

**This interview with
GRACE SLICK
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 29, 2024**



Library of Congress: When you joined Jefferson Airplane, it was already an established group. Did you find it difficult to become a full part of something that had already been formed?

Grace Slick: No, not all. We had all played together. There were several bands, we all played together. There were maybe three bands—and we’d do one night at the Fillmore, the next at the Carousel Ballroom.... They were small venues. And we’d play one night, and Big Brother and the Holding Company would play the next night. Like I said, we all knew each other.

LC: Many vocalists, male and female, consider you an inspiration. When you were growing up, did you have any musicians that inspired you?

GS: At the time, I was really... I liked Gil Evans and Miles Davis and their “Sketches of Spain” album. “White Rabbit” is really a Spanish march. How it got popular in rock, I don’t know. And its lyrics were very carefully reworked just so it’s not plagiarism. But [the song] had nothing to do with rock and roll....

Well, our parents read to us or we read to ourselves when we got a little older, we read. And “Alice in Wonderland”—that little girl takes *five* different drugs in that story. Then our parents are asking us, “Why are you taking drugs?” Well, were you listening? WERE YOU LISTENING?

That song is two things: I mean, it’s not “pro-drug,” it’s not pro-vodka, but it is pro-psychedelics. Now, if you are in bad shape, you shouldn’t take psychedelics; it will make you nuttier than you already are. But if you’re not, they will open you up. And, yes, it [the song] is pro-books.

LC: Were you mad or upset that people didn’t get the subtext of that song?

GS: No. I knew for a very long time, other people’s opinion of you is very personal to them. Their opinion of you is for their own reasons. That’s fine. There’s people who don’t like me. There are people I don’t like: Donald Trump is one of them. Netanyahu is another one of them. They are ruining the culture. They are a stain on the beautiful painting of our culture.

LC: When did you know you could sing?

GS: Well, I can't sing very well but I can sing well enough for rock and roll. 'Cause I can sing loud. My mother was a singer for a while. My father was, too, they'd sing around the house. And me, too. So I knew I could carry a tune.

Am I marvelous as a singer? No. I mean Barbra Streisand is a great singer. I'm not a great singer but I do well with what I have.

LC: Had you recorded with your previous group The Great Society?

GS: We did a little, in a small studio in San Francisco. We were so bad. They finally got Sly Stone to come in and Sly taught each of us—well, not the singers—but taught the guitar players and the bass player and everyone what to do on the songs.

There is probably some old Great Society stuff floating around somewhere.

LC: When you joined Airplane, you brought to them two vitally important songs: “White Rabbit” and “Somebody to Love.” Did you have to “sell” those to the band or were they happy to have them?

GS: Oh, they were happy to have them! I mean we were pretty loose in those days. I know Billy Joel once said we're not very good....

You know, all the East Coast bands were trained in the Brill Building in a tiny room with a single piano, and you worked over and over until you got it right. They were used to doing commercial jingles and, doing that, they can't screw around....

But we weren't trained musicians ...some knew music better than others but Billy was right.... We were a very loose group. Fun and different.

You know, most songs before the '60s were about love or they were to lift the spirits, you know, during World War II. And they were BEAUTIFUL songs. But then we switched over to what we haven't done before: writing about politics, because of the wars, because of people like Nixon and him making large mistakes. We started writing about what was going on and not just songs about who you would like to screw.

LC: In various incarnations of Jefferson and Airplane and Starship and as a solo artist you have had many enduring songs and singles. But why do you think “Surrealistic Pillow” album has become so legendary?

GS: ALL of the songs were good. Marty Balin wrote good love songs; Jorma and Jack were fans of the blues and early folk music. Paul Kanter wrote about going into space and what we were going to do up there. I wrote screwy stuff—“White Rabbit” and “Eskimo Blue Day.” “Eskimo” doesn't relate to love, politics. It's just what the weather is going to be like as you travel from Scandinavia to Africa. It changes. Everything changes. Things are not going to stay the same. So be ready for it. Count on it.

I think it has on it a good representation of the time: it was good, simple and easy for people to get up next too and is [now] a good representation of that time.

You know, I paint. That's what I do now. And, sometimes, I'll do a painting of someone and it's just...off. It's just not right. But this album was *right* in its representation.

LC: By the way, I read your memoir, “Somebody to Love?,” many years ago and I think it’s one of the best autobiographies I’ve ever read—

GS: “Somebody to Love”—question mark! It’s kind of funny: my memory is just dog doo. It always has been. I don’t know when it went to hell. I did a play when I was a junior in high school and I played both parts. An no problem. But now? Maybe drugs did it? I have no idea. My memory is shot. Used to be I was always afraid I’d forget the lyrics to the songs but then the music cues your mind. Once I got on stage, the lyrics kicked in.