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The Original Line Up

Jefferson Starship + The Zombies

20 July 2008: The Grand Ballroom — San Francisco, CA

by [Greg M. Schwartz](#)
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It's been four decades since Jefferson Airplane was one of the most important bands on the planet. The group helped pioneer the "San Francisco Sound," spreading the psychedelic vibe of the West Coast's socio-cultural revolution across the nation and around the world. Creative and philosophical differences splintered the band apart in the early '70s though, leading rhythm guitarist Paul Kantner and vocalists Grace Slick and Marty Balin to move forward with a new version of the band, which they dubbed Jefferson Starship.

The new band produced hits that charted higher than any of the Airplane's songs. But it is the Airplane's catalogue that resonates with seminal classic rock authenticity and influence, continuing to draw interest from subsequent generations just like contemporaries such as the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, etc. Now, after decades of revolving lineups and various stops and starts, Jefferson Starship is poised to make a major comeback.

The band returned to their native San Francisco hot on the heels of three sensational acoustic shows in nearby Larkspur (just about 10 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge) at the end of June, where they debuted songs from their remarkable new album, *Tree of Liberty*. The impending album features the debut of vocalist Cathy Richardson, who appears to be the ultimate replacement for the now retired Slick, as well as the return of former Quicksilver Messenger Service member and long-time Kantner cohort, David Freiberg.

Tree of Liberty, due September 1st, mostly features moving covers of traditional revolutionary and patriotic songs in an inspired effort by Kantner to revisit his musical roots. But this is the patriotism of the founding fathers and the '60s anti-war movement, as opposed to what the Bush regime tries to pass off for patriotism in the post-9/11 era. Both the album and the Larkspur shows demonstrate a spectacular vocal chemistry in the harmonies between Kantner, Freiberg, and Richardson. From old classics like "Wooden Ships" to the stunning new "Threshold of Fire"—which ranks amongst Kantner's best work—the band showcased a revived ability that was downright majestic. Kantner may look a bit over the hill, but the classic rock warrior has clearly still got his mojo working. Richardson has also been filling in for Janis Joplin with Big Brother and

Jefferson Starship is a band poised for a big comeback. They've got a spectacular new vocalist in Cathy Richardson, a stellar new album, and what appears to be a revitalized Paul Kantner.

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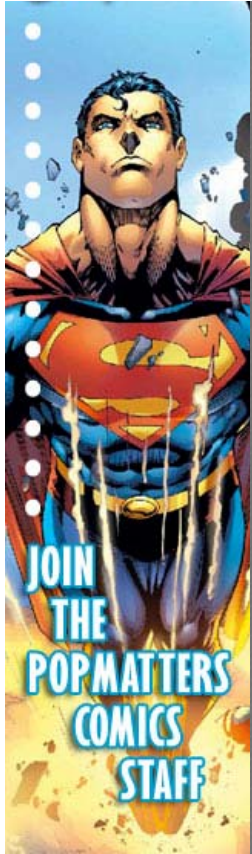
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the Holding Company but, as impressive as she is there, she sounds even better in the Grace Slick role.

1960s contemporaries the Zombies open the Grand Ballroom show with a 75-minute set. Classic hits like "She's Not There" and "Time of the Season" resonate with the psychedelic pop vibe of the era, and vocalist Colin Blunstone still sounds great. Keyboardist Rod Argent has to be credited for whatever's keeping him going, as the 63-year-old easily looks 20 years younger. But much of the group's repertoire feels dated. The crowd is decidedly older and the show clearly hasn't sold as well as might be hoped, since tables and chairs have been brought out to help fill the space. This leads to a sit-down crowd, always an obstacle in creating the high-energy psychedelic rock vibe that Jefferson Airplane helped pioneer at local venues like the Fillmore.

