

Time Loves CA Hero

A '70s guitar visionary and genius songwriter, **LOWELL GEORGE** of **LITTLE FEAT** is rock's lost star. **MICHAEL SIMMONS** pays tribute.

BY THE MID-1970S, BOB DYLAN AND THE ROLLING STONES were regulars at their shows. "The Stones so wanted to hang around him," chuckles friend Van Dyke Parks. "They could tell he had the Tao of the blues." Jimmy Page almost got thrown out of the Plaza Hotel in New York for blasting "my favourite American group...too loud", while "Robert Plant loved 'em," says Danny Hutton of Three Dog Night. "I remember after Robert had that accident, he was on crutches with his foot taped up, and he was at a show! I said, What are you doing here? He said 'I wouldn't miss this for anything!'"

"They" are Little Feat and "he" was their leader, Lowell George. By 1979, Lowell would be dead of a combination of cocaine, booze and over-the-counter medicines, the proverbial "jazz heart attack". He left behind a wife, four kids and Little Feat, "a band of assassins" as top fan Jackson Browne calls them, who blended rock, blues, country, soul, funk, jazz and New Orleans with fierce experimentation. Lowell was lead singer, possessed of unequalled honey-and-hot-sauce soul pipes. In a holy trinity of electric slide guitarists, alongside Duane Allman and Ry Cooder, he wrote/co-wrote some of the most memorable songs of the 1970s (Willin', Truck Stop Girl, Sailin' Shoes, Dixie Chicken, Easy To Slip) for a band in a parallel universe of their own design.

"We had an expression: *droit gauche*," explains Van Dyke Parks. "To do what was right, might take a left turn. [Lowell] did that in his work." It also explains the duality of an artist who desired commercial acceptance, but strictly on his terms, rendering success elusive and allowing Little Feat, the band he toiled with for a decade, to disintegrate as they reached rock stardom. Years after his death, his bandmates consulted a psychic who'd never heard of George. Contacted in the afterlife, Lowell was asked what led to his death. The droll wit of his answer gave it credence: "I fucked up."

Portentously, Lowell arrived on Friday the 13th of April 1945, the last of two sons to Willard and Florence George. Pal Martin Kibbee cracked that "He was born under a bad sign—the Hollywood sign." His father Willard was "furrrier to the stars" and died when his youngest son was 10. Parks recalls the only photo of Lowell's dad he ever saw: Willard and W.C. Fields standing next to a Stutz Bearcat covered with freshly shot mallards. A bright, mischievous, chubby kid with an instinct for music, as a nipper he and older brother Hampton appeared on a televised talent show, duetting on a >



The eyes have it: Lowell George, NBC Studios, Burbank, California, 1976.



Little Foot: Orient Express with Peter Walker (far left) and Lowell, bare-foot with sitar.

The Standells (1966's *Dirty Water*), whose fans didn't cotton to Lowell's girth and sitar mini-set. In November 1968, Frank Zappa hired George as second guitarist and singer for the Mothers Of Invention. He's credited on *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* – on *Didja Get Any Onya?* he even vocally mimics a saxophone – and co-produced *Permanent Damage* by The GTOs, the Zappa-sponsored groupie group. When the dope-averse Zappa heard a new Lowell song, *Willin'*, with its chorus of “weed, whites, and wine”, he advised its composer to start his own band. George had befriended musician Russ Titelman at the Kinnara School. Titelman became part of producer Jack Nitzsche's inner circle and was hired to contribute to the soundtrack for Mick Jagger's film debut in *Performance*. For years it has been rumoured that Lowell played slide on *Memo From Turner*, despite Ry Cooder's credit. Titelman confirms the slide was Ry's; Lowell played “Indian stuff” on the score's instrumentals. Titelman was crucial when they acted on Frank Zappa's advice.

BORN IN TEXAS, BILL PAYNE SPENT HIS teens in Santa Maria, California surfing and practising piano, on his way to becoming one of the best keyboardists in rock. Like many smart young musicians, he wanted to be a Mother. He got no further than Lowell George in June '69.

Invited to George's home, he was greeted by a gorgeous blonde and Erik Satie music.

“She says, ‘You must be Bill. Lowell'll be back in four or five hours. Make yourself at home.’ I look at his record collection which had Lenny Bruce, *Om* by John Coltrane, The Fugs, the Smithsonian collection of blues. I'm thinkin', Whoever this guy is, I can identify with him.”

