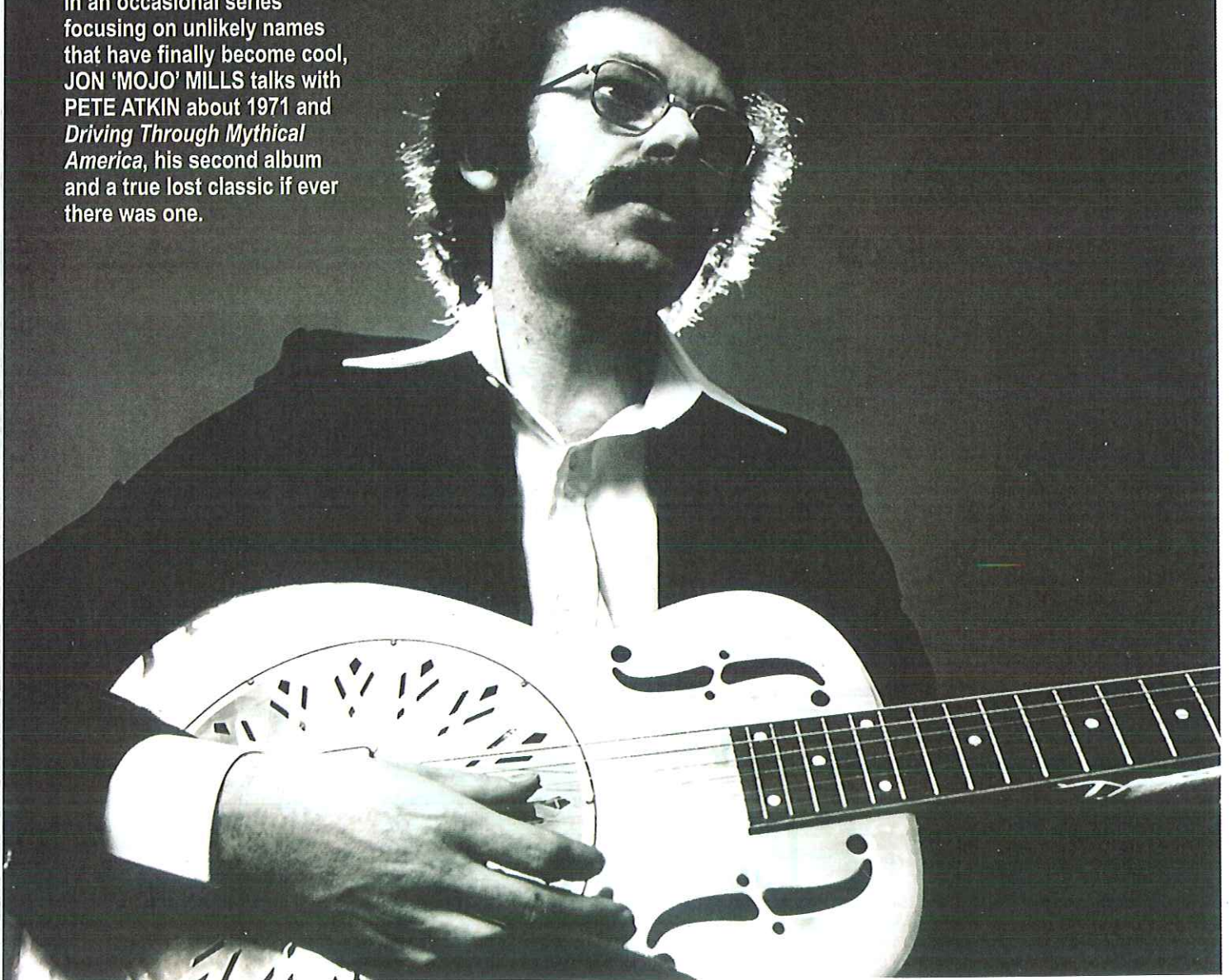


# TOO COOL TO BE SQUARE

In an occasional series focusing on unlikely names that have finally become cool, JON 'MOJO' MILLS talks with PETE ATKIN about 1971 and *Driving Through Mythical America*, his second album and a true lost classic if ever there was one.