That vibe increases greatly though as Jefferson Starship hits the stage with some classic material from the '60s. The band gets down to business early with "Crown of Creation", the title track from Jefferson Airplane's 1968 album, setting the tone for an evening of classic tunes. The surprise is that sometimes-vocalist Marty Balin is now on hand as well, and the crisp four-part harmonies between Kantner, Balin, Freiberg, and Richardson demonstrate this lineup is a force to be reckoned with. The song may be 40 years old, but it still sounds fresh.

As in Larkspur, there's no bassist. Keyboardist Chris Smith covers the low-end ala Ray Manzarek of the Doors and the band is still able to deliver a fairly full sound. But leaving a hole once filled by one of the greatest bassists in rock, Jack Casady, makes it feel like something is missing. Drummer Donny Baldwin and lead guitarist Slick Aguilar are more than capable though, and it's heartwarming for any classic rocker to see Paul Kantner playing what looks like the same Rickenbacker he was frequently pictured with in the '60s.

The band catalyzes the feel good vibe of the '60s with a cover of "Get Together", the Youngbloods' classic ode to peace, love, and togetherness that was a staple of the Airplane repertoire. The 4-part harmonies on the chorus are superb as the band knocks the timeless classic out of the park.

Richardson takes center stage for Grace Slick's "Lather", and shows she can command the stage all on her own. With charismatic blonde beauty and a dynamic vocal range, she lifts the performance of every song. Balin takes the lead for 1978's "Count on Me" and it's here that the evening's sonic conflict first comes into play. The melodic song is certainly catchy and a hit in its day, but has a softer pop vibe that seems at odds with the powerful psychedelic rock that characterizes the Airplane material. A major counterpoint is provided next by "Eskimo Blue Day" from the Airplane's 1969 classic *Volunteers*.

Richardson demonstrates herself as a major rock star waiting to happen, belting out a stunning lead vocal that resonates with breath taking power. It's a reminder of what an incredible vocalist Grace Slick was and what a tall order it is for the band to replace her. Kantner has clearly hit the rock 'n' roll jackpot again with Richardson. The band throws on a sick jam at the end with Aguilar tearing it up on lead guitar. The energy isn't wasted as they launch right into "White Rabbit", one of the most iconic tunes of the '60s, with Richardson once again belting out the vocals with a vengeance.

But then they go back to the '70s hits with Balin on 1975's "Miracles". Like "Count on Me", the song was a hit in its time but the energy pales in comparison with the Airplane sound. The vibe takes a further nosedive when Balin continues with "Hearts", a schmaltzy ballad. Can it be coincidence that Kantner, Freiberg, and Richardson choose this moment to take their regularly scheduled break and depart the stage, leaving Balin to croon on his own?

Balin even rolls his sleeves up and goes out to the front of the stage in the type of rock star posing that Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead used to catch crap for, even though his showboating was far less overt. It's so over the top it becomes stupefying, leaving younger members of the crowd wondering how they suddenly found themselves at what now seems like a Barry Manilow show. Aguilar tries to save the day with a ripping guitar solo, but it's too late, the buzz-kill has occurred.

Freiberg returns for "Cowboy on the Run", a Quicksilver Messenger

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Service tune that is the first of the evening's three songs from *Tree of Liberty*. It's got a folksy soul that reverberates through the decades when Freiberg sings lines like "Sometimes I dream of a world without war / People laughing in the sun." Richardson joins him on some sweet harmonies and Smith throws down a big piano solo, as the song gets the show back on track. Kantner is still MIA though, and the band seems a bit lost as to where to go next. Freiberg ends the confusion by declaring "OK, let's do a Jerry Garcia song" and leads the band into the Dead's "Loser", a bluesy number that features more stellar harmonies as well as another big solo from Aguilar.

