

The Vinyl Dialogues Volume II

Dropping the Needle

... on more albums of the 1970s

Mike Morsch

Mike Morsch

For my daughters, Kiley and Lexi.

The Vinyl Dialogues II

Cover photo and design by Ron Dacanay.

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The soundtrack and the stories that bring back the memories

Introduction

Mike Morsch

The soundtrack of our lives isn't just about the music. It's also about the stories that are associated with the music. When I was a kid in the 1960s, I listened to my parents' vinyl collection. The first time I heard "The Little Girl I Once Knew," on a 45-rpm vinyl record, I was hooked on the harmonies of the Beach Boys. I'm still mesmerized by those sweet sounds to this day.

But the 1970s was my decade. I was in high school and college during those years, and although the Beach Boys were still a constant part of the soundtrack of my life, other artists began to creep into my repertoire and expand my musical tastes.

It started in 1973, when I was a freshman in high school. Our school had this long hallway — called the "Leeway" after Jimmy "Doc" Lee, a longtime manager of the basketball team — that connected the original high school building with a newer addition that had been constructed to accommodate the growing school population.

After lunch, students would gather in the Leeway before the next class. To help pass the time, the student council had secured a jukebox for the Leeway. Two songs for a quarter.

Every day that year, after I had finished eating in the lunchroom, I would head for the Leeway with my quarter. And nearly every day that entire school year, I would play the same

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two songs: “China Grove” by the Doobie Brothers and “My Maria” by B.W. Stevenson.

In the summer of 1975, I was a frequent guest of a friend whose parents were members of the local country club that had a big swimming pool. I spent a lot of time acting like a 15-year-old that summer, but it was memorable for another reason: I really started to notice girls.

And it was at that pool that I witnessed my first bikini “wardrobe malfunction.” As memorable as that was, I also recall the song that was playing on the pool’s public address system when I got that first eyeful. It was “Sister Golden Hair” by the band America.

In the fall of 1975, I had my first car date. But I was still a bit young to have secured my driver’s license, so my girlfriend drove. Her dad, a honcho in a big local company, allowed her to use his car for our dates — a sweet 1975 white Mustang.

Although the song was four years old by 1975, her favorite tune was Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven.” I was not a big fan of the song or the band. But the song was eight minutes long and she liked to make out to it in that Mustang. I’m still not a fan of “Stairway to Heaven” or Led Zeppelin, but I never said anything to her about it because at age 16, I was a big fan of making out with her in that Mustang.

In the fall of 1976, I was on the junior-senior prom committee at our high school. The theme was “Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song” by Three Dog Night. I was also on the prom court that year, and during the introduction of the court to the rest of the student body that evening, that song was played. My escort on the prom court - who was not my date for the evening - and I shared a special kiss right before we were introduced, during the playing of “Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song.” I’ve always remembered the kiss and the song fondly.

When I got to college in the fall of 1977, a guy in the dormroom next to mine had a turntable and a substantial vinyl collection. Oftentimes when I would walk by his room, he had

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the door open and was playing records. I'd occasionally stop in and listen to what he was playing, but I didn't much like his favorite musician and album.

"You should really listen to this guy. He's going to be big someday," my friend would say.

The artist was Bruce Springsteen and the album was *Born to Run*, released in 1975. I'm a Springsteen fan, now. Better late than never to that party.

And now, four decades later, I get to talk to those artists who created so much of the soundtrack of my life.

These dialogues are filled with insight, sparkle and fond recollections. They also happen to be a whole lot of fun for those of us who are driven by great music.

The stories behind the memorable albums in this book will surely resonate with many — from the artists who crafted them to the listeners, like you and me, who still appreciate the music that filled up the soundtracks of our lives.

‘We were all best friends then’

Sunflower The Beach Boys

He was in a well-known band, had a smoking-hot girlfriend, more than a few bucks in his pocket, went to Malibu to ride waves all the time, and drove a fast

Porsche.

Life was pretty good for Bruce Johnston in 1970.

