

“Chicago Transit Authority”--Chicago (1968)

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Essay by Mark Plotnick (guest post)*



Album cover

Becoming The Chicago Transit Authority

For over 200 years, modern brass and reed instruments have shaped nearly every form of music--rock and roll included. Along came the Beatles and the rock music revolution embraced the amplified sounds of guitar, bass, drums and sometimes keyboard.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Columbia Records signed several acts that re-established the role of horn and reed instruments in rock music. The Flock, Electric Flag, Buckingham and Blood, Sweat and Tears received critical acclaim, but all paled next to their label mate—Chicago --one of America’s most commercially successful and longest-running bands to date. Since 1969, Chicago has sold a staggering number of records including 21 Top 10 singles, ten No. 1 singles, five consecutive No. 1 albums and 25 albums earning platinum sales status.

From the get-go, Chicago’s *raison d’etre* was to bring horns back to a primary place in popular music. “In the Swing Era, horns were the vocals of the time,” stated big band enthusiast, Lee Loughnane. “Our goal was to make horns the lead voice again in rock music, and we’ve been pretty successful at it.”

Chicago’s seven original members were on a fast track early thanks to natural talent, musical parents, band instructors, formal training, and woodshedding. But the concept of a rock ‘n’ roll band with horns sprang from the mind of founding member, Walter Parazaider, who at the time was studying orchestral clarinet and English Literature at Chicago’s DePaul University.

Parazaider, a saxophonist and flutist, sought out formally trained and street-credentialed musicians to act on his dream. The first to join were teenage friend and local guitar wunderkind, Terry Kath; then DePaul University student and trumpet player, Lee Loughnane, and Danny Seraphine, a local drummer who took private music lessons at DePaul. The four called themselves The Missing Links.

The four grew to five with the addition of James Pankow, another DePaul University student who excelled on trombone. According to Pankow's parents, James was gyrating to the sound and beat of music before he could walk.

Needing a keyboard player, the Missing Links found Charles Lamm, a Roosevelt University music student and jazz enthusiast playing and singing in a South Side Chicago dive. When Lamm was asked if he could play the bass pedals, he fibbed and said yes. For the moment, the band had a makeshift bass player. The sextet rehearsed James Brown and Wilson Pickett songs in Parazaider's parents' basement and renamed themselves The Big Thing because they were "bigger and brassier" than most bands.

While playing regional gigs, they crossed paths with another DePaul student--James Cetera--who played bass guitar and sang in The Exceptions, a popular Midwest club band. Cetera watched The Big Thing perform and wanted "in." The band now had a legitimate bass player whose tenor voice provided range to the baritone vocals of Kath and Lamm. The six were now seven and the unit was complete minus management and a recording contract.

Enter James Guercio, another DePaul student, friend and musician. Guercio was impressed with The Big Thing and had an "in" as a record producer with CBS. He became their manager, moved the boys to LA, and changed the band's name to the Chicago Transit Authority (a.k.a. CTA) named after the city's public transportation system bus line Guercio rode to school. But that name was short lived after the city of Chicago threatened a lawsuit. The band's name simply became Chicago.

THE ALBUM

In early 1969, the band traveled to New York and began work on their first album titled "The Chicago Transit Authority." It was a blend of psychedelic rock, pop, balladry, classical, jazz and rhythm 'n' blues. Terry Kath's scorching guitar was prominent along with an abundance of extended jams, political messaging, soulful three-part harmonies and a triple brass attack that drove the songs' Memphis style.

Originally intended as a one-disc release, the band had enough material for a double LP. They wanted to make a big statement and negotiated a deal.

Despite being well rehearsed, bandmembers were inexperienced working in a studio and were given scant studio time by Columbia/CBS.

The first song they tackled was "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" credited to Robert Lamm. According to woodwinds player Walter Parazaider, they tried recording the song live but to no avail, so they developed a process of first laying down the rhythm section followed by horns. It would serve as a blueprint for future recordings.

SIDE ONE

The four-sided, 12-track debut begins with “Introduction,” a muscular six minute and 35-minute gut punch with layered dynamics. It was an opening statement that revealed all of the musical tools Chicago had at its disposal: Terry Kath’s soulful, robust vocals and genre bending guitar skills (he receives song credit); horns and woodwinds that could punch or create atmosphere; whimsical arrangements; soulful keyboards and a rhythm section that could complement, drive or anchor the band as needed.