Kantner returns for 1975's "Fast Buck Freddy" a rocking tune featuring another showcase vocal from Richardson where she sings, "how much longer can we take it / how much longer 'til we take it back?" The momentum continues to build back up as Kantner leads the band into Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom", from the new album. The song features majestic harmonies from the whole group and is an absolute gem. Another *Liberty* cut follows, with Richardson commanding the stage again on a clever mash-up that blends John Lennon's "Imagine" with Bob Marley's "Redemption Song". Richardson slays the crowd with her vocals, receiving an extra cheer when she tosses in the line "have no fear of Bush and Cheney, 'cause they're gone in 2009." Kantner and Freiberg chime in with the "Redemption Song" chorus at the same time Richardson sings the "Imagine" chorus and it's a knockout.

1974's "Hyperdrive" continues to build the show's momentum back up with a powerful jam and yet another stellar vocal from Richardson. Unlike Balin's cheesy '70s hits, Grace Slick's '70s tunes like "Hyperdrive" and "Fast Buck Freddy" rock with a character that fits in with the Airplane material instead of sticking out like a sore thumb. But when the band launches into Balin's "Plastic Fantastic Lover" from 1967's groundbreaking *Surrealistic Pillow*, the singer shows how great he can still sound. It just depends on the tune apparently. This is the Marty Balin that made a significant contribution to one of the greatest bands in rock history.

The old school vibe continues as Balin is on lead again for "It's No Secret", from the Airplane's 1966 debut, *Jefferson Airplane Takes Off*. It's another rocking triumph that makes one wonder why he bothers with cheesy songs like "Hearts". Richardson sings a snippet of U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)", as an introduction to a smoking rendition of "Somebody to Love", the 1967 smash hit that put Jefferson Airplane on the national radar. Richardson's powerful vocal is simply stunning and the band rocks the classic hit hard, bringing the set to a powerful conclusion.

When the band returns, Kantner says it's always great to play in San Francisco, remarking "they say San Francisco is a good place to go crazy, because no one will notice," which brings laughs and knowing nods all around. The next tune is introduced as Freiberg's song about an errant girlfriend and it turns it to be "Jane", the band's hard rocking 1979 hit. Freiberg belts it out with a powerful vocal, showing he's got juice left for more than just folk songs and backing harmonies. But it can't possibly be the grand finale. The show has showcased the staying power of Jefferson Airplane's seminal catalogue and the band rises to the occasion by throwing down a scintillating rendition of the call-to-arms title track from 1969's *Volunteers*.

Balin and Richardson click powerfully on the song's counterpoint vocals, while Kantner chips in as well for a song that is nothing short of classic rock magic. Designed to summarize the socio-cultural revolution of the '60s, both the message and the music feel as fresh and timely as ever. The crowd down front explodes in ecstatic glee as the band rocks out, building the choruses one upon another for a high-energy showcase. Balin chimes in with a "Fight back!" message, and the crowd responds in kind for one of the most triumphant jams of the 2008 concert year.

The mind boggles at what a force this band could be if Jack Casady and Jorma Kaukonen could be lured back into the fold. The Airplane bassist and lead guitarist are still going strong with Hot Tuna and could bring so much to the table. They probably wouldn't be interested in playing Balin's poppier '70s hits though, which would serve Jefferson Starship just as well in 2008. The enthusiastic reception for the band's '60s material far outweighed that of the '70s hits, and the new album has a vibe based in those '60s roots. The band could potentially fit right in on the jam rock scene at festivals like Bonnaroo, Rothbury, Wakarusa, and High Sierra, and win over a whole new generation of fans. But cheesy songs like "Hearts" would send those fans scurrying to see who's playing on the

next stage over.

Jefferson Starship demonstrated itself to be a band poised for a big comeback. They've got a spectacular new vocalist in Richardson, a stellar new album, and what appears to be a revitalized Paul Kantner. But can they put it all together? If they can separate the wheat from the chafe in the repertoire and find a bassist to help kick the jams into overdrive, it would seem they could make another major impact on the music world at large. With national affairs in a turbulent state that mirrors 1968, such resurgence would be most timely.

— 8 August 2008

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