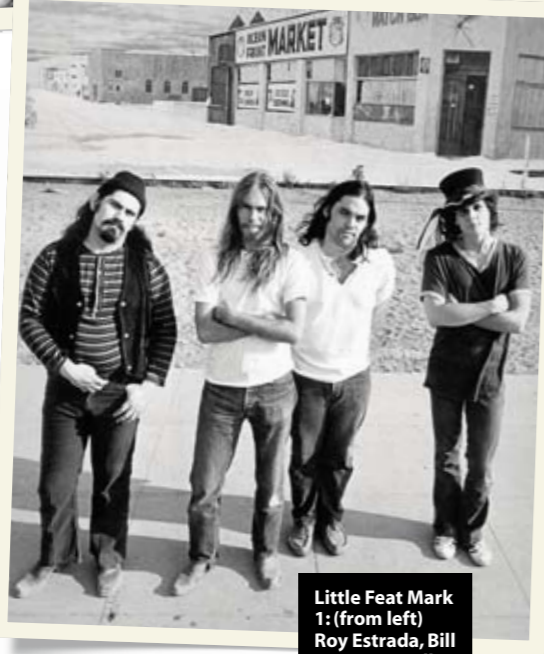
Thus began an extraordinary partnership. A remark Mothers drummer Jimmy Carl Black made about Lowell's lower paws led to Little Feat, the “a”

added in a Beatles homage. Richie Hayward joined on drums, as did former Mother Roy Estrada on bass. While writing and rehearsing, the only rule was that the music had no limits, but the template was The Band: lots of chops but no show-offs, literate lyrics set to arresting melodies. “*Big Pink* had such a big impact,” says future producer Ted Templeman. Yet Feats music certainly wasn't *Big Pink* redux.

“We had a year where we were writing, including an instrumental called *Dance Of The Nubile Virgin Slaves*,” laughs Payne. “We played this material for Ahmet Ertegun and he looked at us: ‘Too diverse, boys.’ So we went back to the drawing board and [wrote] *Brides Of Jesus*, *Crazy Captain Gunboat Willie*, and *Hamburger Midnight* – which were totally off the wall, so you can only imagine how eclectic and weird the first shit was.”

They had one accessible classic: *Willin'*. “That was one of the calling cards with record companies,” Lowell would note. Regarded by many as the truck-driving anthem, it was a perfect country song. Recorded by Johnny Darrell and Seatrain before the Feats' first album was even released, there are over a hundred covers, including those by Linda Ronstadt, Dylan, Steve Earle, and The Byrds.

Titelman was knocked out: “I said to Lowell, Let's go see [A&R chief] Lenny Waronker at Warner Bros Records. I'll be your producer.” George brought an acoustic and Payne played the piano in Waronker's office, performing nine songs. Waronker simply said, “OK, go upstairs and talk to Mo.” Mo Ostin was president of Warners, a hip corporate label with Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Randy Newman and the Grateful Dead on



Little Feat Mark 1: (from left) Roy Estrada, Bill Payne, Lowell, Richie Hayward.

◀ single oversized harmonica. After picking at his brother's flamenco guitar at age 11, he got a Fender Stratocaster that would remain his axe of choice.

He attended Hollywood High School, along with future co-writer Kibbee, future Feats member Paul Barrere and future wife Elizabeth, who notes George always seemed headed in his own direction: “Lowell was sitting at a table facing out on the rest of the class. I don't know if that was because he was being segregated for being unruly, but that was the first time I met him.”

In the marching band he played flute, for portability. “One occasion he turned the chart upside down and played that,” says Kibbee. “It sounded great.” Adopting the beatnik persona of the early '60s, he studied sax and mastered the shakuhachi, a Japanese wooden flute known for its difficulty and became a brown belt in a martial art (which art is disputed), a fact he'd reveal for effect.

While attending college in autumn 1963, he got a job working nights at a gas station where he gleaned romantic notions about the life of the long-distance trucker. He later credited *Willin'* and *Truck Stop Girl*, two of Little Feat's earliest compositions, to this time. He idolised Howlin' Wolf and told of a backstage meeting, babbling on to Wolf about how much his music meant to him. The gruff bluesman growled at the kid: “Well, fuck you!” This made George love Wolf even more and his respect for musicians increased if they were “versed in the ways of Chester Burnett”.

