Jim Morrison When a rock Miles Davis god dies: the full, insane story

Electric warrior!

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An epic tale of four unlikely revolutionaries



Four friends, one a guitar genius, some art-blues loonery – life was good for '70s underdogs Patto. Then came illness, car wrecks and squalor. Harry Shapiro unfolds Britain's great rock tragedy.

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HEN PATTO GUITARIST OLLIE HALSALL WAS found dead on the floor of his sparsely furnished Madrid flat on May 29, 1992, it brought the curtain down on the saddest story in British rock'n'roll history. All bands have their share of bad luck and misfortune, but Patto were cursed with more tragedy, apathy, indifference and pain than any band has a right to expect.

Forever on the verge of making it, Patto spent the three years from 1970 to 1973 trading in a uniquely British brand of soul-tinged blues and alarming time signatures. In Mike Patto they had a hipster-ruffian singer blessed with a startling white blues vocal delivery and, in Ollie Halsall, one of the greatest guitarists of all time. After three years of knocking on the door and finding no one home, the band broke up. Halsall embarked upon an erratic career path peppered with drugs and disaster, Patto died of lymphatic leukaemia, while the other two members, Clive Griffiths and John Halsey, were involved in a terrible car smash which left Halsey with severe physical injuries and Griffiths so damaged that he is to this day unable to remember ever being in the band.

"We certainly weren't the luckiest band," deadpans Halsey. "Patto's dead, Ollie's dead, Clive's one of Dr Who's Daleks, there's me walking round with a parrot on me shoulder and even our roadie Eric – great bloke – got shot and killed in Pakistan."





OU NEED TO HACK THROUGH A whole forest of Pete Frame family trees to get to the roots of Patto. Our first stop is Southport Art College in 1965 where bassist Clive Griffiths – serving time in MJQ-inspired jazz outfit Take 5 – starts hanging out with two strikinglooking members of rival band The Musical Students. Keyboardist Chris

Holmes had already started turning heads thanks to his green eyes and shock of albino-white hair. Their 15-year-old drummer and vibes player, Peter 'Ollie' Halsall, an incredible talent with a thirst for booze and a sense of the absurd, had been semi-pro since the age of 13 with outfits like Pete And The Pawnees and Rhythm And Blues Inc. As a child Halsall had struck a deal with his parents that if he learned the vibes, they would buy him a set. He did this by cutting up strips of paper, laying them out like a vibes keyboard, playing the notes on piano and then hearing them in his head as he played silently with mallets bought with pocket money.

Clive persuaded Chris and Ollie to join him in Take 5. With pretensions to jazz cool they changed their name to Timebox, slang for a prison cell. With guitarist Kevin Fogerty they headed for London, misfortune already dogging them. Living in digs so filthy and cold that they had to ride the Circle Line just to get warm, vocalist Frank Dixon and drummer Geoffrey Dean contracted TB and had to quit. Dixon's successor, John Henry, was apprehended by military police for deserting the US Army.

Meanwhile, over in Norfolk 23-year-old singer and band veteran Mike Patto (he changed his surname from McCarthy after playing in a

band with guitarist Johnny Patto) was scouting for a new band. "I'd been in the Bo Street Runners," Patto told the NME in 1972. "We were on Ready Steady Win! ['60s TV talent show linked with Ready Steady Go!]... I got wheeled in on a trolley, singing. I was in dozens of bands before Patto." By the time Mike met up with Timebox at the Playboy Club, he was singing with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra. After an informal late-night jam Mike was the new Timebox vocalist.

An amateur boxing champion, Mike Patto

looked like he could handle himself. Described in a 1970 issue of NME as having "the appearance of an 18th century footpad, or a poacher who's just bagged a brace of pheasants", Patto was also into jazz, smoking dope and being hip. As fellow scenester Zoot Money puts it: "He was one of the few people who could say 'man' and it didn't sound suspect. And that was before the drugs. He was the real deal. Terminally hip."

When Timebox hit London, they signed with agent Laurie Jay, a drummer who had led his own band backing Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis on UK tours. While they sorted out a permanent replacement for Geoff Dean it was Jay himself who depped on drums. Not entirely happy with this, Jay decided to advertise for a new drummer.

