

DOWNLINERS SECT: ACTORS IN TRANSNATIONAL PROCESSES.

A Discussion on the Album *The Country Sect* from 1965

In August 1965, English Rhythm and Blues-group Downliners Sect released their second album and confused their fans. The band was well-known for playing rough Rhythm and Blues, close to garage-rock. They had a great support within the mod society, where they internationally were a cult band. The previous year, they had recorded an EP with among other songs *Beautiful Delilah*, the single *Little Egypt* and the album *The Sect*. The records were well received, and Downliners Sect was in magazines like *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* mentioned beside groups as Yardbirds, Who, Pretty Things and Rolling Stones.

The title of the new 1965-album was *The Country Sect*. On the sleeve you can read:

"While other artists have been gazing deeply into their crystal balls and sticking pins into such trends as 'Dylan' – 'Bacharach' and 'R. and B.' The DOWNLINERS SECT have blithely gone their own sweet way and recorded an album which is unashamedly country music...

If the Sect's faithful following spread the word about this LP there is a good chance that the next big trend in pop music could be country.¹

However, this was not the first time that Downliners Sect recorded music, that surprised their fans. In March and in June 1965, they released two different singles, which could be regarded as artistic breaks. Actually, at the same time they went back in the music history when they brought music from American rural areas to England.

The first one was *Wreck of the Old '97*, which was reviewed in *New Musical Express*. The clear connection to skiffle in the way Downliners Sect performs the traditional folk song was not observed by the reviewer. However, he wrote that:

"The traditional 'Wreck of the old '97 was once a Dixieland speciality and when performed by r-and-b group, the Downliners Sect, the outcome is a mixture of the two styles. Bounces along jauntily with a sort of railroad rhythm, with two voices duetting the sad saga of the ill-fated engine. Spoken introduction leads into weird novelty blues."²

¹ Mike Collier, Album sleeve, Downliners Sect, *The Country Sect*, E.M.I. Records 33SX1745.

² *New Musical Express* 12 March 1965 s 7.

The reviewer, on the other hand, drew attention to the innovation in Downliners Sect's performance of the traditional song. It couldn't really be determined by genre. It wasn't Dixieland and it wasn't Rhythm and Blues. To me, it is typical skiffle with a country touch while also having a garage-rock feel to it. The sequel *I Got Mine* was also reviewed in *New Musical Express*. Now, attention was drawn to the band's swing towards more pure country with the words:

"Well here's a turn up for the hook from r-and-b specialists, the Downliners Sect, who are on a country barn-dance kick in 'I Got Mine', on Columbia. It's a happy record, toe-tapping and infectious – with a chorus you can join in.

The lyrics amusing too. Altogether a disc to chase the blues away, but very out-of-character for this group.

Flip is a slowly swaying c-and-w Reeves-type ballad, which doesn't really suit the boys. In fact, I can't help wondering if it's a send-up."³

The flip side is the, what I mean, more Hank Williams-inspired *Waitin'.in Heaven Somewhere* with John Paul Jones on piano. He later played base in Led Zeppelin behind future country singer Robert Plant and alongside original skiffle guitarist Jimmy Page. Both songs appeared on *The Country Sect*.

The band's third single of 1965 came in October and was the folksy *Bad Storm Coming*, a song that also appeared on the album. It feels like it was inspired by The Byrds, who drew a lot of attention in England at the time. But perhaps even more of the wave of protest songs that swept England at this time with artists such as Barry McGuire, Joan Baez, Buffy Saint-Marie and Donovan. The B-side was made up of *Lonely and Blue*. The single was mentioned under the headline *Protest Corner* in *New Musical Express*, as part of the protest song wave, in the following words:

"'Bad Storm Coming' is not wild and turbulent as you might expect but is decidedly folksy with a steady mid-tempo rhythm and guitar figure. Downliners Sect harmonise well on this Columbia disc, but it doesn't have any real bite, and the lyrics is pessimistic rather than bitter. But it, too, is topical."⁴

How then, can the band's turnaround and becoming the first rhythm and blues or pop group in England since the skiffle period of the 1950s to consistently record a kind of anglicized American country music be explained?

³ *New Musical Express* 11 July 1965 s 4.

⁴ *New Musical Express* 8 October 1965 p 4.

When I, in an interview, asked the two front-members of the band Don Craine, who sadly passed away at the age of 76 two years ago, and Keith Grant, they clearly stated that it was not connected to business, nor to any thoughts of being brave or challenging the music industry. The reason was selfishness:

“We didn’t find it brave to record it. To be honest, it was selfish. We didn’t do it necessarily to sell a lot of records. From my point of view, we have made singles for the fans. When it came to the album, we did what we wanted to do. *Wreck of the Old ’97* and *I Got Mine* are triggers. We did the LP because we loved country music and that we wanted to show people that it was a really important part of the creation of British Rhyth’m and Blues. It was also to honor Lonnie Donegan and the skiffle, which actually was a starting point for what happened in the 60’s. Without Donegan, there wouldn’t have been the particular British Rhythm and Blues nor the British pop in the way it developed. We didn’t want to sing dreary sad songs all the time, so we picked up that we wanted to go back to Donegan. We wanted to pay tribute to him. Because if you look to what Donegan really did, he did a lot of country and blues stuff. White and black people’s. People like Leadbelly worked before he get in prison alongside white ones. The blacks were working alongside people like the Carter family and Jimmy Rogers and even Hank Williams. Hank Williams is on the border of rock music, very, very close. He was really great. If he had lived another five years he could have been a huge rock star... We all came from rock’n’roll and skiffle, all of us in England. Anyone who is denying that is probably lying.”⁵