George and Kibbee, singer/guitar and bass respectively, formed a rock band in 1965, The Factory. Warren Klein played lead guitar while Lowell stuck to rhythm. The latter understood his function as rhythm player was to complement the song, prefiguring his tasteful lead playing. Through an ad in the *LA Free Press* – “Drummer Wanted. Must Be Freaky” – they found propulsive percussionist Richie Hayward. “Richie was unbelievable,” says Kibbee. By 1967, Lowell was studying sitar. Ravi Shankar had opened the Kinnara School of Indian Music in LA and his students included Georges Lowell and Harrison, and with respected acoustic guitarist Peter Walker, Lowell joined proto-world band Orient Express. But his need to work led to a two-month stint with one-trick garage ponies



On Sunset Strip: Little Feat at the Whisky A Go-Go, 1972: (clockwise from left) Paul Barrere, Lowell, Kenny Gradney, Bill Payne, Sam Clayton and Barrere, Richie Hayward.



“Drugs quietened the demons. With proper care he'd still be here.”

the roster. Little Feat had a deal. Recording began in mid-1970 with Titelman producing: “Basically I thought the direction should be like a Band record. Sophisticated but rootsy-sounding at the same time.”

An accident with a model airplane before recording began damaged George's left hand and numbed two fingers on his right. He had no choice but to play slide. With the aid of a compressor to add sustain, he developed his signature sound: a few searing notes that could mimic a screaming saxophone or a long, piercing single note that could rattle one's bones. Instead of an ordinary glass slide, he decided to use an auto mechanic's socket wrench.

To describe Little Feat's sound Van Dyke Parks came up with *Cartoon Consciousness*, nailing the songs' visual synesthesia and surreal wit. A *Lowellism* – “cracked mosaic” – referred to the fractured structure of Feat's melodies and rhythms, created by shifts during band jams and George's composition process of hacking up tapes of demos and splicing them back together. “I use tape like someone would use manuscript paper,” he said. A primitive drum machine, the DoncaMatic, also encouraged herky-jerky temporal variations.

1971's eponymous debut received ecstatic reviews. In *Rock* magazine, Bud Scoppa pointed out that “there's something inexplicably strange and off-centre about it”, and dubbed it “a genre masterpiece – in a genre I still can't quite place.” George was averse to direction during the recording and insistent on a perfectionism that wasn't in the budget, resulting in a rupture between him and Titelman. “I was concerned fiscally about it and responsible for it,” says Titelman today. “Lowell wanted to redo a bunch of things.” And yet he doesn't hesitate to add, “But he was so brilliant.”

The debut sold only 11,000 copies. George found an ally at Warners who shared his disdain for authority – Van Dyke Parks, who was director of Audiovisual Services. “Lowell approached me when I was a person of pivotal interest to his continuing at Warner Bros, because he and his group had been dropped from the label.”

Lowell had three young sons to support: two of his own with different women and Elizabeth's son from her first marriage. He added to

Little Feat's paltry pay by becoming a session guitarist and producer. He'd sideman for Bonnie Raitt, Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne, Carly Simon, Harry Nilsson, John Sebastian, James Taylor, The Meters, Etta James and jazz man Chico Hamilton, and produce Raitt and the Grateful Dead. He, Payne and Hayward all played on John Cale's *Paris 1919*, George's lush slide phrasing adding to the album's orchestral wash. “It's very subtly done,” reflects Cale. “It fits right in. It's very warm and elegant. What he plays on *Andalucia* is gorgeous.”

Lowell also worked with Parks on his avant-calypto *Discover America*. At one session, Japanese group Happy End visited to ask Parks if he'd produce them. He declined, due to commitments, so an aide opened a briefcase full of \$100 bills. As Parks told Bud Scoppa, Lowell “sidled up to the open case, and while caressing it, uttered his most famous words: ‘I think we can make music out of this!’” Lowell and Van Dyke wrote *Sayonara America* for the group, which became a Top 10 hit in Japan. By working with George, Parks ensured his friend's visibility at the label. Furthermore, when they concocted the song *Sailin' Shoes* for *Discover America*, Parks delayed the release so Lowell could debut it with Little Feat. With staff producer Ted Templeman attached, Warners OK'd another album.