In 1967 one of the best bands on the London club circuit were Felder's Orioles, a Stax-style covers band and a favourite of Jimi Hendrix, who would sit in on live sets. Although they had four singles on



the Piccadilly label, they were all reluctant to turn professional – all, that is, except the drummer John Halsey. "I put an ad in the Melody Maker," explains Halsey. "Drummers were supposed to have their own transport but I didn't, so I put, 'Has own bicycle'."

Amused by the ad, Jay phoned Halsey and asked him to come to the Scotch Of St James for an audition. "I wore my widest kipper tie and flares, but I was crapping myself and my playing was diabolical." Fortunately, the only other contender was even worse.

By August 1967 the band were already a tight outfit and, following their performance at the Windsor Blues and Jazz Festival, were signed by producer Gus Dudgeon to the Decca subsidiary, Deram. Their debut for Deram was Tim Hardin's Don't Make Promises, featuring Ollie Halsall on a sitar he'd picked up two weeks previously. The next single was a cover of The Four Seasons' Beggin', which cracked the Top 40 and sent a buzz running through London music circles. Laurie Jay tried to up the ante by hiring publicist Max Clifford to "put their name about".

"He used to make things up," explains John Halsey, "things like, 'The boys have just got back from a tour of Russia' and that we'd been caught up in the French student riots. It was just crap to get us in the papers."

Over the next 18 months, to the end of 1969, Timebox began the slow transformation to Patto. The scene was changing. Bands were writing their own material. Mohair suits and trendy clubs were giving way to kaftans, beads and venues where punters sat in the swirling haze of dope smoke.

Ollie and Mike starting writing together. "Our first songs," recalls Halsey, "were Froogly Boogly and Ob-la-di-ob-la-da. That's right. The band knew this guy called Jimmy Scott, an African conga player who named himself after screen idols James Stewart and Randolph Scott.

> He had this catchphrase, 'Ob-la-di-ob-lada, life goes on, man', which we thought would make a good title. Trouble was, Paul McCartney also knew Jimmy."

> As well as developing their songwriting skills, another milestone was Ollie's announcement that he wanted to play guitar. The music was increasingly intricate and complex, moving towards what was in essence jazz-rock. Feeling increasingly isolated from the rest and struggling with health problems, Chris Holmes asked to

leave, and was eventually let go in November 1969.

"Mike took over the band," explains Holmes today. "Very demanding. He was a few years older than us and most of his friends were into jazz. Ollie called him Mr Ego Patto, but took to him straight away. Ollie was this amazing guitar player, but he would get very frustrated – especially with me. Once Mike joined, the band started getting into all these odd timesignature things, which was difficult and did nothing for my confidence."

"I don't think Chris felt comfortable doing this new stuff," says Halsey, "so he got wheedled out. We celebrated our new-found freedom. Clive Griffiths on bass, me on drums, Patto prancing around singing. Ollie with guitar was like a man possessed. It was fucking amazing. He played guitar left-handed, but if he got hold of someone else's, strung righthanded, it didn't make any difference – he could play it perfectly! How?"

By now Timebox were out of contract with Decca. Joe Cocker's bass player Alan Spenner, a big fan, introduced them to Island producer Muff Winwood. Island passed on the band, so Muff decided to produce them for Phonogram on its new progressive rock label Vertigo. As for a new name, suggestions included Tarzan, Nazrat and, er, Little Nesbit and the Bootleg Parfilly Five. It was Winwood who pointed out that the name was staring them in the face. Timebox became Patto.

Holmes' departure had put the pressure on Ollie as the sole lead instrumentalist but, says John, "He was ready for it. Overnight Ollie went from a guy learning guitar to this *monster*. Virtuosity beyond belief."

If Patto had been as huge as Cream or Zeppelin, then the name of Ollie Halsall would have been spoken of in the same breath as Page, Beck, Hendrix or Clapton. Guitarists just stood in the wings and gaped. When Patto went on tour supporting Ten Years After, Alvin Lee taped every Patto set and forsook the limo to travel with them in their van. "I think," says John, "he hoped a bit of Ollie would rub off. Alvin couldn't believe Ollie. He absolutely flipped. So he got a Revox and recorded every single Patto gig on the tour. He just wanted to be with Ollie."

"Mike Catto was the real deal. Terminally hip... And that was before the drugs." Timebox, 1969: (from left) John Halsey, Mike Patto, Clive Griffiths [note glass eye resulting from childhood pitch'n'putt accident], Ollie Halsall, and Chris Holmes.

