

FOOL'S GOLD



RONAN O'RAHILLY may be a little-known figure these days but his Zelig-like involvement with Radio Caroline, the Phun City festival, The MC5 and The Loving Awareness Band, as well as cult '70s movies *Universal Soldier* and *Gold* have elevated him to the status of countercultural Zelig. **SIMON MATTHEWS** investigates



approached by The Committee, a comedy troupe based in San Francisco specialising in improvised political satire. One of its members, Del Close, had been in Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters as well as being the creative force behind the light shows used by The Grateful Dead. The Committee had devised a film, *Gold* – a western type farce about some hippies who discover a gold mine and their subsequent tribulations with authority – but had run out of money to complete the venture. They thought O'Rahilly might be able to assist them. O'Rahilly saw some potential in the project and agreed to help them get the film into a state sufficient to enable it to be released. He added music from David McWilliams and Barry St John, artists on the Major Minor record label to the soundtrack (Major Minor had funded Radio Caroline in its latter years) and provided an image of Radio Caroline that was used at the start of the film. Overtaken by the need to find a follow-up film for Lazenby after he had persuaded Lazenby to drop out of the Bond franchise, O'Rahilly put work on *Gold* to one side shortly after he had acquired the 35mm negative from its director Bob Levis. He also abruptly threw himself into the '70 UK general election when he was responsible for a major campaign on the benefits of free commercial radio that aimed to ensure that a Labour government under Harold Wilson was not re-elected.

With Wilson calling the election on May 18th and polling day set for June 18th it quickly became clear that, as well as the usual parliamentary opposition, Labour would also face hostility during the election campaign from a range of UK counterculture groups.



An indication of this came on June 5th when *International Times* carried advertisements for Phun City – a major anti-establishment music and poetry festival. *International Times*, which had a not insignificant circulation of 40,000, was run by a "workers group", the most prominent of whom was Mick Farren, a musician who had recently toured North America with his group The Deviants. Farren had returned to the UK as the British representative of The White Panthers, a US libertarian/anarchist group founded by John Sinclair, the manager of The MC5, then the premier US political rock band.

When Farren and his colleagues devised Phun City, the event had two aims – to raise money toward the legal costs of an obscenity trial that *International Times* had become embroiled in and to protest in the biggest and noisiest manner possible against what was regarded by the counterculture as a conformist, pedestrian Labour government that failed to let people (especially young people) express themselves. The venue selected for the event, Ecclesden Common, was on the outskirts of Worthing, the extremely staid seaside town where Farren had been brought up and educated. Every major UK recording artist of the time was invited to perform and Farren, via his connection with John Sinclair, also secured the appearance of The MC5 as the headline act.

Perhaps inevitably the festival simply could not be organised in conjunction with Wilson's electoral timetable. Despite this Farren pressed ahead and obtained advance publicity for the event on Radio Caroline International, which broadcast for the duration of the '70 general election campaign from the Radio North Sea International ship, off the coast of Essex.

Farren continued with his plans even after the surprise Heath victory on June 18th and

the election of a Conservative government. But opposition to the festival was growing, with local MP Captain Henry Kerby raising his concerns in Parliament on July 10th and asking for a ban on all pop festivals. Four days later the local authority obtained an injunction against Phun City. This caused the various backers to withdraw and in some disarray Farren and *International Times* turned to Ronan O'Rahilly for help. O'Rahilly confirmed that he could assist and arrived on site in his double-decker election "battle bus" on July 22nd with

Phun City aimed to protest in the biggest and noisiest manner possible against a conformist, pedestrian Labour government that failed to let young people express themselves.



sufficient finance to pay for some site security and a PA system but an insistence that the bands and poets due to appear would have to perform for free. He also announced that his company Mid-Atlantic Films (recently announced as the producers of *Universal Soldier*, George Lazenby's follow-up to *On Her Majesties Secret Service*) would film the entire event thus producing something to equal *Monterey Pop* or *Woodstock* in its scope and portrayal of the cultural proclivities of contemporary UK youth.