Sailin' Shoes, released February 1972, was as good as the first, maybe better. The album cover was the first by surrealist painter Neon Park: a cake with the legs of a dame, riding a swing with one shoe sailin' off her petite foot, a slice cut from the cake suggesting feminine nether-region; Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* watching from afar. The fine art embodiment of *Cartoon Consciousness*, Neon's work graced every Feats album until his death in 1993. ➤



Hamburger midnight: Lowell (centre) with Linda Ronstadt, Paul Barrere (far left) and friends at the Roxy, Sunset Strip, Los Angeles, early '70s.

◀ Yet despite rave reviews, *Sailin' Shoes* only sold a couple thousand more than the debut.

Times were tough. Estrada joined Captain Beefheart And His Magic Band for financial stability, one of the funniest rock'n'roll in-jokes, given Beefheart's uncommercial status. Yet as one door closed, three opened.

Gossip of John Sebastian and Phil Everly joining Little Feat came to naught, and Paul Barrere was hired to play second guitar, freeing George to concentrate on singing and lead. Bassist Kenny Gradney and percussionist Sam Clayton joined from Delaney & Bonnie, bringing the polyrhythms of their New Orleans home to the band as the quirky headneck quartet became a monster N'awlins funk sextet. With George producing, *Dixie Chicken* flew the coop in January '73 to ecstatic reviews, a masterpiece of grease (many thought Little Feat were a Southern band), redolent of tube tops, hot pants, cocaine, Quaaludes, and women of ill repute doin' their deeds in a mythical Memphis.

Warners convinced the band to hype the record by arriving at radio stations, dressed as waiters, with Lowell in a chicken suit, distributing boxes of fried chicken. Barrere wore the chicken head – Lowell refused – and dubbed the stunt “bullshit”. *Dixie Chicken* doubled *Sailin' Shoes* sales, but still the band briefly split. The LPs were expensive to record, cash reward was minimal, relations strained. “Everybody sort of went their own way and came to realise the grass is always greener – supposedly,” George told a DJ. “We’re not Exxon, I’ll tell ya, in terms of well-oiled. I’m not really after that.”

DESPITE THE STRIFE, they became the band other musicians pointed to as the model of artistic prowess and integrity. “People go ‘Are you a Stones person or Beatles person?’” says Ronstadt. “I’m a Little Feat person.”

“Lowell was among the greatest musicians I ever met,” says Bonnie Raitt. “He’s up there with Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan.” The Feats Auxiliary formed around the band and they were called on for sessions and sit-ins: Ronstadt, Raitt, Browne, Hutton, Emmylou Harris, Bonnie Bramlett, Fred Tackett, Valerie Carter, J.D. Souther, and Nicolette Larson.

Ronstadt was knocked out when she first saw Little Feat, soon after *Dixie Chicken*'s release, at a club in Atlanta. “Lowell was singin’ and I went, OHHHH GAAAAWD. He was *hellaciously* good.” Lowell accompanied Ronstadt and Browne on a bus tour in 1973 while the Feats were on a break. In the DC area, Linda and Lowell spent time with Emmylou, who was living there after the death of Gram Parsons. Ronstadt and George collaborated at Blue Seas Recording in Hunt Valley, Maryland. It was in this environment that she later saw a side to Lowell that would be exacerbated by time and cocaine: his epic no-sleep, nine-day studio binges. Ronstadt says it was more than drugs. “My deepest suspicion is bipolar disorder. Drugs are a way to quiet the demons. With the proper medication we’d still have him around.”

Referring to their next – and fourth – album, Barrere noted that “*Feats Don’t Fail Me Now* was a literal title, because Lowell got us all back together again and said, ‘OK, we’re gonna sink or swim.’” Cheaper than LA’s studios, Little Feat block-booked Blue Seas for spring/summer 1974 and band and family – including a pregnant Liz George – decamped to Maryland. On the Browne/Ronstadt

The Big Deal: Lowell and Sam Clayton mock Warner Bros Mo Ostin and Feat lawyer John Frankenheimer, December 19, 1975.



Feat, live '77 with Auxiliary Bonnie Raitt (second from left), Emmylou Harris and (far right) Jesse Winchester.

"He was in over his head, he knew it, but he could not pull away."



1976 tour programme.

tour, “he met a promoter in DC who’d done Linda and I at the Lisner Auditorium saying, ‘You could play around here every weekend, people are crazy about you,’” recalls Jackson Browne. The Lisner became a band favourite and the DC/Baltimore/Virginia region became their turf. They’d record all week and gig on the weekends at Lisner or small colleges.