Even today there are a number of artists that don't want to fit in the box. Their choice of clothing and general demeanour may not equate to everybody's ideal notion of rock star. When guitars are loud they favour the piano, when hair is generally worn long, they wear it short. Indeed, these are the ladies and gents and singers and groups that by default don't really want to conform. Perhaps there's more of a place for them in 2009 with the ironic "nerdy cool" brigade, but in 1970 if you didn't conform you just weren't the norm!

Pete Atkin is one such character – a rather nerdish, bespectacled, gifted academic who teamed up with fellow student Clive James (yes, that one) to write skittish songs whilst at Cambridge University in the mid-60s. As members of The Cambridge Footlights the pair rubbed shoulders with many future luminaries, including *The Monty Python* boys, and entertained like-minded people with their wit, wisdom and humour. By 1970, with James' challenging lyrics and Atkin's melodies, which

borrowed liberally from show tunes, jazz, folk and rock, the unlikely duo recorded debut album *Beware Of The Beautiful Stranger* for Fontana. Kenny Everett at Radio One loved it and gave the opening track plenty of airplay, but the record buying public were less forthcoming.

1971 gave birth to a second album *Driving Through Mythical America*, which this writer rates as their best due to its timeless quality, and conversely how well it sits in with time pieces *Forever Changes*, *Happy Sad* and *Bryter Later*. The wealth of UK session heavies, primarily consisting of members of Blue Mink and star players like Chris Spedding, gave the literary lyrics and Atkin's doleful vocals a dose of incredibly subtle hipness. In fact, in 2009 this might just sound like the "coolest record ever" ticking all of the right boxes for bearded crate diggers to have an epiphany... funky drumming, tick; far out fuzzy guitar parts, tick; quintessentially mannered English vocals, tick; a touch of the baroque, tick; a cinematic feel, tick... but who really got it other than music journos at the time of its release? Very few.

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So what does the inimitable Pete Atkin have to say about the assumption of being "too cool to be square"?

"I think I always felt I was uncool, or at least I never felt that I was actually cool – a subtle but important distinction, if such distinctions can ever be said to be important. In practice 'trendy' or 'untrendy' is probably the distinction we would have made at the time, although I guess that's not really the same thing. Maybe the difference is that 'trendiness' is something you can aspire to, while 'cool' is something you either have or don't. You can certainly be both 'trendy' and 'uncool', as many surviving photos of people from the late '60s and early '70s bear witness.

"Either way, if I was ever going to be thought of as 'cool' it was going to have to be via a route other than fashion. As one of the ones who was not naturally sporty at school, I used to hope to ingratiate myself with my peers and avoid being beaten up by the sporty ones by a reputation for 'mucking about' with pop music. ('Pop music' in the early '60s was an all-embracing term that had not yet separated off

from rock 'n' roll and all the sub-categories which now have their own distinct definitions).

"Even by the time I started recording in '70 I never felt completely comfortable with the world of fashionable image. I'm sure I wished I was trendy, but I had no idea of how to do anything about it. Don Paul, my producer at Essex Music, made some attempts to trendy me up when they got a release deal for my first recordings. He sent me to a smart hairdressers' in Beauchamp Place near Harrods who wanted to give me an afro (now *there* would have been some good pics). I persuaded them not to, but since I didn't have any idea at all of what I *did* want him to do, I ended up with a haircut pretty much exactly the same as I could have got from my usual local joint for a tenth of the pre-decimal price.

"It was Don, too, who lent me the velvet suit for the cover shoot for that first album, *Beware Of The Beautiful Stranger* – the one with me leaning against the tree with the gypsy caravan in the background and the out-of-focus girl sitting on its step (it's her hairdresser who was credited on the sleeve, by the way, not mine). It was a Mr. Fish suit, which apparently was pretty damn smart. Don tells me he still has it. It would be fun to think its history might make a fortune for him on Ebay, but I don't think he's holding his breath on that.

