

GIVE IT ALL AWAY

They were dubbed "The Faces with A-levels", boasted one of the greatest guitarists this country has ever produced and caroused the early '70s underground rock circuit like knowing elder statesmen. So why didn't **PATTO** achieve some kind of breakthrough? **MARCO ROSSI** revisits days of darkness and light with drummer John Halsey

Not unreasonably, any discussion about Patto tends to begin and end with the late Peter "Ollie" Halsall, of whom the band's drummer, "Admiral" John Halsey, sagely noted, "He may not have been the best guitarist in the world, but he was certainly in the top two." Ollie's freakish dexterity was comparable in scale of achievement to free divers who can descend to a depth of 400 metres and hold their breath for six days. However, there was also an exhilarating, wilful roughness about his playing – a reckless spontaneity, an impudence, a palpable wit. For sure, he possessed an incendiary, knee-buckling turn of speed; but unlike other contenders in the fastest-gun shootout, Ollie's lines always bristled with exuberant passion. This applied whether it was an immaculate arc-of-the-heavens run, unfettered by conventional harmonic and structural propriety, or a perverse, provocative, doggedly reiterated phrase. The guitar wasn't even his first instrument: Ollie had hitherto been a vibraphone player by trade.

However, to merely define Patto as an expedient coat peg for Halsall's prodigious gift is a gross oversimplification. Here was a band with formidable collective chops, offset with a sense of humour so ingrained that their gigs were routinely punctuated with scurrilous, absurdist comedy routines. Would they have achieved mainstream success if they'd been able to take themselves, or anything, seriously? It's a moot point: but thinking of Patto as a kind of virtuosic Barron Knights is catastrophically wide of the mark. XTC's Andy Partridge, a major fan, remarks, "Pretty much everything that Patto recorded is shockingly, wonderfully played. It's stellar on every level. You're often not listening to the construction of the tune, you're listening to the way they pull it apart. Like a set of really talented wreckers! That's kind of what Patto were."

The Patto parable begins with Timebox, formerly The Take 5, who relocated from Southport to London in October 1966. By the time the band crossed paths with the 22-year-old John Halsey, at that point drumming with a soul band called Felder's Orioles, the Timebox line-up boasted Halsall on vibraphone, bassist Clive Griffiths, keyboardist "Professor" Chris Holmes, guitarist Kevan Fogarty and new recruit Mike Patto (born Michael Patrick McCarthy), formerly the vocalist in the last line-up of The Bo Street Runners.

Halsey's route into Timebox was facilitated via that most *de rigueur* '60s rite of passage: placing an advert in the *Melody Maker*. "When I was with Felder's Orioles, we all went professional and jacked our jobs in, but that only lasted a couple of months. Everybody went back to work except for the guitarist and myself! I put an advert in the *Melody Maker* saying that I was looking for a band to join."

Fortuitously, Halsey's phone rang almost immediately. "Timebox's manager, Laurie Jay, phoned me up. Timebox were playing at The Scotch Of St James, and he asked if I could go down and sit in. I said 'Okay,' so I put on my grooviest flares and my biggest kipper tie and set off. I got there, and it was very dark and dingy. The band were onstage, and Mike Patto was playing drums! Not terribly well, but he could get away with it.

"So, anyway, I went up and played. I was a bit disillusioned about my performance: it was a strange drum kit, and I hate doing anything where I'm being examined. But they still phoned the next day, saying, 'Do you wanna join the band?' They picked me up the same day, and we went straight off to play three one-hour spots at the Lakenheath air base."