But it’s the song’s words that tell the story of Chicago: who they are, how they feel, where they’ve been and what they aim to do musically:

Hey there, everybody. Please don’t romp or roam. We’re a little nervous. ‘Cause we’re so far from home.

So, this is what we do. Sit back and let us groove. And let us work on you. We’ve all spent years preparing. Before this group was born.

With Heaven’s help, it blended. And we do thank the Lord. So, if you’ve nothing to do. Sit back and let us through. And let us play for you.

Song two is the existential and rhetorical, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is” (4:33). For the first minute and 14 seconds, Robert Lamm’s curiously dissonant piano chords meander between jazz and classical motifs. Where is this song headed? Five seconds later, we find out and the hooks take hold.

Enter the horns and brass, drums, bass, melody and lead vocal (courtesy of Robert Lamm) along with sublime multiple part vocal harmonies. At the 3:33 mark, a baritone soliloquy sneaks into the listeners right ear (for those wearing headphones) and utters, “People running everyone...don’t know where to go...don’t know where I am....” Proto rap perhaps?

“Beginnings” is the final song on side one and comes as close to a love song as any cut on this debut. It’s a love song in the Chicago tradition. Radio friendly. Big and bold. Compositional complexities. According to Robert Lamm (songwriter and lead vocal), the song’s idea came to him while growing up in Brooklyn. He walked past a movie theater where an usher was outside smoking a cigarette. Lamm asked him the time and the man responded with what became the song title.

The song kicks off with chords rapidly strummed on Kath’s acoustic as Seraphine’s drums kickstart the tempo and Cetera’s bass lays down the groove. Robert Lamm sings:

When I’m with you, it doesn’t matter where we are. Or what we’re doing, I’m with you that’s all that matters...Only the beginning of what I want to feel forever, yeah...Only the beginning, only just the start.

At the song’s outro, the words “Only the beginning,” are sung repeatedly 19 times. At the 6:15 mark, the music and vocals end and all that remains is one minute and 30 seconds of percussive

interplay over joyful scat-style gibberish. This final portion of the song was often cut short on most AM radio.

SIDE TWO

The first track “Questions 67 and 68” (5:01) was written by keyboardist Robert Lamm who also sings harmony. It was the band’s first single. The numbers 67 and 68 represent the years 1967 and 1968 during which Lamm was in a relationship he and his girlfriend were questioning.

Danny Seraphine’s drumming starts things off followed by a fanfare of dramatic sounding brass (James Pankow’s horn charts) and Terry Kath’s soloing up and down the fretboard. In comes the distinctive singing voice (soft, airy, vulnerable and warm) of bassist Peter Cetera.

The song’s steadiness receives a subtle, galloping tempo change at the 2:45 mark courtesy of Seraphine’s drums. Before returning to the chorus, Kath sneaks in a few guitar licks reminding everyone he’s still in the mix while Cetera and the boys bring the song to a highly satisfying conclusion.

The song in its original length peaked at No. 71 on the Billboard Chart. A few years later, it was shortened and peaked at No. 24 on the Billboard Hot 100.

Cueing the band’s second song on side two is Robert Lamm’s command, “*Alright, here we go.*” The next 39 seconds of “Listen” (3:22) build with the brass section playing galloping rock progressions as Cetera’s treble-boosted bass line builds tension. And on top of it all is Terry Kath sustaining a single guitar note throughout this section. Meanwhile, Danny Seraphine’s snare cracks and cowbell lovers get their fix. The first verse begins with Robert Lamm singing:

“If you think that we’re here for the money you could be right, you know. But the bread is not good here. Wasn’t always like that, you know. I said, all you got to do is listen.”

This song references the band’s early day’s playing bars and clubs where the attention of patrons was not on the music. Lamm requests a little acknowledgement...and making a few bucks would be nice:

“If it’s good you can tell us so. Or you can smile...it could be so nice you know. If only you would listen.”