"So, no, I wasn't really aiming at anything at all in the way of an image, I'm afraid. I certainly wasn't trying to look like my old geography teacher, which would have been even more bizarre and have consigned me to the uncool bin for ever. Any resemblance to anyone else's geography teacher is entirely unintentional."

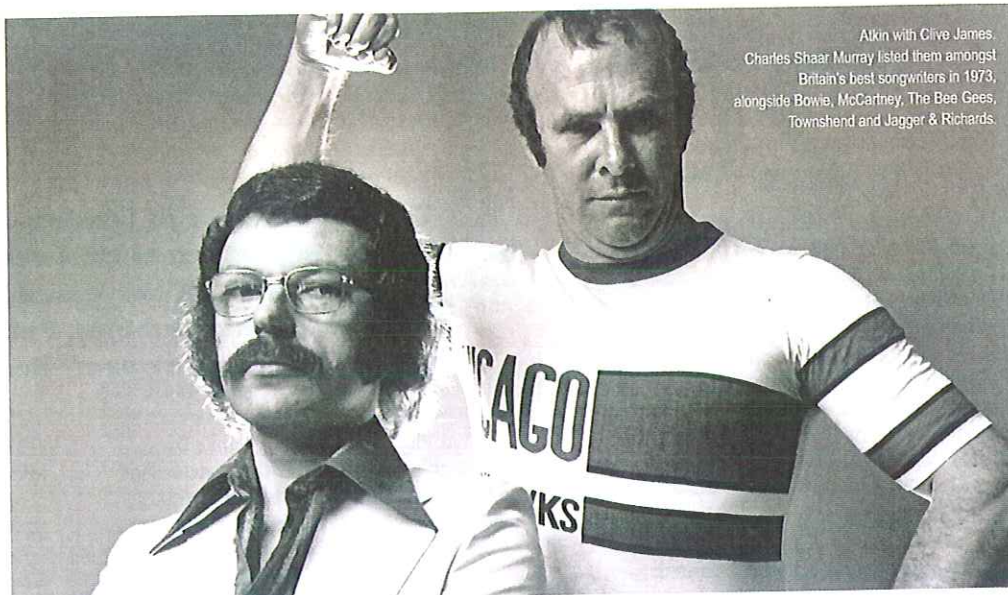
What about that longer haired, less boutique conscious year 1971? How did Pete perceive himself then?

"Image unquestionably mattered in '71, but it didn't seem to matter quite so much as it does now. I think I'd managed to convince myself that if the music was successful, then the image thing wouldn't matter much at all. Such an attitude these days would seem almost laughably irresponsible. Of course, it's always possible that I'm simply raising something I couldn't help about myself into a principle which I then congratulate myself on practising.

"What I wanted, I suppose, was enough success to allow me to go on making music for a living. And at the start back then that meant writing. I had always enjoyed performing (the years have proved that the show-off gene is dominant and persistent) but the ambition originally was that Clive and I would make a living from writing songs. That's why I started out by approaching publishers rather than record companies. And that's how it came to be that it was a publisher (Essex Music) who funded the demos that ended up being released commercially as *Beware Of The Beautiful Stranger*."

Was his music beyond fashion?

"Musically, I always assumed (naively, I now realise) that the more original my stuff was, the more likely its success. And more than that, I thought that it would always be a mistake to set out deliberately to imitate the people I admired most. I'd be sure to be caught out. So if I came up with an idea that sounded to me a bit like something else, I'd always change it to avoid the accusation of having nicked it. In practice, of course, there's no way I could ever have sounded like Elvis or The Band or The Mamas & The Papas or Buddy Holly or The Beach Boys or any of the great Motown artists, so I was probably once again trying to make a virtue out



Atkin with Clive James. Charles Shaar Murray listed them amongst Britain's best songwriters in 1973, alongside Bowie, McCartney, The Bee Gees, Townshend and Jagger & Richards.