But he was most excited that Beach Boys were making the band’s 16th studio album, which promised to be a creative team effort that included contributions from all band members: Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Dennis Wilson, Carl Wilson, Al Jardine and Johnston. The album would be called *Sunflower* and it would set a different standard for the band.

This album was a total group collaboration. It said, “By the way, there are



Beach Boys keyboardist Bruce Johnston calls the band’s 1970 *Sunflower* album the best album the group ever made.

(Photo by Mike Morsch.)

other people in this band that respect and love Brian's compositions and Mike's lyrics, but they also have something to add to the legacy of the Beach Boys as writers."

But the band would have to navigate a lot of rough waters in the lead-up to *Sunflower*.

Johnston had joined the Beach Boys in 1965 as a replacement for Glen Campbell, a veteran of the Wrecking Crew, a group of top-notch session musicians in Los Angeles. Campbell himself joined the Beach Boys as a replacement for the band's co-founder, Brian Wilson, who had decided to stop touring with the band and concentrate on writing, producing, and arranging the Beach Boys' music.

During that stretch in the mid- to late-1960s, Johnston had worked on what would become some of the most memorable Beach Boys albums of the decade, including *Summer Days and Summer Nights*, *The Beach Boys Party Album* and the brilliant *Pet Sounds* in 1966. Johnston's voice can be heard as backup vocal behind Carl Wilson's lead vocal in the song "God Only Knows" on that album.

After *Pet Sounds* was released, the follow-up album was supposed to be *Smile*, a collaboration between Brian Wilson and lyricist Van Dyke Parks. But the project was indefinitely shelved for a number of reasons, including Wilson's escalating drug use and battle with mental health issues; technical challenges with the recording, which disrupted Wilson's creativity; and legal battles with Capitol Records, the band's label.

The Beach Boys did release two albums, *Smiley Smile* and *Wild Honey* in 1967, and followed those up with *Friends* in 1968 and *20/20* in 1969.

Also in 1969, the group planned what band members thought would be their last album for Capitol Records. They had sued the record company over unpaid royalties, but still released two singles for Capitol, "Breakaway" in mid-1969, and "Cotton Fields," with Jardine on lead vocals, in the spring of 1970.

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So by 1970, there was a lot going on for the Beach Boys. But the band faced one other really big obstacle.

“The American public was very uninterested in the Beach Boys at that time,” said Johnston. “The band had this fluffy image, even though the *Pet Sounds* album and the single ‘Good Vibrations’ broke new, incredible, pop musical ground. Sadly, people still sort of had a Disney World image of us and we became less relevant.”

They also had the pressure of negotiating a new recording deal with a new record label. Although the band’s relevancy in the United States had waned, it was still popular in other parts of the world. The group was negotiating with Deutsche Grammophon, a German classical record label that would eventually be known as Polygram, which in turn would become part of Universal Music Group.

But in a press conference in mid-1969 that was originally intended to promote the single “Breakaway” in European media, Brian Wilson gave the impression that the Beach Boys were broke and owed everybody money.

“We went to Europe and the hotels would not take our American Express cards. It was stuff like that,” said Johnston. “Brian would say these wacky things that weren’t really the way things were, right in the middle of the negotiations with Deutsche Grammophon.

“I remember that he was telling people that our band owed money. At that stage in their lives, everyone in the band were pretty good investors. The band, as individuals, were living beautifully, but within their means,” said Johnston. “So it wasn’t like the band went bankrupt. That crazy comment Brian made did not help our negotiations with Deutsche Grammophon, but that deal was probably something that shouldn’t have happened anyway.”

It was indeed a blessing in disguise because in the late 1960s, Van Dyke Parks — Brian Wilson’s collaborator on the shelved *Smile* project — worked as an executive for Warner

Brothers Records. Warner operated the Warner Music Group, which owned the Reprise Records label.

Mo Ostin, a highly placed Warner executive, was willing to sign the Beach Boys to the Reprise label. One of the stipulations that Ostin insisted on as part of any deal, was that Brian Wilson be involved with all Beach Boys albums.

Sunflower would be the first Beach Boys album for Reprise.

“So Mo said, ‘If you’re going to come here [Reprise], Brian has to be involved and be writing songs. That’s why there’s at least four Brian Wilson songs/collaborations on the album,’” said Johnston.