Following O'Rahilly's guarantees the injunction was lifted and the festival opened on July 24th with the highlight being a performance from The Pretty Things. The

following day there were sets from The Pink Fairies (who appeared nude) and The Edgar Broughton Band who showcased their successful LP, *Sing Brothers Sing*, as well as their fiercely political polemic single about the 1970 general election, 'Up Yours', before the day concluded with a blistering appearance from The MC5. Events continued on July 26th with performances from Michael Chapman, Sonja Christina and Mungo Jerry. Farren and his colleagues at *International Times* had originally intended an event lasting a week. The severe shortage of funds

precluded this and also meant that Phun City was highly disorganised – sanitation was poor, there was nowhere to shelter from the constant rain, the poetry festival (fronted by Pete Brown and William Burroughs) was due to be held in an inflatable dome but the dome failed to inflate and the event was held instead in a tent used for collective acts of worship by a Christian group, from which the poets were quickly evicted (by Hells Angels!) due to their continual swearing. Once the musical events were over most people left the site and the police arrived in force the following day to disperse those who remained.

Despite its grand objectives Phun City as originally intended was neither a large-scale event nor a commercial success. It passed by without causing major disorder and the masses did not take to the streets. It lost £6,000 (the equivalent of £150,000 today) and provided no funds for *International Times*. O'Rahilly never produced a film of the event for public release, and it is not clear what became of the extensive amounts of supposedly excellent that was shot and seen by some of the participants. Perhaps he was distracted by *Universal Soldier*.



If the name Ronan O'Rahilly is remembered today it's for being the elusive figure that successfully promoted UK pirate radio for a few years in the mid-60s. Ronan did indeed take much of the credit for the success of Radio Caroline, and, at a time when the BBC provided a mere two or three hours of pop music per week (on one radio station) basked in his notoriety. He sealed his swinging credentials by running The Scene club in London's Soho and briefly managing and recording Georgie Fame. Less well known, and much less remembered, are his post-67 forays into youth culture activities and film production.

exists) saga about a young woman rejecting bourgeois conformism. Directed by Jack Cardiff, the film came with a soundtrack from Les Reed, formerly of The John Barry Seven. Although never reaching the same stratospheric levels of success as his former bandleader Reed is a somewhat overlooked figure whose work during this era included running the Chapter One label. This was an interesting subsidiary of Decca whose roster of artists contained Episode Six, Pete Brown and Graham Bond, The Woods Band and Mark Wirtz. Reed's soundtrack for *Girl On A Motorcycle*, described as "...an intriguing period mix of Hammond organ grooves, quasi-classical interludes, psychedelic passages and *avant-garde* incidentals" has since been reissued on an RPM Records CD. Commercially, the film was a fair success, and can still be seen occasionally on TV. It established O'Rahilly as a coming man in mid-60s cinema and was a factor in his becoming the manager of George Lazenby, the Australian actor chosen to succeed Sean Connery in the role of James Bond.

O'Rahilly also drank deeply from the well of the US counterculture. In late '69 he was



Riding high on the credibility that he gained from keeping Radio Caroline on the air for eight months after The Marine Offences Act came into force O'Rahilly put together a film adaptation of the Andre Pieyre de Mandagues novel *La Motorcycllette*. Released in the UK as *Girl On A Motorcycle* and in the US as *Naked Under Leather*, it starred Alain Delon and Marianne Faithfull and was a sexually explicit (and therefore heavily censored – more than one version of the film