When pushed, Ollie would say his influences were Django Reinhardt and Bert Weedon. He took nothing from contemporaries. "If I bought a Jimi Hendrix album it would destroy me," he told NME in 1974. "I'd get influenced terribly. Most people contend that you're supposed to listen to as much music as possible, and distill the results. That's bullshit. Do that and you're just another suburban Clapton. I used to like Mingus, Eric Dolphy. I once had the idea of playing guitar the way Cecil Taylor plays piano – totally devoid of any tonality or rhythmical structure at all."

O PATTO STOOD ON THE VERGE OF GREATness. The first thing they had to do was record an album. Muff Winwood's experience of trying to record Patto has never left him. "They frightened the hell out of me, Totally stoned. You couldn't go into the studio. There was just a cloud of dope smoke, and this would be first thing in the morning. They'd come down from some gig inhaling all sorts like Night Nurse, ready to start work at 10 in the morning and rolling these enormous joints. It was just unreal. The music used to go off at an incredible rate, tempos were never the same from one take to the next. I'd say to the engineers, We're going to have to get the sound up quick because you cannot have these guys going over a song more than five times otherwise it'll completely change."

Across their first two albums *Patto* (1970) and *Hold Your Fire* (1971), Patto set out their stall for the world to judge. Immaculate, often tricky musicianship underpinned clever lyrics delivered by the ever-eccentric Mike Patto in a pulverising throaty rasp. "I don't think we've done bad," he told Sounds in January 1971. "It's taken us eight months to get from 'who the hell are Patto?' to getting good gigs and an album out. Some bands I've been in just got stoned all the time and never progressed beyond a certain point."

The reviews were always enthusiastic. But their almost universal critical acclaim did not transfer to record sales. They sold about 5,000 for the first album, fewer for the second. Part of the problem was the impossible task of recreating the sheer power of their live show on record. Patto live really was a show. Right from Timebox days, they hammed it up. They would do The Dwarf's Chorus, kneeling on their shoes and singing Hi Ho Hi Ho. They'd do Riding Along On The Crest Of A Wave. They'd line suitcases up on-stage, each with its own mike and do a cappella barbershop style vocals unseen off-stage. At the end, the audiences would give the suitcases an ovation. In between all of this was in-your-face hammering freeform jazz-rock from a band who were pushing their drug-addled bodies to the limits. Following a particularly hectic gig at Lanchester Arts Festival in 1971, Clive Griffiths was rushed to hospital with a collapsed lung.

Patto tried to insert some of their famous stage humour into their third LP, *Roll 'Em*, *Smoke 'Em*, *Put Another Line Out*, released on Island in October 1972. The result, Mummy – an anthem to incest – must be one of the

> most disturbing 'comedy' tracks ever. They never performed it on-stage, it was left off the Australian release and, according to John Halsey, two American DJs from two different stations were sacked for playing it. Then there was the sea shanty Captain P And The Attos. "That's fuckin' terrible,"

says Halsey, "not even funny. We had other material but we said we wanted the silliness on the album. Ollie hardly played any guitar on

that album and that was the biggest thing in the band. It certainly wasn't the songwriting. I don't think our material was ever up to it. It wasn't even commercial in an avant-garde way."

It's at this point that press about Patto begins to focus heavily on one aspect: 'loon-

ing'. In a 1972 NME article by Roy Carr entitled 'Never Do The Obvious', Mike Patto is described as "an arch-looner, who tears hellfor-leather along the thin line that separates sanity from insanity." In February 1972 Patto told Beat Instrumental: "Our music will develop with a little smack of anarchy and a sad, realistic insanity." Pretty soon, that joke wouldn't be funny any more.

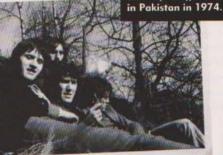
An already damaged looking Patto; and

vain (front), killed

(below) roadie Eric

UST AFTER THE RECORDING OF THEIR THIRD album, Patto were invited on a world tour with Joe Cocker. This proved every bit an epiphany as the transition from Timebox to Patto. The band had never been to the States, nor played in such huge venues. The tour was the group's first worldwide gig, the result of a successful Rainbow show with Cocker and Chris Stainton in July.