Once the deal with Reprise was finalized, the band started submitting songs to Ostin, who liked some but rejected others. That sent the band members back into the studio to create and record more songs to fill out the album. In all, the Beach Boys offered Ostin nearly 30 songs, 12 of which would eventually be selected for the album.

Still, the challenges remained. There were people hanging around getting in Brian Wilson’s ear with suggestions that could undermine the project.

“The start of an album is always about the music. And somehow, we were all in sync with each other, despite all the stuff that had gone on and the people trying to medicate Brian and steal him,” said Johnston. “They’d say, ‘Brian, you’re so brilliant you don’t need the Beach Boys.’ Those kind of guys would come to the studio and attempt to get Brian hooked on a cornucopia of drugs.

“I’m not talking out of school because this has all been in the press over and over and over. This was before Brian went and locked himself in his room for a few years.”

The writing and recording of *Sunflower* featured two polar opposite dynamics: that of outsiders trying to separate Brian Wilson from the Beach Boys, versus six guys being the best of friends and creating new music that made them confident that they would be relevant again.

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“I was single with the hottest girlfriend on the planet, I was driving my Porsche to the sessions, I was going surfing and I was making the greatest album that I had made so far,” said Johnston. “Brian had his beautiful and amazing vocal arrangements covered, but I got to help the guys with vocal arrangements on their songs. It was a real band effort and it was just perfect.

“We were all best friends then,” he said.

Dennis Wilson was the first to step up with the songwriting and vocals. He has four songwriting credits on *Sunflower*, including “Slip on Through,” “Got to Know the Woman,” “It’s About Time,” on which he shared credit with Jardine and Bob Burchman, and “Forever,” written with Gregg Jackson. This song became Dennis Wilson’s signature song with the Beach Boys for the rest of his career until his death in 1983.

“Dennis delivered the first song. ‘Slip on Through’ was a total 1969-1970 groove,” said Johnston. “In later years, Dennis’s voice sounded tired and used up, but it was perfect on ‘Forever.’ Dennis had this kind of Mel Torme-foggy-voice. The girls loved it.”

Brian wrote “This Whole World,” on which Carl Wilson sang lead; “Add Some Music to Your Day” with Love and Joe Knott, on which Brian shared lead vocals with Love, Johnston, Jardine, and Carl Wilson; “All I Wanna Do” and “Cool, Cool Water” with Love; “Our Sweet Love” with Carl Wilson and Jardine; and “At My Window” with Jardine.

Johnston wrote “Deirdre” with Brian Wilson and handled the lead vocal and “Tears in the Morning,” on which he had a solo songwriting credit and also sang lead.

“We all had to kind of start writing songs. And I think probably that might have surprised everybody in the band more than they ever thought. We wrote some really cool songs,” said Johnston. “It was pure art. Somebody would say, ‘I have this idea, what do you think?’ It was absolutely great.”

Sunflower was released in August 1970 and garnered good reviews in both the United States and United Kingdom.

In October 1970, *Rolling Stone* reviewer Jim Miller wrote, “After a long period of recovery, mediocrity, and general disaster, the Beach Boys have finally produced an album that can stand with *Pet Sounds*: The old vocal and instrumental complexity has returned and the result largely justifies the absurd faith some of us have had that the Beach Boys were actually still capable of producing a superb rock album — or, more precisely, a superb rock muzak album.”

But in a nod to the relevancy of the Beach Boys as they went into the 1970s, Miller added, “As a whole, *Sunflower* is without doubt the best Beach Boys album in recent memory, a stylistically coherent tour de force. It makes one wonder though, whether anyone still listens to their music, or could give a shit about it.”

The album cover for *Sunflower* featured a photo of all six band members and some of their toddler children. Johnston and Dennis Wilson were not yet fathers, but Brian Wilson was joined by daughter Carnie; Jardine was pictured with oldest son Matt; Carl Wilson had son Jonah on his shoulders; and Love’s children, Hayleigh and Christian, were sitting on their father’s lap.