And so it was that Timebox, "One of the best discotheque and club groups currently gassing the public," according to a faintly alarmist *Melody Maker* write-up in March '68, became essentially inescapable. "We were literally working seven nights a week," notes Halsey, "doing London clubs like The



MIKE PATTO

Singer-songwriter Mike Patto was born in London 22 years ago. While still at school he sang at the Two O'Clock Bar in Soho. When he left school he became a garage mechanic, working only in his spare time. Later he moved into professional and his song and composition work groups, and started to play in and around the country. For a year he played in a R & B group called The Bluebelles, but his own success as a solo singer and in due to have his first disc released early this year. Patto is 6 ft tall, has brown hair and green eyes. At present he lives in Northwood, the home of his family and his drumming career at a Manchester club. *Teague Patto is a year composer.*

PROGRAMME

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| 1. The Five Dimensions | I | 1. The Moody Blues |
| 2. Winston G. | T | |
| 3. The Graham Bond Organization | E | 2. CHUCK BERRY |
| 4. Long John Baldry | R | |
| | V | |
| | A | |
| | L | |

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The young Mike Patto comperes; Timebox. L-R: Chris Holmes, John Halsey, Clive Griffiths, Mike Patto, Ollie Halsall

Revolution, The Bag O' Nails, The Scotch Of St James, a support spot at The Marquee on a Tuesday, and also air bases like Lakenheath and Bentwaters."

However, the Rubenesque plumpness of the Timebox gig diary didn't necessarily compel punters to buy the records: only their glowing July '68 version of The Four Seasons' 'Beggin' infiltrated the Top 40, and the goalposts were moving both within the band and in the wider world. Halsey takes a deep breath.

"Ollie wanted to play guitar, so Laurie Jay's partner, a guy named Laurie Boost, bought Ollie a guitar. And then Kevan was sort of rowed out – nothing to do with me, I was an innocent party. We soon had a really nice repertoire going: something to be proud of, but it was all other people's numbers. And then the progressive thing came in, and Ollie's guitar playing started to get... pretty advanced!

"We began writing our own numbers, but Chris Holmes wasn't keeping up with it, so it was explained to Chris that we needed to carry

on without him. There again, that was nothing to do with me, it was down to Ollie and Clive. A pretty hard decision, but when you're a business, hard decisions have to be made sometimes."

Holmes would subsequently flex his chops when he joined Harvest label proggers Babe Ruth in the '70s. For his erstwhile Timebox bandmates, meanwhile, their rebirth as Patto was effected by degrees as their original material began to coalesce. "You couldn't really call them songs," chuckles Halsey, "they were 'compositions'. Some were pretty abstract *avant-garde* things. This was at the time of progressive music, as it was labelled, and it was quite in vogue: and the band as musicians just got better and better."

Judging by Patto's eponymous debut album, released on Vertigo in November '70, an ornery, unruly beast with uncanny telepathic powers had suddenly lurched to its feet. Soul and R&B inflections still informed Mike Patto's emphatic, rough-cast vocals; and on stage, the pathological urge to "loon", in the parlance of the day, was if anything taking on a manic aspect (twist competitions, slaving Elvis impersonations, the works). However, the free-jazz improvisation, algebraic time signatures and oblique chord sequences seemed to have sprung from approximately nowhere, salted with a generous measure of pub carpet dirt.

Blossom Toes and BB Blunder guitarist Brian Godding, who became a good friend of Ollie's, remembers the transformation well. "The first time I saw Timebox was at a festival where the Blossies were also playing [Possibly the August '67 National Jazz & Blues Festival, Windsor]. At that time Ollie was mainly playing vibes, but did play some guitar on the Telecaster he'd recently obtained – nothing particularly outlandish.

"The next time I saw them was at The Rainbow when they had become Patto. Ollie had acquired his legendary white Gibson SG Custom by then, and the band had morphed from a semi-soul outfit into a free-form jazz-rock quartet! Ollie had a fantastic tone, going through a Fender Princeton and Fender Bassman 4x10 combo linked together... and when he let rip, it was mind-boggling, like Charlie Parker meets Jerry Lee Lewis!

"I'd never, ever heard anything like it: it just made me laugh with pleasure. The whole band was manna from heaven."