The ingredients for this must have looked promising on paper. Based on an original script from Joe Massot (notorious for *Wonderwall* and later to write rock 'n' roll western *Zachariah*) it was directed by Cy Endfield, who had enjoyed enormous success with *Zulu*, one of the iconic UK films of the '60s. O'Rahilly dallied with the idea that the film would include Jimi Hendrix in a major acting role. Discussions to that end were held with Hendrix throughout July and August. The intention was that Hendrix and George Lazenby would play cool, hip mercenaries chilling out in London between missions in post-colonial Africa. The death of Hendrix in September, prior to any footage being shot, put an end to these plans and the film proceeded instead with Lazenby at the head of a largely male cast playing a mercenary

The intention was that Jimi Hendrix and George Lazenby would play cool, hip mercenaries. The death of Hendrix, prior to any footage being shot, put an end to these plans.

whose exposure to the counter culture ultimately deflects him from his violent profession.

The highest billed female role was taken by Germaine Greer (does this make her a Bond girl?) appearing here in hot pants and Afro. By all accounts filming on *Universal Soldier* was punctuated by much consumption of cannabis – and other substances – with the end result being an action film with little action and a bumbling incoherent plot. Part of this may have been due to the decision to build and shoot scenes around whatever music Philip Goodhand-Tait (engaged to write and perform the soundtrack) provided rather than work from a carefully honed script. Goodhand-Tait came to the film as a successful lyricist and composer who had written two chart hits for Love Affair – 'A Day Without Love' and 'Bringing On Back The Good Times' – in '68-69. Whilst *Universal Soldier* was in production, DJM records signed him and Elton John simultaneously to exploit the then vogue for singer-songwriters, with Goodhand-Tait arguably the bigger figure at this point. The soundtrack for *Universal Soldier*, although apparently excellent, was never released and the film itself, which appeared in early '71, was an expensive commercial flop.

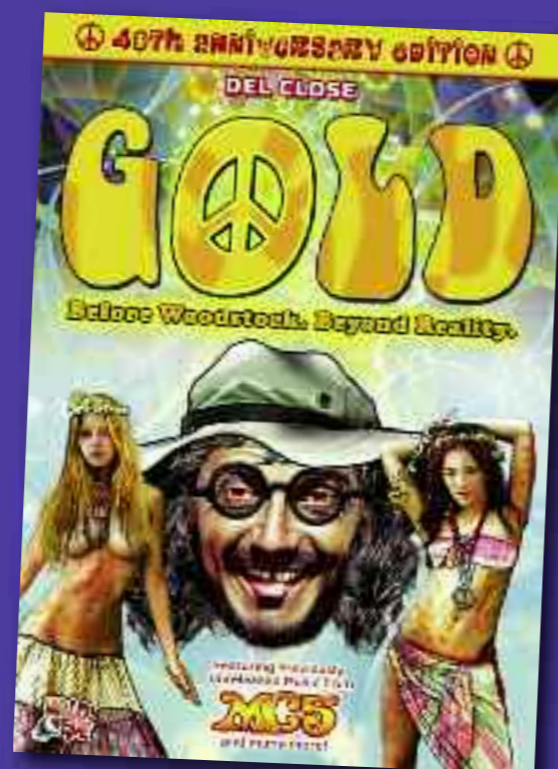
Following the failure of *Universal Soldier*



and the abrupt ending of his relationship with George Lazenby as a result, O'Rahilly returned to work on *Gold*. In late '71 he announced that he was bringing The MC5 back to the UK (they were now without a manager and a record deal in the US) so that they could provide additional material for the soundtrack of *Gold*, record a live LP (tentatively called *Live From Saturn*) and tour extensively. Between January and March '72 The MC5 appeared at various venues across the UK (including a legendary date at The Corn Exchange, Cambridge where one of their support acts was Stars, the final musical incarnation of Syd Barrett) and recorded their contribution to the soundtrack of *Gold*. The film was finally released in late '72 after difficulties with The British Board Of Film Censors who removed an unsimulated oral sex scene and also cut a section where instructions are given to the audience about how to make a petrol bomb. It failed to get a general theatrical release and was shown instead until mid-73 at two cinemas in London, one of which was The Windmill, formerly the premier UK venue for nude revues.