The photo for the cover was taken by Ricci Martin and was shot at his family’s Hidden Valley Ranch near Thousand Oaks in Ventura County, California.

Ricci Martin is Dean Martin’s youngest son with his second wife, Jeanne. Ricci Martin was only 17 years old when he took the photo for the *Sunflower* album and it was his friendship with Carl Wilson that got him the gig.

Ricci’s brother, Dean Paul Martin, was the “Dino” in the 1960s band, Dino, Desi and Billy, which included Desi Arnaz, Jr., the son of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Sr., and friend Billy Hinsche.

The three were in the band together from 1965 through 1969 and were best known for the songs “I’m a Fool” and

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“Not the Lovin’ Kind,” both of which were released in 1965 before any of the three had reached the age of 15. That success enabled them to open for a Beach Boys tour that same year.

Carl Wilson was then married to Billy Hinsche’s sister, Annie, and that is the couple’s son, Jonah, pictured with his father on the cover of *Sunflower*.

Because of the musical connections between the Martin family and the Wilson family, Ricci Martin had become good friends with Annie and Carl Wilson.

Dean Martin’s California ranch reflected the spoils of his star status. It was equipped with a heliport, a pool, a tennis court and a chip-and-putt golf course. Both Carl Wilson and Ricci Martin thought the ranch would provide the perfect background for the cover photo.

“I don’t want to say Carl invited himself out, but he asked me where would be a good place to take the photo for the cover of the album,” said Ricci Martin. “This is the Beach Boys, after all. Why not have the Beach Boys at the ranch? Even my mother would like that.”

Once all the Beach Boys had arrived at the ranch with their children on the day of the photo shoot, Ricci decided to position the artists and their kids on a portion of the ranch’s golf course.

“The kids cooperated. They were just like the boys, very hippie, especially Carl’s son. You couldn’t get a peep out of him,” said Ricci, who even at a young age had already photographed his father’s television show for *TV Guide*. “I chose to take just a few rolls of film. It was smooth as silk, actually. It was a very easy photo shoot.”

In the days before digital photography, Ricci did all his own film developing and photo printing. In those days, photographers often put together a “proof sheet,” essentially a printed version of the negatives on a roll of film. While looking at those proofs, one shot stood out. It would be the one to grace the cover of *Sunflower*.

“Of course I ran it by Carl, who ran it by the rest of the boys,” said Ricci. “But that was the one that was going to be used.”

Even though Ricci Martin got a photo credit on the back of the album, it was only the band and its insiders who knew he had taken the photo.

“There was nothing special about the picture other than my connection to Carl and that I’m Dean Martin’s son,” said Ricci. “That’s what makes it ‘special.’ But it could have been done, honest to God, by anybody. It’s all about timing.”

The accomplishment of taking the cover photo on a Beach Boys album didn’t seem to cause any great waves within the Martin family, though.

“My parents could have cared less,” said Ricci. “You’re also dealing with Dean Martin and Jeannie Martin. Dad would have said, ‘Hey, that’s great, pally.’ And Mom would have said, ‘You should have moved that baby over there’ because she’s a director, of course. She would have told me how to do it better.”

Ricci didn’t ask for any payment for the photograph from the band.

“These were my friends, these were my buddies. We had a great time at the ranch and it was as simple as that,” said Ricci.

But Carl and Annie Wilson did show Ricci their appreciation by providing him with a great memory once the album was complete and being marketed to the public.

“Carl and Annie came over one day and said, ‘Just get in the car and come with us,’ and I said ‘OK,’” said Ricci. “They drove down Sunset Boulevard toward Sunset Hills and there was this huge billboard of the *Sunflower* album. That was something to see. I don’t want to call it art, but there was my photograph up there on a big billboard. It wasn’t promoting my photograph, but their album. But that was quite a fun moment.”

Although critically acclaimed, *Sunflower* only rose to No. 151 on the U.S. record charts and stayed there for only four



Ricci Martin, son of Rat Pack crooner Dean Martin, took this photo of the Beach Boys, which ended up on the cover of the band's 1970 album, *Sunflower*. (Photo courtesy of Ricci Martin)

weeks. It was the lowest-charting Beach Boys album up to that point.