Patto's debut album stands up well as a primer for their unreasonable strength as a unit: witness the extra-sensory interplay of 'Red Glow', the determinedly exploratory 'Money Bag' and Ollie's lambent vibes solo in 'The Man'. In passing, the album also highlights Patto's propensity for pitching curveballs: a tendency that can only have inhibited their saleability. 'Hold Me Back', for example, almost qualifies as generic, flailing



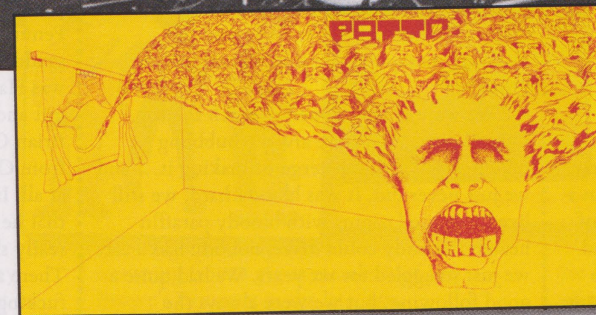
Patto, Griffiths, Halsey, Halsall and saxophonist Dave Brooks on stage, circa '73; album #1

blues-rock, if you're prepared to overlook Halsey and Griffiths' furious but sophisticated extemporisation – the jazz-rock Geezer and Bill. Similarly, 'San Antone' could pass as good-time, punter-friendly boogie were it not for the beautifully illogical, right-angled tone clusters jammed into its spokes. Those who described Patto as "The Faces with A-levels" had a point, up to a point – but it's more like The Faces having a series of jazz seizures and periodically lapsing into a transcendent fugue state.

In early '71, Clive Griffiths fell ill, resulting in erstwhile Jody Grind guitarist Bernie Holland being temporarily drafted, as Halsey recalls. "Clive had pleurisy, I think, or a collapsed lung. Bernie was always around at all the London gigs: he was very, very influenced by Ollie. We had a little tour booked of clubs in Holland and Germany – and Clive was laid up, so Bernie came with us and played bass.

"When we got back home, Clive got out of hospital and we thought it'd be nice to keep Bernie in the band, but it didn't really work out. Ollie was twiddling away, like he did, and Bernie was more or less playing the same way, so the whole thing was terribly cluttered. But we were aware of that, and it didn't take long; Bernie knew what was going on anyway."

Holland was just one of several noteworthy guitarists captivated by Ollie's singular talent: Robert Fripp of King Crimson was another, as was Alvin Lee of Ten Years After – despite an ignominious *entrée* when Patto supported TYA in Stockholm. "We went on and did our first song," remembers Halsey. "The place was packed, but when we reached the end of the



number, the first we'd ever played in a huge auditorium, there was absolute silence. Nothing. Not *one* person applauded!

"We all looked round at each other and thought: now what do we do? I remember Alvin Lee standing in the wings and watching Ollie with his mouth open: Ten Years After went on after us and were making excuses for not having played for a long time, but for us it was still a really embarrassing situation."

In December '71, Patto's second album, *Hold Your Fire*, was released. Vertigo pushed the boat out with a gimmicky, interactive Roger Dean sleeve based on drawings supplied by the band, who would often while away interminable van journeys with games of "consequences". Ollie's compact starburst of a solo on 'Give It All Away' is tacitly acknowledged as one of his finest – and, therefore, one of the finest solos in the entire earthspan – while 'Air Raid Shelter', like 'Money Bag' on the debut album, represents an *avant-jazz* line in the sand. Andy Partridge admires "the way Ollie gets into the start of the solo section. He plays these very... hexagonal-sounding runs, it's just this weird witchcraft coming out of the scales he's playing, and he hasn't even got into the ferocious stuff: he's just warming up and getting into it. It's permanently inspirational."

But if *Hold Your Fire* resounds with appropriately blazing ensemble performances, Mike Patto's lyrics and delivery had also gone up a gear. 'You, You Point Your Finger' issues a heartfelt rebuke to knee-jerking elders, while the title track wryly skewers naïve hippie idealism. "I spent three weeks making necklaces from oriental beads / They were stolen by my guru while I was high on glory seeds."

Intriguingly, Ollie's 'See You At The Dance Tonight' ("I can see you in your plain clothes, standing by the lake") references a brief, surreal phase when Timebox performed for royalty, as Halsey explains. "Christopher Soames, who became a Government minister, and his sister Emma grew to love the band, and were always at The Scotch Of St James. Emma Soames booked us to appear at The British Embassy for her 21st birthday party. There were princes, princesses and high-falutin' people from all over the world there.