At the time, much like *Universal Soldier*, the film was not a success and it remains the last celluloid venture to date from O'Rahilly. Today, though, *Gold* appears to be enjoying something of a critical re-evaluation. (The negative has been re-acquired by Bob Levis, its rightful owner, remastered and released on DVD. Copies can be obtained direct from Levis by contacting him on levis4402@yahoo.com)

During the time he was working on *Phun City*, *Universal Soldier*, *Gold* and the valedictory MC5 tour, O'Rahilly was also putting together a financial package that would bring Radio Caroline back on air. This



he achieved in December '72. Money must have been scarce because all the Caroline broadcasts for the next 15 months featured the same records and jingles that the station had broadcast between '64 and '68 – a welcome cornucopia of rhythm and blues, pop, soul and psychedelia, together with much undervalued European music (Golden Earring, Earth & Fire etc), amidst the otherwise barren '70s.

In March '74, though, O'Rahilly abruptly revamped this format and launched instead his latest business venture – the Loving Awareness concept. This involved switching the Radio Caroline play lists to the type of



bland FM "progressive rock" that was endemic in the US but hardly heard at all in Europe and specifically using this material to extoll the benefits of a meditative, West Coast-style hippy culture. As part of this project O'Rahilly put together and funded a rock group that would promote this concept with their music. Formed by former members of Skip Bifferty, Arc and The Greatest Show On Earth, this was The Loving Awareness Band, an outfit about which Pete Frame of *ZigZag* would later comment "...took some time to gather momentum". Eventually unveiled to the media in simultaneous press conferences at The Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam (this event being hosted by Simon Dee) and The World Trade Centre in New York in May '76, events that were largely ignored by the UK media but were covered very extensively in Europe and also by three major US TV stations, O'Rahilly went to great lengths to proclaim in his publicity that The Loving Awareness Band were as good as the *White Album/Let It Be*-era Beatles, had the support of The Beatles and would be acclaimed – like The Beatles had been in the '60s – as the dominant musical force in western culture in the years to come. The Loving Awareness Band duly went to Palm Springs, California, where they recorded an LP that was released on the Dutch Phonogram label in September '76. Despite being broadcast continually on Radio Caroline it did not sell in significant quantities. A limited number of live appearances (a mere 17 of these were in the UK) by the group across Europe did not promote sales either.



What was striking about Loving Awareness even then was how out of kilter it was with everyday existence in the UK in the mid-70s and how musically conservative, although undeniably competent, the material performed by The Loving Awareness Band sounded when compared with what was available from other artists at that time. Whilst O'Rahilly might have had a valid point in early '74 in seeking to profit from the large numbers of young people buying album music (Yes, ELP, Led Zeppelin *et al*) rather than bothering with an increasingly sterile

UK Top 30, by late '76 entirely new audiences had developed following the pub rock mini-boom, a variety of new sounds from Europe and the first stirrings of punk. In this context it is worth remembering that both Dr Feelgood and Kraftwerk enjoyed their first commercial success in late '75 and had been joined within 12 months by Can, Patti Smith, The Ramones, The Damned, The Sex Pistols and Blondie. The delay in launching The Loving Awareness Band was a crucial error and meant that the group failed to develop any relevance to its target audience. In August '77 The Loving Awareness Band left O'Rahilly and became The Blockheads, backing band for Ian Dury, and a very different, more accessible and more successful musical entity altogether.

O'Rahilly's career seems to prove that without the resources of a major film and/or recording studio behind you it is difficult in the extreme to straddle the ever changing world of youth culture and play a dominant role within it. Still – he left an entertaining legacy. It is to be hoped that a formal soundtrack release for *Universal Soldier* might be attempted by someone in the near future. Even better would be the discovery of the rushes for the proposed film about Phun City. [\[1\]](#)