Johnston believes part of the issue with the lack of sales was that the album didn't contain one bona fide hit single.

"I would have liked to see it reach more people," said Johnston. "But what's the hit? We never talked about any of the tracks being a hit. We loved 'Add Some Music to Your Day.' I'm not saying *Pet Sounds* wasn't art, but with *Sunflower*, we just kind of did it. It was total group art."

Johnston calls *Sunflower* the best album the Beach Boys ever made and it remains his favorite more than 40 years after its release.

"I felt a good vibe when we were making it and I felt a good vibe after it was done," said Johnston. "I hate to say this, but I don't actually like rock and roll. I don't consider the Beach Boys a rock and roll band. I think we're kind of our own art form."

Discography

Sunflower

The Beach Boys

Release Date: 1970

Duration: 36:49

Title	Time
Slip On Through.....	2:19
This Whole World	1:58
Add Some Music To Your Day	3:35
Got To Know the Woman	2:43
Deirdre	3:29
It's About Time	2:57
Tears In the Morning	4:11
All I Wanna Do	2:36
Forever	2:42
Our Sweet Love	2:42
At My Window	2:34
Cool, Cool Water	5:03

For a free preview of the songs on this album, visit www.VinylDialogues.com/Discography

From chaos comes vision and innovation

There's a Riot Goin' On **Sly & the Family Stone**

By the time Sly & the Family Stone got around to releasing the album *There's a Riot Goin' On* in 1971, there was literally a riot going on within the band.

After the 1969 album *Stand!* — considered by many to be the group's artistic high point — the band was on a roll. That album featured the single “Everyday People,” which was the band's first No. 1 hit on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart.

Sylvester Stewart — aka Sly Stone — had put together the first intergender and interracial band in 1967 and was working in the San Francisco Bay area.

In addition to Sly, the band included his brother, Freddie Stewart, on vocals and guitar, Cynthia Robinson on trumpet, Larry Graham on bass guitar, Greg Errico on drums, and Jerry Martini on sax. Sly's sister, Rose, joined the band on piano and vocals a year later, in 1968.

The band had put out three albums prior to *Stand!* and was considered an early pioneer of the soul, funk, and psychedelia sounds in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

“We are the first interracial, intergender American pop group. We didn't have three girls in the back doing doo-wop,” said Martini. “Everybody in our band, we were all front-liners.

“I asked Sly when we first started, ‘Why did you want me?’ There are a lot of brothers out there that can probably whoop



From left, Jerry Martini, Cynthia Robinson and Greg Errico were all original members of Sly & the Family Stone, one of the first interracial and intergender bands. (Photo by Mike Morsch)

my ass [playing the saxophone].’ He said, ‘But you were what I was looking for.’”

Martini and Sly had known each other since they were teenagers. But the white Martini was an outcast in his own racial group because his musical interests included African-American artists like James Brown, Ray Charles and Jimmy Walker. But Sly was looking for horn section musicians that were influenced by those greats.

The interracial and intergender aspects of the band were important to drummer Errico as well at the time, and he said that couldn’t help but influence the music.

“It played a big part because you had to consider [that] everything you did had the potential of being important. We looked at it a little bit deeper and it became more important because of all that it represented. It was part of the inspiration for all of us,” said Errico.

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The release of the *Stand!* album in May 1969 might have been a springboard to the band's next big step: an appearance at Woodstock a few months later in August 1969.

But the band didn't see it as any big deal at the time.

"I'm not really sure what got us the invitation. Woodstock to me was just another festival until we got there. We never thought about things like that — what was propelling us to the next level. The scholars and the writers do that," said Martini.

"My opinion is, maybe, but I don't know. I just know that we were hot and everybody wanted us and I was enjoying the success," he said.

Errico had a similar take on the invitation to Woodstock.

"We didn't like doing them [outdoor festivals]; none of the groups did. A lot of groups turned Woodstock down. And that was the perception," said Errico.