The final song on side two begins with Terry Kath’s funky rhythms joined by Peter Cetera’s bass notes dancing beneath and Danny Seraphines time-keeping propulsion and complex fills. At the 50-second mark, “Poem 58” (8:35) segues into a steady groove that sets the table for Terry Kath’s overdriven guitar and a Cream-like improvised jam (think “Spoonful” on “Wheels of Fire”). Kath’s guitar even takes on Eric Clapton’s signature “woman tone” as the three musicians battle it out for superiority. Some social media posters describe the song as Jimi Hendrix with horns.

At the 4:50 mark, the frenetic jam suddenly ends, the tempo slows, and other instruments (trumpet, tenor sax, trombone and electric piano) enter the fray that turns slower, darker and more bluesy in a minor key. It isn't until five minutes and 20 seconds in that we hear Robert Lamm's lead vocal and backup harmonies.

This is a killer song loaded with dynamics, jazzy improvisational delights, stupefying horn arrangements, raw instrumental might and cagey lyrics. And last but not least, the power and soulfulness of Chicago's multiple-part vocal harmonies. This underappreciated jam still impresses to this day!

SIDE THREE

Jimi Hendrix was a Terry Kath fan, and "Free Form Guitar" (6:49) demonstrates why. It's just Terry Kath and his Fender Stratocaster plugged into a Bogan PA (acting as a preamp) run through a Showman amplifier with two fifteen-inch speakers. The album's liner notes confirm that no electronic gimmicks or effects were used on this selection.

Just sustain and sizzling distortion. If the sounds of interstellar space could be conveyed via an amplified guitar, this is what they'd sound like. This cut is not for everyone. But for guitar God fans and fans of Terry Kath, it's not to be skipped over as many typical listeners do.

"Southern California Purples" (6:28) has little in common with Chicago South Side blues, but it is a blues song nevertheless...Chicago style. The tune begins with a chuckle; someone uttering "alright"; guitarist Terry Kath's false start and then more gibberish as if the band were warming up at a club.

And then wham...Kath plays a pile-driving guitar riff; Cetera duplicates Kath's notes on bass; Seraphine's drums kick in and Lamm contributes seventh chords on his Hammond organ. The musicians enter an A minor, riff-heavy 12-bar blues progression that many a fledgling band have jammed on at one time or another.

Robert Lamm's vocals are as soulful, commanding and enthusiastic as the best blues belters. Lamm's organ and the horn section fade in and out at key moments--but all serving Terry Kath's glorious riffing and fat tone. When Kath plays, it elicits awe in the enormous instrumental power this man has at his disposal.

Four minutes and forty seconds into "Southern California Purples," the band has some fanciful fun with the lyrics, much like the Beatles would with their recordings. Kath's sustains a note at the bridge and Robert Lamm sings in his best John Lennon voice,

"I am, he is, you are, he is, you are me and we are all together, whoa, whoa."

Do I really need to tell you what song that line is taken from? Didn't think so. So, what does the song title mean? There have been many opinions. For example, the word purples (plural) represents a combination of the blues (symbolizing sadness) and reds (symbolizing the California sun or creative energy). Or is it simply Southern California 1960's slang for drugs?

The final cut on side three is “I’m a Man” (7:42) a song written by Steve Winwood and record producer Jimmy Miller. It was first recorded in 1967 by the Spencer Davis Group of which Winwood was lead vocalist and keyboardist. Winwood was only 18 years old at the time, but his voice sounded mature beyond his years.

Chicago’s version contains a few lyrical changes and a longer playing time--thanks mostly to a two-minute stretch that features a mid-song drum and percussion jam bolstered by a background of human whoops, yeas and hollers.

“I’m a Man” again hammers home Terry Kath’s muscular rhythm and lead guitar prowess (listen to his use of the Vox Cry Baby wah-wah) and the vocal versatility and virility of Terry Kath, Peter Cetera and Robert Lamm--all taking a verse with the latter two getting an additional verse. All singers participate during choruses.

As with the Spencer Davis Group’s original, Lamm’s hard driving organ is integral to the song and often paired with the horn section for added punctuation. These boys can play!

SIDE FOUR

The final side on disc two is a departure from the contents on the other three. It begins with “Prologue, August 29, 1968,” a 50-second recording taken from the protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The words and sounds of Black militants, demonstrators and police are captured with the most memorable being the chant “The whole world is watching.”

