midst of recording the new album, we knocked out some of the ones that we do live in the show, and they came together pretty quick and easy."

Though Jefferson Airplane's 50<sup>th</sup> passed without a highly anticipated reunion—Grace Slick has consistently insisted that she's too old to perform rock music—Balin, who remained largely neutral during latter-day fractional spats between band members, stirred the rumor mill when he joined Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady for a few Airplane classics at New York's Beacon Theatre on the eve of the group's anniversary in late 2014. He's also channeled the original Airplane's tight focus on artistically minded songwriting and dynamic

musicianship with his trio and has gradually started splicing his concerts with more catalog songs.

"We just started doing them as a trip at the rehearsals, and then we started using them in the live shows and noticed that they went over pretty good," he says of the trio's setlists, which now dig much deeper than anthems like "Volunteers." "I kept them in the mix." And as he inches toward the Summer of Love's own 50-year milestone in just over a year, Balin's happy to return to the folk stories and heartfelt ballads that originally inspired him to start a band.



"I'm doing the same thing that I've always done. I love to sing; I go out and sing for people and people come out to hear me and I think it's great. As long as I can keep doing that, I'm a happy man."

Sadly, *Good Memories* took on new significance when Kantner and Signe Anderson—the Airplane's first female voice—both passed away, eerily, on January 28.

"He and I opened new worlds," Balin said of Kanter in a statement. "He was the first guy I picked for the band, and he was the first guy who taught me how to roll a joint. And although I know he liked to play the devil's advocate, I am sure he has earned his wings now." He also paid tribute to Anderson in a heartfelt message: "One sweet Lady has passed on. I imagine that she and Paul woke up in heaven and said, 'Hey, what are you doing here? Let's start a band,' and no sooner than that [deceased Airplane drummer] Spencer Dryden was there joining in!"

**In recent years, you've woven Jefferson Airplane and Starship songs into your solo sets with increased regularity. What sparked your interest in this material again?**

Basically, it was my guitar player, Chuck Morrongiello, who got me interested in doing them again. He'd play me songs out of Bill Graham's vaults or something—from all these shows that we did. I didn't know they were recorded. I would say, "Oh, yeah. I remember that one," and he'd say, "Well, let's do it."

People were getting off during the live show because they hadn't heard these old songs for ages. It was fun. When we decided to make the record, we did the songs that we were already doing live with the band.

**You coupled your Airplane tribute with a collection of new love songs with your trio. What**

**were your initial goals for that project?**

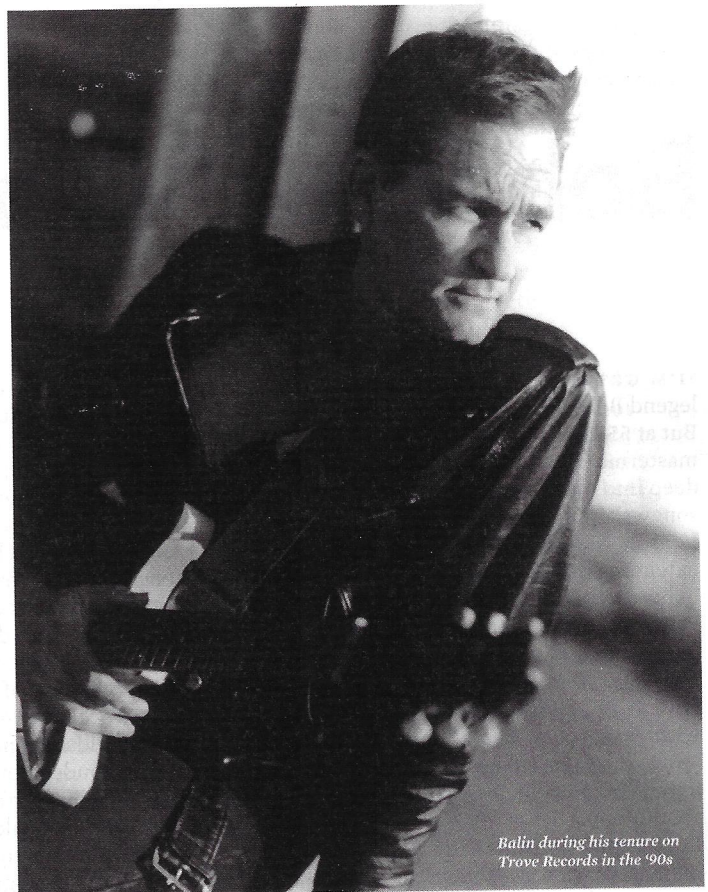
The trio's just me, Charlie and an upright bass player named Lloyd Goldstein, who we call Goldie. We all live around here, hang out together and just started playing. Then we started doing these little shows and took it from there. I'm always writing and had all of these new songs building up.

I'm not with Jefferson Starship anymore, though they still use me in their ads. I have all of these songs, and now I don't have to wait for somebody to change guitars or have an instrumental break in every song, then pass it around to all of the singers. It's like a circus. I'm not into that.

People want to hear me sing, and now that's what I'm doing; I'm just singing. The whole night is me—and if you dig it, cool. And I'm having fun. I move wherever I want, from one song I want to another. There aren't any egos and [we are free from] people's problems—waiting for somebody to light a cigarette, have a drink or change guitars and organize their music. Let's get to the music, man. That's what I'm doing—just flying along.

I enjoy the acoustic approach of just me and two guys. It's what you would do if you were just recording and laying down the basic tracks. So we decided to put these new songs on an album and we laid down these fresh ideas, new inspirations. I could have brought in all kinds of musicians, but I wanted to keep it live—just really simple and bare bones. The song is the essence here. I don't have any instrumental breaks. I don't have all these interludes or the psychedelic tripping from some of those big songs. We just basically pared it down to the song.

**Though Grace Slick has made it clear she isn't interested in performing again, you sparked a**



Balin during his tenure on Trove Records in the '90s

**reunion frenzy by joining Hot Tuna at the Beacon in late 2014. What was the impetus for that collaboration?**

It was Jack Casady's birthday and they invited me to come sing a few songs. I was playing up there in New York, too, so we went over there and we joined in with them and played and it was kind of fun. Jorma's got all of his other guys onstage, so it's a big scene, big sound. I had played at Jorma's ranch before that and Jorma and Jack got up and played with me there, but we hadn't played before that for a while.

**You started in the 1960s folk scene and, in many ways, you've returned to that more stripped-down, song-driven approach with your trio.**

Yeah, and maybe I'll build up demand, too, and be able to add cool instruments. That would be kind of fun. You can look at kids like Ed Sheeran and people like that who just get up by themselves. It seems to me like that approach still works today. If it's good enough for him, then I figure it's good enough for me.

I still like listening to the old stuff, but I hear new music all the time. My little daughter will play music on the computer and I'll say, "What is that? That's cool, play that song again." Then I hear stuff all the time on the radio and I try to write it down. There's a lot of stuff happening that's really nice, especially in Canada or Europe, actually. It all comes down to good songs, good singers, good sounds.

**Now that Jefferson Airplane has passed the 50-year mark, how would you describe the band's true legacy?**

We were the first band out of the San Francisco hippie scene. I remember telling these record companies: "Oh, there are all these other guys up there playing, and there's this girl Janis Joplin, and there are people up there called the Dead." We would talk about all of this stuff, and all they wanted was this band called the Airplane. So we were the ones from that scene who broke through and got the record companies interested in signing these bands from Frisco. **1**