"We didn't know it was going to be what it was, first of all, but we didn't want to do festivals. It was either muddy or you'd be onstage when it was raining and risk getting electrocuted. It just wasn't much fun. It was a pain in the ass to do," he said.

Apparently, the pain-in-the-ass feeling was mutual on the part of Woodstock organizers. Even though Sly & the Family Stone was a hot headlining act and was coming off the success of the *Stand!* album, Sly had developed a reputation within the industry of not showing up to gigs, and being a handful to handle when he did.

Previously published reports have revealed that Woodstock planners decided early on to keep Sly hanging as a last choice in case they couldn't secure some of the acts they wanted at the festival. Sly & the Family Stone ended up being one of the final acts to be booked for Woodstock.

But as the festival date got closer, band members started to realize that it might be more than just another outdoor festival. Reports started to filter in that it might indeed be a special outdoor show. People started traveling to New York for the festival, the roads got clogged, and the whole scene

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seemed to be morphing beyond what anyone could have anticipated.

“By the time it was time for us to be involved, or to go to the hotel or even get to it, there was an issue on how were we going to get to the performance. The roads were blocked,” said Errico.

Woodstock organizers had booked a helicopter to shuttle the artists from the hotel to the festival site. Sly and Errico rode in an Army helicopter, which landed near the stage, while Robinson and other band members decided to take a car to the festival, and got stuck in the massive traffic jam.

“My first helicopter ride was in an Army helicopter with no doors. I freaked out. Cynthia, Jerry, and the other band members decided to go in a limousine anyway, and it took them two hours to get up there in the mud and going around other cars,” said Errico.

“So I got in the helicopter with Sly. You’re flying in something you’re not used to. And then we got to the site . . . and it was unreal. It was like a dream, this mass of people. You could feel the vibe and the energy before we even got there. It was really something.”

The band was scheduled for the third night of the festival, Sunday, August 17, 1969. The lineup of heavyweights that day included The Who, Jefferson Airplane, Joe Cocker, Country Joe and the Fish, Ten Years After, The Band, Johnny Winter, Janis Joplin, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Sha Na Na, and Jimi Hendrix.

Sly & the Family Stone was scheduled to go on at 8 p.m., right after Janis Joplin and right ahead of Blood, Sweat and Tears. But the schedule had gotten incredibly backed up.

According to Errico, the constant “experience” of the event just kind of kept happening and everyone was trying to deal with everything. But Errico sensed camaraderie, not just among the musicians, but amongst everybody involved in the

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festival — the organizers, the workers and the people attending.

“Everyone just thought, you know, we have to make this work. Just having a concert with that many people had never happened before. The powers-that-be and the landowners and the cities and counties were all overwhelmed. But now it was there and it was there before anybody could do anything about it, realize it, or stop it. Now we just had to deal with it.”

When 8 p.m. rolled around, Michael Lang, one of the Woodstock founding fathers and promoters, told the band it was going to be pushed back in the schedule. An hour later, Lang pushed the schedule back another hour. That happened four or five more times to the band.

At approximately 3:30 a.m. on Sunday, August 18, Sly & the Family Stone took the stage at Woodstock.

“So we’re all thinking, it’s raining, it’s three in the morning, and all these people had been there since Thursday or Friday, being beaten by the sun and getting wet from the rain, listening to loud music twenty-four hours a day — they’re done, they’re beat up,” said Errico. “Everyone was in their tents and sleeping bags. They were protecting themselves from the rain and they were tired. And we were going to go and play a set now in front of these people? That was frightening.”

The band decided that all it could do was what it knew how to do, play music, and not think about the circumstances that surrounded the gig.

By the band’s third number, “You Can Make It If You Try,” people were up out of their sleeping bags and tents. Within the next few minutes, it seemed to band members like a half-million people were now all groovin’ to the sounds of Sly & the Family Stone.

“The energy in the band just exploded. The hair stood up on my arms,” said Martini. “People got up out of their sleeping bags, and it actually looked — with no hallucinations or anything like that — like people were moving in waves swaying

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back and forth. A half-million people — that was an amazing feeling and we just kept playing and playing.”

Errico could feel it, too.