These chants lead into the next cut “Someday” (August 29, 1968), written by trombonist James Pankow and keyboardist Robert Lamm. Lamm and Cetera share lead vocals.

Nineteen hundred and sixty-eight was a politically volatile year with the Viet Nam war and Civil Rights issues smoldering and political assassinations leaving the nation deeply divided. The band’s namesake city was host to the convention that left a blemish on the city of Chicago, Mayor Daley and Chicago’s law enforcement for its heavy-handed tactics. During verse four, Lamm and his bandmates sing:

Twist and turn your head around ‘till everything’s unclear. Twist and turn your arm around until it is not there. And they’d love to burn you.

Robert Lamm and his bandmates take the next verse:

Can you look around now and tell us what’s to be? Can you look inside yourself and tell us what you see? As you feel the rumblings as your head comes crumbling down. And you know what I mean.

Why the politics? Why not? It was a time when the band Chicago and many others were politically inclined. Protest music has long been an American musical tradition.

Side four concludes with the song “Liberation” (14:16). It’s another song that makes the listener feel like a fly on the wall of the recording studio. A voice utters “*eleven*,” Seraphine pounds his skins, Kath tunes his guitar, Lamm places hands on organ keys, and Cetera plucks a bass note. Then comes the count of One, two, three. And we have music!

“Liberation” opens with a happy and liberating motif until a fanfare of horns give way to Terry Kath’s ominous guitar sustain and feedback. An extended jam of rock, psychedelia, acid jazz, and metal ensue at breakneck speed. The band does go “off the rails” on a few occasions, but the song was recorded entirely live, complete and uncut according to the liner notes.

At 11 minutes and 20 seconds, Kath eases his bandmates into a cool-down moment with pensive, mood-lifting guitar chords and pickings. The band then crescendos into a furious climax with the outro containing the song’s lone vocal sung by Terry Kath: “*Whoa, thank you people.*” And there you have it--The Chicago Transit Authority’s self-titled debut double LP.

The album hit the shelves in April of 1969 and was titled “The Chicago Transit Authority.” According to James Pankow, it was a hit on the new and powerful FM radio stations popular with college students: “AM radio wouldn’t touch it because we were unpackageable. It was too different and the cuts on the album were so long that they weren’t really tailored for radio airplay unless they were edited.”

It didn’t seem to matter. The band’s double album debut climbed to No. 17 on the Billboard 200 and enjoyed a record-setting run of 171 weeks on the US charts. To date, it’s been certified double platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

As future Chicago records achieved even greater success, radio station programmers looked back and made hits out of the songs “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?,” “Beginnings,” and “Questions 67 & 68.”

They had become famous. Walter Parazaider explained, “It was amazing because we were close friends. We had gone through this upheaval of leaving Chicago and moving to LA at a young age, leaving our families and just rolling the dice. We stuck real close together and kept everyone’s ego in check. The one thing that seemed to help us was our facelessness behind the [trademark Chicago] logo.”

The inner jacket’s liner notes were written by producer James William Guercio. The final portion reads:

The printed word can never aspire to document a truly musical experience, so if you must call them something, speak of the city where all save one were born; where all of them were schooled and bred, and where all of this incredible music went down barely noticed; call the CHICAGO.

Mark Plotnick is the co-author of “Classic Rock--Photographs from Yesterday and Today” (published 2019 by Amherst Media) and “‘70s Chicagoland Rock Concerts” (published 2024 by The History Press). Plotnick also contributes CD and concert reviews for “Chicago Blues Guide” and does ad hoc writing for other publications. Mark Plotnick and rock concert photographer Jim Summaria co-host the weekly program “That Rock Show.”

Bandmembers

Walter Parazaider (Woodwinds, Background Vocals), Terry Kath (Guitar, Lead Vocals), Daniel Seraphine (Drums), Lee Loughnane (Trumpet, Background Vocals), James Pankow (Trombone, brass arrangements), Robert Lamm (Keyboard, Lead Vocals), Peter Cetera (Bass, Lead Vocals)

Album Cover Art: Nick Fasciano

Producer: James William Guercio

Engineer: Fed Catero

Released by Columbia Records/CBS

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.