"It was a gas," Mike Patto told NME in 1972. "Before we went, the biggest audience we'd played to was around 8,000, but out there =>



← we were doing 20,000 seaters. We were using Joe Cocker's aeroplane, limousine to the gig, go backstage and get out of your mind on booze, food and dope, on-bangthank-you-off, limo back to the hotel and choose any of the 30 rooms, people arriving all the time. Amazing."

Discovering that their UK brand of 'looning' didn't project, the band revamped their set to include more four-to-the-floor rockers. The audience response improved dramatically. As John Halsey told Nick Saloman in 1992: "I loved that big Joe Cocker tour. God, []oe] was in a hell of a state. They used to have to sober him up every night just so he could walk onstage. We'd go on first. When we played the Hollywood Bowl we had 10 minutes! We used to do The Ventures' Walk Don't

Run and hold a Twist competition. I'd do that Ventures drum beat, Ollie and Clive would twist. The audience would cheer for whoever they thought was best. From that we went into Elvis's Big Hunk O' Love. Just two numbers, and we had everyone on their seats calling for more. Cocker was completely out of his brain. By the time they'd finished the place was half empty. We felt pretty good."

The band toured throughout America, New Zealand and Australia. Then, disaster.

"Everyone got busted and deported," explains John Halsey. "We came home in disgrace. After playing massive gigs like the Hollywood Bowl, we

were back at The Black Swan, Sheffield. Oh gawd! Back to reality!" The fourth, and last, Patto album began when Ollie Halsall and Mike Patto were recording with Keith Tippett's Centipede and John and Clive decided to go down to the rehearsal studio.

"We put together Good Friend, the last song we recorded together," explains Halsey. In May 1972, while "roaring about the room pouring forth torrents of verbal jazz and shouting, 'Intellect is the tool of ego'," Mike Patto told Disc magazine: "The new album [will] be total theatre. Our ideas are coming together at the last minute, so anybody's liable to spring a surprise."

The recording of the album did not go well.

"It was the first album we'd done that I wasn't happy with," says Halsey. "We'd lost the 'fuck 'em all' attitude. Patto thought he was Randy Newman. Ollie was playing one-note guitar solos. On all the things that Mike wrote, he wouldn't play ball. Then he said, 'I've had enough, I'm leaving.' We got Mel Collins in, and we dubbed sax solos on all the bits that Ollie had been messing around on and the album was finished. But Island decided they weren't going to release it." The LP, appropriately entitled Monkey's Bum, has only ever appeared as a bootleg.

According to friend and fellow guitarist Bernie Holland – who spent a brief time in the band - Ollie's abrupt departure was entirely typical. "Once Ollie had made up his mind he acted immediately. Ollie had his own orbit. Like the planets, sometimes his normality would coincide with everybody else's, then he'd just spin off in a trajectory of his own."

"Patto thought he was Randy Newman." On the slide in 1972 and (inset) ruined by looning.



T WAS 1973 AND THE world was changing. The days of tricky time-signatures and blues workouts were on the wane. Sometime before Halsall's departure, his father died. He'd returned home

for the funeral but the band still had some gigs booked. Instead of cancelling them, they thought they'd get their mates together and play as Dick & The Firemen. They went and told Muff Winwood.

"He was really cold about it," says Halsey. "He just said, 'Forget it. It's over. The industry's not like that any more. We're into Roxy Music, Sweet, glam rock. All that progressive stuff's finished. Move on.' We didn't know what to do. He was right."

"Patto just fizzled out," Mike Patto told Melody Maker in May 1973. "Our material always missed with the public at large because it was so schizo. We couldn't keep going up the hill. It had to end somewhere.'

After they split, Patto spread themselves throughout the British rock scene, playing apart, coming together, all the time unravelling.

Kevin Ayers first ran into Ollie Halsall in 1973, during the recording of his Confessions Of Dr. Dream album in AIR Studios. "He was carrying a guitar in the corridor," says Ayers. "I needed a guitar solo. He listened to this track once, then played this stunning solo. I fell in love with him at that moment. I signed with Island and I had to get a band together and Ollie joined. I thought of him as one of those idiot savants, just incredibly eloquent when he played guitar. He was my best friend for a long time."