Another blessing came during their time back east: Inara George was born on July 4, 1974. The period is recalled as being Edenic by the oft-fractious band.

For these sessions, Lowell encouraged the others to contribute material. “What I really tried to do was get a group effort,” he said later. “Mostly because it’s time for all those guys to have their talent exhibited.” Payne conjured Oh Atlanta, one of the catchiest tunes in the band’s repertoire. Like its predecessor, *Feats Don’t...* is a good-time party album but with less cartoony deviance. One could say it was *commercial*. Perhaps that’s why it sold almost 150,000 copies upon release.

IN JANUARY 1975, WARNERS SENT THE BAND on a package tour to Europe with the Doobie Brothers. North London’s Rainbow broke the band in the UK. Lowell was pleasantly shocked when the audience went wild: “It’s Sunday afternoon. Why aren’t you home in bed?” Warners president Joe Smith described the Feats reception for Rolling Stone: “The people stood and just kept screaming.”

The band returned to the States to record their fifth album, but George’s behaviour was deteriorating. Despite earlier encouragement, he was now griping about Payne and Barrere’s material. Prone to rehearsal no-shows, or conversely fixated on vocal re-takes, he was driving everyone batty. “He was like a dog chasin’ its tail,” says Payne. “I don’t think it should’ve taken that much time or money to make these records. I was pissed off by the idea of being excessive on every level. Lowell was in over his head. He knew it and yet he couldn’t pull himself away.”

As the group became more popular, Lowell became unhappier. Tired of their line-up, he retreated into himself instead of acting on his instincts; self-destruction through indecision. “He didn’t think the band was as virtuosic as other [musicians],” says friend Fred Tackett. George and Payne’s personalities were no longer compatible – a notion the ➤

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Lowell, Topanga Beach, late '70s: "He was surf fishing, the big game fisherman and this is what he caught," says Elizabeth George. "I thought it was perfect." (Below) with Inara George, 1979.



latter endorses. Whether Lowell's increasing chemical use was responsible is up for debate; his expansive, eccentric genius is not. "I thought of him as bigger than this world creatively," says confidante Joan Turner. "He was so brilliant, that to be in the milieu he was in, he had to mitigate his creativity."

For the next album, *The Last Record Album*, Lowell co-wrote *Mercenary Territory* with Elizabeth (and Richie Hayward), reflecting personal grief. "That was from a letter I wrote to him in a moment of fury and frustration," says Liz. "It's self-explanatory. 'My nights turn into your mornings...' and this isn't so cool and I'm not the only parent here." Despite trouble in the grooves, *The Last...* was solid, and sold a healthy 300,000 copies. Warners re-signed them in December '75 for a million, a contract known as The Big Deal. "Everyone bought a house," laughs Barrere. The agreement called for three Feats LPs and a Lowell George album.

When it came to record the sixth Feats album, Payne and Barrere asked Ted Templeman to produce. "They wanted somebody to look at it objectively," he says. If any other band had made *Time Loves A Hero*, it would be considered first-rate, but it's bereft of Lowell's humour, and — most noticeably — of George himself. One source of contention was *Day At The Dog Races*, a fusion instrumental developed at rehearsals when the erstwhile leader couldn't be found.

"His eyes were black, his mouth was open but he couldn't speak."

"Lowell came in and said, 'What are you guys? Fucking Weather Report?'" says Templeman. (When the song was performed live, George would stroll off-stage.) An apathetic George had to be cajoled. When he refused to get out of bed to record a guitar solo, Templeman called Raitt. "Bonnie played the solo and kicked it. [Then] Lowell came down in his pyjamas and really played it." The album sold well in the States and made the Top 10 in the UK, but Feats fans were mystified by Lowell's low profile.

And yet the next record, *Waiting For Columbus*, produced by George, was Little Feat at their finest. They recorded shows in August '77 at the Lisner in DC and the Rainbow in London, the sites of their most devoted audiences for a live album, an announcer leading the crowd in the chant: "F! E! A! T!" as Lowell whacks his cowbell, Paul scrapes his strings, Richie and Sam start pounding. Payne said "it raised the hair on my arms" the first time he heard it. Joined by the Tower Of Power horns, all of Little Feat's attributes are here: unequalled musicianship, big vocals and group harmonies, killer tunes, surreal wit. The album went gold and most thought of it as a giant step instead of a last gasp. Among those impressed were the Grateful Dead who hired Lowell George to produce 1978's *Shakedown Street*.