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of the inevitable, and making myself sound just too different for big commercial success."

Did he even want to be contemporary?

"It's possible, I suppose, that if I had indeed tried to make my songs and the recordings more self-consciously contemporary – trendy at the time – then they might sound more dated now than they perhaps do. I don't know. That's not really for me to say."

But it is something that *Shindig!* can clarify. And this does prove the point that Pete, was indeed, "too cool to be square". Trying too hard, today and 40 years ago, would lead somebody to be trendy for five minutes and then sound dated five minutes later. Isn't being ahead of the game and non-conformist so much better than being trendy?

Pete continues, "But, no, I wasn't trying to write or to perform in any particular style. Clive and I have often said that we always wanted to try to incorporate ideas from the whole range of 20th century popular songs into our stuff – still do, in fact – including most especially the great Tin Pan Alley songwriters: Rodgers & Hart, Cole Porter, the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Noel Coward, Johnny Mercer – the list goes on. If we have ended up with any distinctiveness, maybe that element is what provides at least a part of it."

What about that "rock 'n' roll style lifestyle" and hanging out with the "in-crowd"?

"The pub was as far as 'hanging out' went. The 'scene' (whatever that was) was always far away. Whenever I happened to find myself in the context of any manifestation of the 'scene', I would quickly be wishing I was somewhere else, and put my best efforts into removing myself to that somewhere else as soon as possible. So no, I was about as un-rock-and-roll as you could get."

*Driving Through Mythical America* is sheer class and there are even certain similarities to Nick Drake and American artists like Love and Tim Buckley... but was this something Pete was intentionally aiming for?

"Nick Drake I knew about, mainly thanks to my younger brother, but I was never into him as deeply as he was. Love and Tim Buckley I was scarcely aware of at all, I'm afraid. The very early Joni Mitchell impressed us, but there were several good reasons why she didn't constitute a role model for either of us.

"However, I'm sure there is always a kind of stylistic osmosis in any era, something that somehow permeates everything that everyone's

doing at a given time. I suppose that's how it's possible to tell from the playing roughly when any recording was made."

And what about that natural, analogue groove that has such spontaneity?

"The 'liveness' of the recording of my '70s albums was partly preference on my part, but mainly practicality – financial practicality. There simply wasn't the budget for the kind of studio time which might allow me to try to build up a complex created sound in the way The Beatles had pioneered. I might have enjoyed that, but apart from a bit of judicious over-dubbing now and then, it was a non-starter. And besides, I did like the 'live' feel – still do..."

"On *Driving Through Mythical America* it really was live. Those tracks with brass on were recorded absolutely live, as you hear them, rhythm, brass, vocals and all. What you hear is what happened. It's not really ideal from a sound balancing point of view but, as I say, it was a matter of budgets."

Chris Spedding and co are on fire with a "Now Sound" that culminated in fuzzed-out guitar leads and driving bass parts... they must have done what they wanted, right?

"I'm afraid I don't think I ever gave them the opportunity exactly to 'let rip', but the time constraints in the studio meant that it just wasn't possible to spend time teaching the songs to the musicians. It wasn't necessary anyway, because they were all such great players, and all so good at sight-reading, that having provided them with a reasonably detailed written-out part, once I'd set the tempo they'd just be able to play it pretty much straight off – that includes the drummers, of course. Some of the finished tracks are literally just the second or even the first time they'd played the whole song through. So I'd always let them know that the written part wasn't necessarily meant to be stuck to rigidly, it was more a substitute for having to teach them the song, a way of quickly giving them an idea of the kind of thing I wanted them to play."

And to close let's get back where we started... why are nerds cooler than rock stars?

"Ah, now then. It all depends. Some nerds, maybe... but then again some rock stars... As Fats Waller said to the woman who asked him 'What is swing?': 'Lady, if you gotta ask, you ain't got it.'"

Pete Atkin certainly did and by lack of trying to fit in his second album now truly ranks as a record that was indeed, just too cool to be square.