“Man, it was unbelievable. It was amazing. And the energy we were putting out was coming back to us and we were taking that and it was going back out to them. It was like this back and forth, one-of-a-kind thing,” said Errico. “I’ve been in front of big crowds and the energy and it’s all cool, but that was a unique thing that had its own stamp and it’s never been duplicated.”

The artistic peak of the *Stand!* album followed by the wildly popular Woodstock performance had enhanced the band’s popularity and positioned it for even greater things.

But it wouldn’t play out like that.

Epic Records, the band’s label, wanted to capitalize on the band’s popularity coming out of Woodstock and wanted another album as soon as possible.

But with the success came friction within the band, particularly between the Stone brothers and Larry Graham. And there was also another very big problem within the band — drugs.

Between the Woodstock appearance and the fall of 1971, the band released only one single, “Thank You,” which reached the top of the Billboard Hot 100 chart in early 1970.

Sly’s behavior continued to become more erratic from heavy drug use and he continued to no-show on gigs and in the recording studio. That forced Epic to release the band’s *Greatest Hits* album in November 1970 to buy some time until a new album could be recorded. The *Greatest Hits* album peaked at No. 2 on the Billboard 200, and in addition to keeping the band’s name out in front of the public, became Sly & the Family Stone’s best-selling album up to that point.

The internal strife and lack of direction forced Errico’s hand and he left the band in early 1971.



Greg Errico, original drummer for Sly & the Family Stone, left the band before the making of the album *There's a Riot Goin' On* because of the radical change in lifestyle of Sly Stone. (Photo by Mike Morsch)

“In the beginning, it was always about the music and that was the most important thing and the records reflected that,” said Errico. “And then it started to become other things — the drugs and stuff like that. I think that had a lot to do with the no-showing by Sly and all the things that started happening from a radical lifestyle.”

Martini saw it all happening as well, but he decided to stick around.

“Sly was living down in Bel Air. He moved away from the band and was doing more and more things on his own. The band’s personality started to disappear during that time. There was no unified band personality by the time *Riot* came along,” said Martini.

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It became mostly Sly alone making *There's a Riot Goin' On*, recorded in the home studio in his Bel Air mansion. Most of the album was made with Sly singing into a wireless microphone and using a drum machine, which he decided would adequately replace the departed Errico. The final product, though, featured some drum tracks that Errico had laid down for previous albums that Sly had salvaged.

Every once in a while, one of the band members would be summoned to the house by Sly to lay down some of their parts. But it was rare.

“The original sound was gone. And it was developing into something else, which was still brilliant,” said Martini.

Despite his drug use and lack of band members’ involvement, Sly was still able to create and take the music in a different direction.

“I recall coming in [to Sly’s house] and he would have us listen to a track. He might take some of our ideas. But he would end up totally directing the horn lines. Anything that I would put in myself, like I had done on *Dance to the Music*, that was a whole other thing,” said Martini.

“Sly did everything like a puzzle. All of the other artists on the planet during that time, they had pretty much standard horn sections, standard harmonies, and they would have a horn arranger that would write it. And a lot of times, the horns would bump into the vocals. They wouldn’t really intertwine with the bass and the guitar,” he said.

“When Sly did a song, every part fit into the puzzle. He didn’t do anything standard. Our horn sound is unique because he didn’t do standard voicing or standard harmonies. He had his own style of writing chords. That’s why he was so different than anybody else.”

There's a Riot Goin' On would yield the band’s fourth and what would be its final No. 1 hit, “Family Affair.” Martini said the first time he heard it, he considered it an “automatic hit.”

“The whole sound was changing. The writing was evolving, the recording was different,” said Martini. “But it was

always the same with him and I. He would put me in the studio and say, ‘Here’s what I want you to do.’ And I would do it. It’s always been that way with Sly. I totally trusted him with our sound. If he heard something he liked — — boom, he’d put it in. He wasn’t tyrannical. If your idea was better than his, he’d use it. Most of the time though, his ideas were better than all of ours.”

Errico believes that the title of the album reflects what was going on inside the band at the time.

“I can almost guarantee the name of the album came after the fact. He just named it what was going on. There was a riot going on. That’s after everything was already recorded. He needed a name for the album,” said Errico.