"But," says that band's publicist Dennis McNally, "the Dead were coked out and so was he." After one all-nighter, Lowell gave drummer Mickey Hart his two cents about the conga sound on a Hart solo album: "It sucked." Hart started to choke a hyperventilating Lowell, whose brown belt failed him against Hart's black belt.

In the last year of his life, George toured and began a new Little Feat album. He also worked on the solo album mandated by The Big Deal, and a solo tour. His producer status and passive/aggressive see-sawing finally drove Payne over the edge. "He let me tell him over a two-day period, one on one, what I thought about him. How much I loved the guy. How much I appreciated his being a mentor to me. Where I thought he was fucking up. How he was hurting us. Hurting himself." Little Feat had finally broken up.

Thanks I'll Eat It Here, Lowell George's solo album, was finally released in April 1979, with 45 musicians credited on a sprawling project that took three years. He sings his ass off and the songs range from very good to sublime, but with only half originals, it wasn't the anticipated masterwork. No small featnote is his cover of Rickie Lee Jones' *Easy Money*. "Lowell is responsible for bringing her to Warners' attention," says Templeman. Jones' eponymous debut was released in March 1979 and Chuck E.'s *In Love* shot up the charts.

Elizabeth George, Corbis

"The solo album, he thought, was all radio songs, which they turned out not to be at all," says friend/guitarist Fred Tackett. For the solo tour he turned to Tackett who recommended Eddie Zip and Sweet Magnolia, "New Orleans guys that I played with as a kicks band. Lowell said, 'Let's hire the whole band.'"

In an interview prior to the tour, George was asked about reports that he'd "turned moody, reclusive".

"That's rock poop," he replied. Of Little Feat's status, he said, "I'm not really worried about it... groups break up and get back together all the time. Nothing is permanent."

But Payne and Barrere were already planning their own band. A decade had passed since Billy Payne inspected Lowell's record collection: "My last meeting with him, he drove up on his motorcycle to my house. His eyes were as black as saucers. He had his mouth open but he couldn't say anything. He got back on his bike, drove away. That's the last I ever saw him."

With Tackett on guitar, Zip on Hammond B3, Don Heffington on drums, and five others plus crew and Elizabeth and Inara, Lowell hit the road on June 15 for a three-week tour, playing a combo of *Thanks I'll Eat It Here* and Little Feat tunes.

"He was round like a ball," says Tackett. "Everyone was concerned. He'd had mononucleosis and then he got bronchitis." Persevering with pharmacological aid, on June 28 he returned to the Lisner in DC, performing a 12-tune set of chug and blister. The crowd was rabid. The last song was a churning second-line Spanish Moon: "Don't take long/To wake up ruined."

Tackett says Lowell phoned Richie Hayward, Kenny Gradney and Sam Clayton after the show and assured them they'd reform Little Feat when he returned to LA. "After the gig we went to a party at somebody's house, doin' what musicians do," drummer Heffington recalls. Around 7am, the band headed back to the Twin Bridges Marriott Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. Lowell went to sleep around 8am, but had trouble breathing. Elizabeth and road manager Gene Vano rolled him over and his breathing briefly returned to normal. And then he died.

"That was the longest day," recalls Tackett. "We sat in the bar for hours and you'd look at your watch and it had only been 10 minutes." The cops swept the hotel room, but found nothing and the death was ruled a heart attack. Lowell had been doing blow, drinking and smoking heavily, but Liz maintains he was taking self-prescribed quantities of over-the-counter cold medications to quell his flu and that this — in combination with the alcohol — is what killed him.

When he discovered there was no insurance for Elizabeth and the kids, Payne suggested a tribute concert. Held on August 4, 1979 at the LA Forum for a sold-out crowd of over 20,000 including the Governor of California, it starred Little Feat with Ronstadt, Raitt,

"It's A Weirid Trip!"

Feat's finest. By The Black Crowes' Chris Robinson.

