

Harry Nilsson: 'Everything was sweeter with Harry'

Harry Nilsson was one of the 70s most brilliant singer songwriters, adored by the Beatles, yet now largely overlooked. As a new box set of his work is released, old friends Jimmy Webb and Van Dyke Parks talk to Neil McCormick about his musical legacy.



'He could cop a feel, get a groove, put it in the pocket, get down with your bad self': Harry Nilsson

By Neil McCormick

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“It was desperate times, it was intoxicated, to be sure,” recalls legendary arranger Van Dyke Parks of nights with the late, great singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson. “One time I turned to Harry and, because I come from an old Methodist camp ground, I said ‘Good for God!’, and he made a song out of that, made it up at the studio after a night on the bar stools. Isn’t that something? It was beautiful to go into a studio with a dozen musicians and nothing written down and make extemporaneous, ensemble, musical theatre. It’s a big deal, a cut above, that’s what I think.”

Nilsson is one of the forgotten stars of the Seventies. “It beggars belief that Harry has been misplaced,” according to Parks. “He was prodigious, indefatigable, astonishing for his raw intelligence and musical ability. It has become too easy now to talk about his addictive personality, nudge-nudge, wink-wink, but there was essentially a great talent. He was rock and roll but he was a romanticist, he had great elasticity, he could cop a feel, get a groove, put it in the pocket, get down

with your bad self. He creates another world. Everything was sweeter with Harry.”

Along with a new biography published this August, Sony have put together a box set that collects all 14 albums Nilsson recorded for RCA between 1967 and 1977 with over 120 extra tracks, many previously unreleased. The covers show his transition from clean shaven, neatly coiffed composer who had written songs for Frank Sinatra and Glen Campbell to scruffy, bearded slob, but the music contained within is fabulous, encompassing blissful pop, wild rock, eccentric comedy songs, extravagant, cinematic epics and intimate, philosophical ballads. John Lennon jokingly referred to Nilsson as his “favourite group” while the way he multi-tracked vocals and arranged melodies led to him being acclaimed as a one man American Beatles (indeed, all of The Beatles sang his praises and contributed to his recordings over the years).



These days, if you hear Nilsson at all, it is probably his breezy yet wistful version of Fred Neil’s ‘Everybody’s Talkin’ from classic 1969 movie Midnight Cowboy, and his lush, melodramatic take on Badfinger’s morose ballad Without You, number one for a month on both sides of the Atlantic in 1971 – both Grammy winners. Of his own songs, you probably know goofy jam Coconut (“You put de lime in de coconut, you drank ‘em bot’ up”) entirely performed in the chord of G7, and maybe One, with its haunting opening line “one is the loneliest number that

you’ll ever do.” But there was so much more to Nilsson.

“I don’t think there was anybody who could touch him as a singer,” according to his close friend, the great songwriter Jimmy Webb. “He had crazy, gymnastic effects that he could do, with a lot of

vocal layering, little choirs of himself, everything so precisely lined up. He had this grace of moving from note to note, warbling and twirling, doing little imitations of birds, and then just screaming flat out so that it would tear your wig off. There was an unpredictability and effervescence and a tremendous range. He would get way down in his chest but nobody could sing higher. One of the problems is his performances were so great, they were like mountains. He didn't just want to be remembered for singing a Badfinger song. But hey, he sang the shit out of it, man. He nailed it."

Nilsson was raised in Brooklyn by a single mother in poverty. He dropped out of high school aged 15, yet with a flair for mathematics, he bluffed his way into a job at a bank. When they discovered he had lied about his qualifications, they kept him on because he was so good with computers. He worked a night shift for seven years, while pursuing his musical career by day, not giving up his job 'til he signed to RCA. "He carried his history of poverty, it dogged him to his dying day, the fear that he might be abandoned in penury, alone," according to Parks. "But he was so damn smart. He was musically illiterate but that doesn't mean a damn thing. His tutor was his mother, who knew big band up and down, and Harry grew up singing all those evergreen tunes. He had an encyclopedic reference to music that predated Elvis."

The affection his old friends have for Nilsson is transparent. They speak repeatedly of his intelligence and generosity of spirit. "He would come bouncing into my office at 890 Broadway with a button on his lapel saying Don't Postpone Joy," recalls Webb. "He was very contagious, and people around him would all of a sudden find themselves having a great day. They might be jerked off to some improbable destination to something that they really hadn't planned to do, but he was delightfully inventive when it came to, dare I say, wasting time."

It was a social gregariousness that carried risks. The most famous photo of Nilsson may be a snap of him and Lennon being forcibly ejected from the Troubador club in LA in 1974, after rudely heckling comedians The Smothers Brothers. The pair shared an apartment with Ringo Starr and Keith Moon during Lennon's notorious "lost weekend", actually 18 months of drinking and carousing. Lennon produced Nilsson's Pussy Cats album, on which Nilsson all but ruined his glorious voice screaming into the microphone. "Lennon was a very nice man. And acute, the sharpest tool in the kit. But maybe they weren't always the best for each other," notes Park.

"Harry came in one night and he was coughing and I noticed a little blood, and I said 'What's going on, man?'" recalls Webb. "He said, 'It's my vocal chords.' I'm thinking, Jesus! I remember saying 'you guys ought to lighten up.' I think it was a kind of testosterone contest. There was some sort of challenge going on, so much screaming."



Yet while Park concedes “his voice lost the snap, crackle and pop that it had in its falsetto years,” he refutes any notion of creative decline, pointing to such later masterpieces as orchestral, philosophical gem *Salmon Falls* on 1975’s *Duit On Mon Dei*. “To me, Nilsson’s talent started to flourish in ways that it hadn’t

in the relative showbiz of the youth market.”

RCA records, sadly, didn’t feel the same way, and began to view Nilsson as an expensive indulgence. They dropped him after poor sales for *Knillsson* in 1977, an album that opens with one of his most perfectly distilled songs, romantic classic *All I Think About Is You*. “He took a big hit when he lost his RCA contract,” according to Webb. “He played it nonchalantly but I think something happened there emotionally.” One of the reasons Nilsson faded so quickly from view is that he never performed live. “He was quite shy about playing for other people,” according to Webb. “Even in social situations, he would never sit at piano and chortle away in front of a group.”

Despite his early pop hits, Nilsson was really a maverick, an offbeat talent aligned with such iconoclastic cult artists as Randy Newman and Tom Waits, and without the patronage of a major record label or the sustaining support of a live fan base, he was easily overlooked, and quickly forgotten. A final album, *Flash Harry* in 1980, was only released in the UK and Japan by Mercury records. Nilsson released very little solo music after that, drifting into film soundtracks, producing other artists, script writing and oddball business ventures. He died of heart failure in 1994, aged 52, survived by a wife and seven children.

“He said to me one time, ‘do you realise we are the only people in the world to ever get to do this?’ And I think there’s a real key to Harry in that question,” says Webb. “He was going to get to the bottom of it, to find out what he could accomplish. He did a lot of goofy stuff but the soul of the man was really described by his voice and his music. Now we can listen to his life’s works and place it in perspective and say wow, he was pretty good. I don’t think he would expect much more than that. He didn’t want to be a statue in the park, but he did want people to recognise that he created some lovely songs and some really memorable records.”