The music had indeed changed, and it was apparent when both the band members and the public heard *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*.

“I was like, ‘Wow, this is dark.’ The thoughts I had were the thoughts everybody had about the album,” said Errico about the first time he heard it. “You put it on and you’re thinking Sly & the Family Stone; you’re listening, you’re going to dig it, but it’s definitely a darker image.

“It wasn’t like what we had been doing, but it was interesting because of Sly’s creativity and his genius. He’s still going to use whatever situation he’s in and it’s going to be something interesting. And it was,” said Errico.

Reaction from reviewers to *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* was mixed when it was released in November 1971. Part of it was because the album has a muddy sound caused by Sly’s heavy use of overdubbing, the mixing techniques he was using, and the use of the drum machine.

It did, however, resonate with the record-buying public enough to enter the Billboard Pop Album and Billboard Soul Album charts at No. 1 on each.

Mostly, though, respect for the album and for Sly’s efforts was muted in 1971, but has steadily grown over the years. It has been cited as influencing future generations of artists and

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multiple styles of music, including soul, funk, R&B, pop, rap and hip-hop.

Martini believes there is absolutely no doubt about that influence.

“Our songs have been sampled by more great rap artists than any other artists, from what I understand,” said Martini. “We changed music. I should say Sly changed music. I was just part of it.

“In my opinion, Sly was the most visionary artist of our times, with all respect to Stevie Wonder, who is pretty amazing. But Sly was the most innovative and the most visionary. If you study his lyrics, which they will someday in colleges, they will pay more homage to him as time goes by,” said Martini.

Martini, Errico, and Robinson still tour today as the Family Stone. And they still feel the vibe coming back from the audience, nearly 50 years after the original band formed.

“I believe we get respect, but there’s also big holes in the presence of the group. I can tell you for a fact that a lot of young people won’t necessarily recognize that it’s a Sly & the Family Stone song, but they’ll recognize the song title,” said Errico.

As for the hit song “Family Affair” that came off the *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* album, Errico said that hasn’t changed over the years.

“It was a family affair then and it’s a family affair now. It’s a great song. It says a lot of different things and talks to a lot of different people. Any good song does that. If it’s a good song, it tells your own story - yours, mine - and we’re totally different people,” he said.

Martini believes that the period leading up to the making of *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* and all the internal troubles in the band may have initially damaged the legacy of Sly & the Family Stone.

“I think it might be because of Sly’s refusal to cooperate with the powers-that-be and be programmed like everybody else. He wouldn’t change his mental independence and we had

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to pay the price for that,” said Martini. “And also probably because of some of the problems we had in some of the years where Sly didn’t show up to scheduled gigs. It took away from his actual genius.

“But now that’s thirty to forty years behind us, and people are looking back at what we had and saying, ‘Wow.’”

Martini said the record company’s expectations for the band were so high after its Woodstock appearance that it created incredible pressure to live up to those expectations.

“They expected Sly to live up to his writings, to live up to all the stuff he was talking about. I tell people, you need to love Sly for what he gave to music, what he did for the music world and the world in general, because of us being the first integrated rock group. What he gave was so much more than what’s been charged against him. I hope people learn how to do that during his lifetime. Then, he really will get proper recognition and in general, the band will as well,” said Martini.

The Family Stone, with three of its original members, still carries the torch for the original band.

“We’re still playing the songs that Sly wrote, as much like the records as we can, so that people can hear it,” said Martini. “Great music will hold up. You have to look at it like that.”

Discography

There's a Riot Goin' On
Sly & the Family Stone
Release Date: 1971
Duration: 01:05:25

Title	Time
Luv n' Haight	4:04
Just Like a Baby	5:13
Poet.....	3:03
Family Affair.....	2:58
Africa Talks To You "The Asphalt Jungle"	8:47
Brave and Strong	3:31
(You Caught Me) Smilin'	2:55
Time	3:03
Spaced Cowboy	4:01
Thank You for Talkin' to Me Africa	7:13

For a free preview of the songs on this album, visit
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