In a fractured interview with the NME in November of 1974, Ollic Halsall - described as "sporting a healthy six-inch rent in the seat of his trousers, made the more remarkable by the absence of any formal underwear" - told other budding guitarists who might be reading: "Don't listen to any music and don't buy any records."

"He felt guilty about being so brilliant," remembers Zoot Money. "I've seen him play with a string going out of tune, no time to retune, but somehow he'd bend into it and make it work. And that was on a cocktail of drugs I wouldn't even walk the dog on."

> There was a brief Patto reunion in 1975 when the band played three London dates for the family of their roadie Eric Swain, who was shot dead in Pakistan, allegedly the victim of a drug deal gone wrong. Then, with drummer Tony Newman (Sounds Inc., Jeff Beck Group) Ollie Halsall reunited with Mike Patto to form "straight-ahead rock band" Boxer in July of 1975. However the band received little acclaim for their debut

album. Their excellent second LP, Bloodletting, recorded in S 1976, was not released until 1979. Ollie quit Boxer in late 1976. Rumour has it the band were so in debt that their manager, Nigel Thomas, withheld all their equipment, including Ollie's prized guitars. With no instruments and 2



Halsall in Spain, far left

little money, Ollie lay low until the summer of '77 when Neil Innes asked him to be a Rutle.

"I'd met Ollie through John Halsey. He was playing on the Scaffold album and I thought, He's bloody good. I'm quick like that. Then I did my first solo album, *How Sweet To Be An Idiot*, and he was all over that. He became my number one guitar choice."

Along with Ricky Fataar, Neil Innes and Halsey, Ollie helped to craft The Rutles' sound, playing guitar and keyboards on the recordings and providing the vocals for Dirk McQuickly. However, unlike Neil, John and Ricky, Ollie did not get to play one of The Rutles in the film. Replaced by Eric Idle, Ollie became Leppo, the fifth Rutle from the Hamburg days who stood at the back. "That was a great shame," says Neil, "It was like, 'Who's he?' The answer is, only the best guitarist in the fucking world."

In the late '70s Ollie's story turned from farce to tragedy. His career hit rock bottom with a Glitter Band gig at the Rainbow, where, wearing a bumble bee outfit, he was hoisted in the air, playing as he flew. He was so terrified, all he could do was scream. Fired, allegedly beaten up by management goons and with no guitar of his own, he stole a star-shaped Glitter Band guitar. Bernie Holland was playing a jazz gig down in south London; "Ollie just appeared with this beard and wearing a long dark coat. He gave me a hug and said he'd come down to see me. I begged him to come up and play. But he said, 'I don't do that any more.'"

During 1978, Mike Patto became ill. "He'd been in a lot of pain and too scared to go to the doctor," says Halsey. "He finally went 'cos he had to find out what was wrong. They diagnosed it as a stomach ulcer. Me and Clive drove down to Maidenhead, where he was living. He was sitting in the garden and looked really shocked, like people do when they've had major operations. His skin was all waxy, and his eyes were a bit scary. It shook me up.

"After that he really got fit, kicking against it but still smoking too much dope. In the Pattos

we smoked all the time, took a lot of trips together. I'd stopped doing it, but Patto was still into it. We did a Dick & The Firemen gig at Crystal Palace with Eric Clapton and Freddie King for him, and he turned up and sang. He had it licked. But then he started going downhill. He came out of hospital for a while, then he was back in, and he died a couple of days later, in great pain. He had lymphatic leukaemia. I recall asking him what that meant. He said, 'You're covered in lymph glands, like a hundred in one finger, and that's what I've got cancer of.' Even then he was getting stoned. He said dope was the only thing that brought him relief from the pain. An amazing bloke. I loved him." Mike Patto died on March 4, 1979.

N MAY 1, 1983, JUST BEFORE 1AM, JOHN HALSEY and Clive Griffiths were returning from a gig as two of Joe Brown's Bruvvers. The driver of an oncoming car fell asleep at the wheel and they collided head on. John was left with a leg he now cannot bend, Clive was in a coma for six weeks. He was paralysed down one side, his personality changed. He spent two years in a special rehab unit relearning how to live.

"He doesn't remember Patto," says Halsey. "He is seriously damaged, and all from a fucking bang on the head. The top of my head was smashed in, broke my skull, broke my top jaw off my skull and my bottom jaw was broken in five places. My hands were broken and my knee was shattered by the dashboard. Clive just had a cut and a fractured cheekbone, but he was unconscious. Trouble was, six weeks later he was still unconscious. Poor old Clive..."