"We played this bloody party until about 6 o'clock in the morning, and then were invited to go to breakfast with Princess Alexandra and Angus Ogilvy, and Princess Anne, and so on. And then we were asked to do another one at Crichel House, and we only got out of there by the skin of our teeth, because we were smoking joints down by the lake: the police suddenly realised what we were doing and came rushing down. They attempted to arrest us, but everything had been chucked away when we saw them coming, so we got away with it. I think Prince Charles was at that one."

Hold Your Fire's palpable brilliance somehow

"We played this party until about 6 o'clock in the morning, and then were invited to go to breakfast with Princess Alexandra and Princess Anne. We only got out of there by the skin of our teeth, we were smoking joints down by the lake"

wasn't enough to persuade band managers Jay and Boost to keep the faith, so Patto balanced the books themselves throughout '72 until Joe Cocker's manager, Nigel Thomas, made overtures. "He wanted the Pattos to sign for his management company," Halsey remarks, "and the way he got us to sign was to offer us this Joe Cocker tour; quite a big thing."

Patto accordingly spent September '72 supporting Joe Cocker on a US tour that began in Detroit and concluded in Hawaii, before the touring party headed off for New Zealand and Australia, where Patto's ribald 5/4 version of 'Strangers In The Night' instantly aroused the ire of the authorities. Halsey, grinning, softly sings, "Strangers in the fuckin' night, exchanging fuckin' glances, wondering in the fuckin' night, what were the fuckin' chances, we'd be sharing fuckin' love before the fuckin' night was through... It went like that. Australia in those days was really, really prudish, and when we came offstage in this massive auditorium we were met by the police and warned for obscenity: they were really serious about what we'd done."

Worse was to come when the tour reached Adelaide on October 14th. "The police had already frisked everybody at customs when we first arrived," Halsey reflects, "and they were very suspicious. There was some dope flying about, and it didn't take long before they raided the hotel: the police knew all the room numbers and everything."

"Anyway, the Pattos and the road crew weren't on the list, but everyone else was busted for grass! They were all fined, and at the end of the court case the judge asked if they had any tickets for the concert the next night because he wanted to bring his daughter. It was all rather amicable, really. But then, in a drunken fit one night, Joe got into all sorts of trouble in a hotel lobby and got arrested, and spent the night in the cell. We were put into hiding. All the Australian kids loved the 'flying in the face of the law' aspect. We eventually had to leave, and didn't finish the tour."

In October '72, the very same month that the Australian tour was hitting the wall, Patto's third album, *Roll 'Em Smoke 'Em Put Another Line Out*, was released, this time on the Island label, where Patto's album producer Muff Winwood was head of A&R. It's an oddly divisive item in the Patto canon, largely because it's less reliant overall on Ollie's inconceivable guitar than of yore. "With the first two, we gave it our all," asserts Halsey, "and they didn't do anything sales-wise, so I think we were a bit disillusioned when we went in to do the third album. Ollie mostly played piano on it, which he did just using two fingers, or three at most."

That said, the berserk 'Loud Green Song' contains the most extreme example of Halsall's untethered guitar work on record – great glittering shards of directed anarchy with no



discernible tonal centre. That scalding pepper-spray of notes is a defining proto-punk gesture: not only does it wish you'd fuck off, it wishes you'd fuck even further off, and more quickly. It expresses in one hit the complex compound emotions that were Patto's lot by '72; euphoria, frustration, immoderate highs and abyssal comedowns.

Roll 'Em's queasy, dissolute and vaguely subversive feel is strangely addictive. The defiantly frayed sprawl of 'Peter Abraham', 'Singing The Blues On Reds' (complete with vari-speeded, Les Paul-indebted guitar passages) and 'Flat Footed Woman' suggest Little Feat drooling and dangling from the very end of their tether, while Patto's larkish onstage demeanour is manifest in the improvised BDSM incest scenario of 'Mummy' and the Dadaist shanties of 'Cap'n P And The Attos'. However, if we're to extend the seafaring metaphor, the ship was taking on water.