Little Feat

(Warner Bros, 1971)

"If you're a casual Little Feat fan then this first album sometimes falls through the cracks. It's a real rock'n'roll record, a little less smooth than the albums that followed, and maybe a little bit more country, but you can hear them starting to find their own Little Feat language. Willin' also sets the standard for the tunes they'd go on to write, while *Bride Of Jesus* is just loaded in terms of imagery and mood. *Snakes On Everything* is another great track, it's psychedelic without being psychedelia *per se*. Overall, the album sets Little Feat up as outsiders, especially in LA. To me, the album's up there with The Band's *Music From Big Pink*."

Sailin' Shoes

(Warner Bros, 1972)

"Little Feat moved on in terms of composition and musicianship with this album. In fact, by the time they reached *Sailin' Shoes* I would be hard pushed to think of a group from that era — other than maybe Delaney & Bonnie — who were as good as them musically speaking. On this album, Lowell George really comes into his own too as a lyricist. His songwriting gets more personal and you sense he's writing about his own loneliness. The album's sleeve, by Neon Park, is all about Little Feat creating their own world and identity. It's not like they're creating a corporate brand, it's more of a weird trip."

Dixie Chicken

(Warner Bros, 1973)

"This is their most popular album and the title track alone is everything that you love about rock'n'roll. It's Southern-sounding and it's warm. Lowell is one of the most unique voices in American music, mostly because of his lyricism, which cuts deep. *Fat Man In The Bath Tub* is a good example. Is that how he really saw himself? That's a blues song, for sure! I hear Robert Johnson in that, but it's matter of fact at the same time. That's part of Lowell's charm. *Dixie Chicken* is still a rough-edged record. It also proves Steely Dan — much as I like them — fucked a lot of things up by taking this kind of sound and cleaning it up. Little Feat still sounded dirty at this point."

Feats Don't Fail Me Now

(Warner Brothers, 1974)

"When I started singing, people would bring up names like Paul Rodgers or Terry Reid. Lowell's was another so I went out and bought this album to see what they were talking about. At the time it didn't hit me because I was into music that was more jagged and I didn't smoke a lot of weed. Then things changed, I got the first album and worked my way back to this. The production is incredible, rich, velvety and funky. To a lot of people this is the pinnacle of a great band." *As told to Phil Alexander*

Browne, Harris, Larson. At the end, the cast blasted through Dixie Chicken while linking arms for the Feats' trademark high-kicks. Afterwards, recounts Jackson Browne, "Barrere broke into this spontaneous version of [the Clovers 1955 hit] *Devil Or Angel* in the backstage showers. Everyone was completely destroyed over his passing, but Paul was giving voice to the fact that Lowell was infuriating."

The cover of the August 9 Rolling Stone featured America's new sweetheart, Rickie Lee Jones. Above the logo read "LOWELL GEORGE 1945-1979". Then there was the posthumous album *Down On The Farm*. Lowell wrote or co-wrote five of the nine songs, including the ravishing co-pen *Be One Now*, sporting his aching vocal and proof of what was evident on the final tour: Lowell George was getting even better.

Payne, Hayward, Barrere, Gradney and Clayton initially scattered but reformed as Little Feat in 1988 with Tackett on guitar and Craig Fuller — later Shaun Murphy — on vocals. Now a sextet with Tackett, they continue to record and tour. "We still honour Lowell by playin' his songs," says Payne. "It was something I wrestled with in '88. We were in competition not only with every-

body else, but with ourselves. In 1989, we played London and we walked on-stage and these people had their arms crossed, scowls on their faces and it was like, 'All right, you're Little Feat? Prove it.'" The band won a 25-minute ovation.

Lowell George is still not a household name. When Rolling Stone listed their 100 Greatest Guitarists Of All Time, he was absent. Yet no night passes in which Willin' isn't sung, be it by a bar band or the Black Crowes. "Lowell's music is so heartbreakingly personal," says Luther Dickinson of the Crowes and North Mississippi Allstars. "He made the blues his own." In 2009, Lowell was given the President's Award from the Americana Music Association, a posthumous nod bestowed on Gram Parsons, Townes Van Zandt and Jerry Garcia.

"When you look at Lowell George, the reason he's still being discussed is because he took the wrong turn whenever he could, if it meant he might find something out," muses Van Dyke Parks. "He was a man of depth and understanding, a troubled mind seeking peace publicly. We all want a happy ending [but] it's very hard to find one in a man so overlooked as he is. I still miss him very much."

Parks pauses and notes a contradiction. After all, here we are still discussing Lowell 31 years after his death... "How can I miss him," Van Dyke guffaws, "when he won't go away?"

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