Ollie Halsall had started the '80s writing advertising jingles with Halsey and touring with him, Kevin Ayers and Clive Griffiths. The trio also worked on sessions for a Tiswas spin-off album, *Tiswas Presents The Four Bucketeers*. It contains the last recordings to feature the three of them playing together. Late in 1980 Neil Innes and Halsey began work on Vivian Stanshall's solo album, *Teddy Boys Don't Knit*. Innes paid Ollie a visit. Halsall was living in a house with no phone or amenities, existing on food stolen from supermarkets and doorsteps. He'd also been spotted distributing National Front literature in the local town centre.

"He was living with a girl," explains Innes. "They hadn't paid

bills on the house for years. The only guitar he had was this star-shaped thing that belonged to Gary Glitter, and Glitter wanted it back. So we did this album with Viv, got £600 each. I went round to Ollie's and said, Did you get your cheque? 'Yeah, man. Come and see what I bought.' He had these plans for an ocean-going yacht. 'I'm gonna build a yacht, man. I'm gonna sail around the world. When I get more money, I'm gonna lay the keel in the garden.' I said, Why don't you get the phone put back on? Buy a guitar? Just buy a *little* boat? That's a typical Ollie story... unfathomable."

To be near Kevin Ayers for playing and recording, Halsall moved to Spain and got involved in producing and playing for Spanish artists, including a techno-pop group called Cinemaspop. Apart from these and a short stint in 1985 with John Cale, Ollie worked primarily with Ayers for the rest of his life, putting out five albums from 1983 to 1992.

"He sent me a telegram saying he'd really like to work with me again," says Ayers. "So he came with his girlfriend and they lived in my house for about three years. He didn't want to become a session musician, which he could have done so easily, and become rich. He said that was too souldestroying; he'd rather go through the rough times and choose the people he worked with. I was working with a manager and an English record company. That collapsed into a Spanish manager and a Spanish band. We both went downhill. His girlfriend left him and he got involved in the Spanish rock

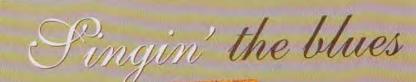
scene. They loved him. He played with some big bands, but they were heavily into drugs and Ollie flew off into the world of bad rock'n'roll. He made a lot of money, spent it and disappeared into this shadow world of fading Madrid musicians, descending into his own kind of despair which he never came out of."

Ollie was sharing a Madrid flat with somebody who may have been a dealer. On May 29, 1992, he was found dead of a drug-related heart attack. Fans placed a guitar volume knob on his gravestone in Majorca. "I miss him very much," says Ayers. "I'm totally non-produc-

tive since he died. He was my right hand. I've never met anybody like that."

"Ollie was born to be obscure," says Zoot Money. "He'd never have thought of just being a guitarist in a commercial band and having some money. It wasn't him. He had this sense of the absurd, living right out on the edge. He had this Dennis The Menace jumper which he loved. Wore it in all weathers. That was Ollie Halsall – Dennis The Menace."

With thanks to Roger Bunn, Nick Saloman and the compilers of the Patto/Timebox Fansite at http://members.aol.com/rutler/index.htm For all Patto-related details, visit the above site and http://home.sol.no/~wildhaue/patto/



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Your pocket guide to the lunatic genius of Patto.

ESPITE THEIR oeuvre being short and sharp, and all of it essential, most of it is currently out of print. The first two albums Patto and Hold Your Fire were repackaged as A Sense Of The Absurd in 1995 with four bonus tracks of unreleased demos. Monkey's Burn has only appeared as an average quality bootleg on Audio Archives. Roll 'Em, Smoke 'Em, Put Another Line Out, however, is still in the shops.

In addition John Halsey has put out Warts And All – the only live recording of the band ever to appear. Recorded at The Black Swan in Sheffield in 1971, it is available only by writing to: John Halsey, The Castle, Castle Street, Cambridge, CB3 0AJ, priced at £11.50 (£12 overseas). Until 1998, all of

seas). Until 1996, all of Timebox's recorded output was available as *Timebox*: *The Deram Anthology*. This is currently out of print, although stray copies have been sited in some of the bigger stores.

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