"We were always tipped to reach the top," sighs Halsey. "We were always 'bubbling under', always on the verge of making it... and we just never did. It was bloody hard, we still lived in rented rooms with bloody paraffin heaters; nobody could drive, nobody had a car: we just struggled for six years. We had quite a good following, but we were always the bridesmaids on big tours, always the support band to Ten Years After, or Heads Hands & Feet, or Joe Cocker, or Rod Stewart. Nobody ever got hold of us and said, 'Listen, do this and you can make yourselves a lot of money!'"

Matters came to a head during the '73 recording of album number four. "Mike had the world's oldest Wurlitzer piano," remembers Halsey, "which we'd bought off somebody at a gig in Wolverhampton. I think we gave the guy the entire gig money for it, 40 quid. So Mike started learning on that. It had always been Ollie putting the musical side of it together, or Clive and I chipping in. Mike was always the lyricist: but then Ollie started writing a few lyrics, and Mike started writing entire songs on his own, which was a great improvement when it came to a bit of appeal."

"So when we were in the studio recording [the unreleased album that came to be known as] *Monkey's Bum*, anything that Ollie wrote

himself, or that Clive and I were involved with writing, Ollie played on like he normally played. But for anything that Mike had written on his own, Ollie was doing, like, one-string solos: it was all a bit schoolboy-ish. After about half a day of this, Mike said to him, 'What's going on? What's the matter with you?' And Ollie said, 'I've had enough of it, I can't do this anymore', and he packed his guitar up and walked out.

"Mike Patto and I more or less finished the album, with Mel Collins putting on horn parts, but Muff Winwood said, 'I think Chris Blackwell's going to turn it down'. You know, 'Without Ollie you haven't really got a band'. Which we did realise – we weren't completely dim! And that's precisely what happened. There you go: two years later, Ollie and Mike put Boxer together and picked it up again. It was all a bit odd, but I really think we were heading in a direction where we'd have been in with a chance."

"I mean, when we did that Joe Cocker tour, the reaction we got was phenomenal. And we came back from that, started doing *Monkey's Bum* with all the knowledge we'd gained from playing everything in 4/4, and not odd bars of 5/4 and 7/4... and then split up!"

Esoteric's long-anticipated release of the shelved *Monkey's Bum* bears out Halsey's belief. Ollie's playing sounds surprisingly committed, while 'Sugar Cube 1967', 'Hedyob', 'General Custer' and 'My Days Are Numbered' in particular fair sparkle with rogue charm. Penury and lack of recognition may have gradually eroded their will, but allied to this was Halsall's seeming indifference regarding his gift and the tools required to disseminate it, as Brian Godding affirms. "I got the impression from Ollie that he didn't rate his own playing at all. In fact, once when I suggested to him that he should maybe go to America, he got really shirty, saying, 'Are you fucking joking? There are guys out there that can play these fucking things properly!' He always cited the likes of James Burton, but then sometimes he'd say he wanted to play the guitar like Cecil Taylor. A very enigmatic lad, really."

"At one of Patto's gigs in The Country Club in Hampstead, I was having a beer – and things – with them backstage and his Gibson SG was leaning precariously up against the wall, so I moved it somewhere safer and asked if I could have a little noodle on it. What a mess it was: the frets were worn down to the bone, and the strings were so corroded that they cut into your fingers. How he played that and achieved what he did, I have no idea whatsoever."

Ollie would subsequently carve "Blue Traff" into the body of his SG with a pen knife, a name (derived from the pastime of lighting flatulence) which he applied to an ad-hoc assemblage of musos, as Halsey explains. "Mike and Ollie had been involved with this thing called Centipede, put together by Keith Tippett. It was a massive band, there was about



Halsey takes the mic for an a capella 'Stairway Of Love', a feature of the band's live shows; albums two and three



bloody 30 or 40 of them! That's what it looked like anyway. At the end of this little Centipede stint, somebody from Ronnie Scott's organisation approached Ollie and said, 'We want you to make an album under your own name', and they got Bob Fripp to produce it.