So, what the Downliners Sect actually honored with the album was the kind of music they, at least Don Craine and Keith Grant, grew up with. It was the skiffle, a musical style- or genre – which was a result of transnational dialectical processes.

In other papers and articles, I have pointed out how the particular British skiffle emerged in the early 1950s as a result of transnational processes, in which American traditional jazz, blues and radical folk-music/country merged with British popular music, like music hall-ditties filled with expressions of English working-class life.⁶ Nearly ten years later, in 1964 and 1965, American folk music had some success in Britain. Particularly protest singers as Joan Baez and Barry McGuire became beside Bob Dylan

⁵ Interview with Don Craine and Keith Grant, 23 July 2017.

⁶ See e.g. Mats Greiff, “Skiffle – hemmagjord musik med kraft att förändra världen” in *Musikens makt*, RJ:s årsbok 2018, red: Jenny Björkman & Arne Jarrick, Stockholm 2018; Mats Greiff, ”Lonnie Donegan. From Trad Jazz to King of Skiffle and Variety Star”, in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music and Humor*, red: Thomas M Kitts & Nicolas Baxter-Moore, New York 2019

high-lighted in music magazines like *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*. This could have had some impact on Downliners as well, which means that transnational processes continued during the early 1960s, not only as an one-way movement from Britain to the US, but also in the other direction.

Don Craine, whose real name was Mick O'Donnell, grew up in Twickenham, West London together with other white people of Irish origin. In his family, music was part of daily life.

“My parents played the piano and my mother used to sing popular songs from music-halls but also American ones like *Yellow Rose of Texas*. I became quite good at the squeeze-box. I had a guitar as well. Sometimes I played in school and sung Cliff Richard-numbers and skiffle songs,.. Skiffle was a life-changer with Lonnie Donegan and just the tree chords. It was great...

I actually went to a concert. My parents took me there to see Donegan. I can't remember when. It was in the early days and that was great... He had a thing when he used to call children at the stage to clap. I remember I had to go up. I loved it.”⁷

When Don started his first group, it played skiffle. They had just guitars, a washboard and a tea-chest base. In early 1962, the band got a drummer and called themselves the Downliners, after a Jerry Lee Lewis-song.⁸ Later that year, Keith became member of the band. He used to play drums in the Vigilantes.

“When I get together with Don he said that the band needed a base player and we agreed that I could do it. My dear father bought me a base guitar, a real one. Then we changed name to Downliners Sect.”⁹

In 1964, The Rolling Stones held residency at the famous Club 51, originally Ken Colyer's jazz-club, Colyer was one of the inventors of British skiffle and he still, besides trad-jazz, occasionally played it in the early 60s. When Stones became too big, they left club 51 for bigger venues and Downliners Sect succeeded Stones and took residency. Here they recorded their first EP:s and singles, among others the big hit *Little Egypt* and became a high-lighted Rhythm and Blues-band. However, in 1965, they returned to their roots, or as they express it themselves:

“Another inspiration from the country is that we like our songs to be little stories, not just “I love you, I love you, etc.” but a story which is a country approach. You have to make an effort in rock music sometimes and tell a story. I also used to use an autoharp,

⁷ Interview with Don Craine and Keith Grant, 23 July 2017.

⁸ Interview with Don Craine and Keith Grant., 23 July 2017

⁹ Interview with Don Craine and Keith Grant, 23 July 2017.

which is a heritage from the Carter Family... If you put in contact with the old country and western stuff it is a bit quirky and a bit slower. You had been to West Virginia, so you know what it is all about. I cheated with the banjo. I could not play banjo, so it is a guitar banjo. There is a washboard player as well. It is our drummer Johnny Sutton's younger brother. He was in a jug band called The Dedicated Men. He came in and he was great. It was fun, we brought something old to make something new. We went back as much as we wanted to bring the music forward. The music went forward as we went back to the time it was popular. Some of it worked, some didn't."¹⁰

The transnational return to the roots wasn't commercially successful to the band. Sometimes, when they played country, fans could pull the plug out of the wall to stop the sound, and the interest for the group slowly faded away. It should take another 30 years before country became the big trend in pop-music.

However, Downliners Sect, with their country-album can be credited as the band who brought back country-music to English pop. Thereby, they paved the way to other groups, like Rolling Stones, Kinks, Small Faces and even the Beatles that occasionally recorded country or at least country-inspired songs. In that way, Downliners Sect were important actors in transnational processes that brought pop-music forward.

¹⁰ Interview with Don Craine and Keith Grant 23 July 1917