"So Ollie asked me to play drums on it, with a bassist called Harry Miller, Gary Windo on sax and a bloke who Ollie met in Tesco who played violin. Ollie nicknamed him 'Max Von Schmacks' and this bloke was a little bit... disturbed. Anyway, we went into the studio as Ollie & The Blue Traffs, and cut these tracks that were quite amazing. As far as I know, there's not a copy of it to be heard anywhere."

In July '75, a briefly reunited Patto's last hurrah came in the shape of three benefit gigs. "We had a roadie called Eric Swain," Halsey says, "and he had a brother nick-named Barnabus; his real name was Raymond. Anyway, they were our roadies, and Eric got murdered in Pakistan. He had a wife and a couple of little kids, so it was decided we'd get together and do a couple of gigs. We did one at The Torrington in Finchley, one at Dingwalls and one at The Black Swan in Sheffield. They were all fantastically well attended, and we got the money – possibly the most money we'd ever earned at any gigs! – and gave it all to Eric's wife."

Mike Patto and Ollie Halsall have both gone now, sadly: the former taken tragically early, aged 36, by lymphatic leukaemia on March 4th, '79, and the latter, aged 43, of a dismayingly preventable overdose on May 29th, '92. Clive Griffiths, alas, sustained brain damage in the same appalling car crash that left John Halsey disabled when both were

returning from a gig as members of Joe Brown's Bruvvers in the late '80s. Lack of space precludes a full rundown of the various Patto offshoots (not least Boxer and Dick & The Firemen) and Ollie's sterling work with Kevin Ayers, although Shindiggers will rever Halsey's turn as Barry Wom in The Rutles... who often seem better than The Beatles, depending on one's mood. (That's Ollie singing Eric Idle's Dirk McQuickly parts – and his guitar is all over the soundtrack.) If there's a heartening end to this sobering tale, it's simply that Esoteric have just reissued the Patto albums, including *Monkey's Bum*, with copious extras on each; and have pledged to ensure that the royalties go to Halsey, Griffiths and the estates of Mike Patto and Ollie Halsall.

"We released all those albums," reflects Halsey, "including Timebox stuff, and this is gospel truth: I never received one penny from them. They didn't sell a lot, I can appreciate that, but you'd think they might have earned a fiver somewhere. Chris Holmes got in touch a few years back and said that Decca were holding some money from 'Beggin', which sold quite well, and it's on loads of compilation albums. So we all wrote to Decca, but they told me that I didn't have a recording contract with them, so therefore I wasn't going to get any money."

"Now, when my mum passed away, she had scrapbooks, and in one of them there was a

quarter-page article about Timebox. In the picture, I was sitting at a table with a recording contract in front of me and a pen in my hand. Mike and Clive were one side of me, and Ollie and Chris were on the other, and we were surrounded by Decca executives.

"The headline said, 'Timebox sign for Decca', and there was a fucking photograph of me signing the contract! And they said it wasn't good enough. They said, 'Have you got a copy of the contract?' I said 'No'. At the time I signed I was young, and keen, and I never kept things like that."

Postscript: Surreally, Ollie Halsall and Brian Godding once found themselves making ends meet by playing on a Gary Glitter tour. "I was playing the Silver Star guitar," groans Godding, "with all the strings tuned to A, and Ollie was playing one of my guitars, a Telecaster with Gibson humbuckers – we were both left-handers. We did a couple of standard rock tunes in the show with a few guitar breaks which Ollie knocked off conventionally, but one night he just went into one big time: standing behind Glitter, legs apart, left hand pointing to the sky, he hammered out the most ridiculous flurry of joined-up semi-tonal bullets for about two choruses! Everybody just went, 'What the fuck was that?'"

"Unfortunately, Glitter didn't fall off the front of the stage: but it was fucking close..."

With special thanks to John Halsey, Brian Godding, Andy Partridge and the impeccable resources pattofan.com and olliehalsall.co.uk

Patto's first four albums are reissued by Esoteric

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