

A U T O S A L V A G E

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

I FIRST HEARD THE LYRICS to “Auto Salvage” in the spring of 1968, when the song was brand new:

*Some time ago there were better cars
Better than your Fords and Chevies
But you'll find them all together in
The auto salvage now*

At the time the words rang in a quaint, oddly anachronistic way against the rumbling distorted guitars, frenetic drumming, dissonant harmonies, and constant tempo and time signature changes of the music. That music, provided by the band Autosalvage, sounded very much of the moment, which is to say, forward looking, part of the vanguard of a cultural revolution that we thought at the time was unstoppable.

Now the lyrics seem almost unbearably prophetic.

I N 1968 I GRADUATED from high school and started college, began my first love affair, and sold my first short story. It didn't seem like the world was ending before my eyes.

But it was. The list of events seems a cliché now: the King assassination, the second Kennedy assassination, the riots at the Democratic National Convention, the election of Richard Nixon. Less known but equally significant is the secret deal with Strom Thurmond that put Nixon in the White House in exchange for ending integration. Meanwhile the Vietnam War went on and on.

In music we got soft rock and then disco. Radio formats became increasingly targeted and the days of hearing soul, psychedelic, pop, and country songs all in the same hour on the same station were over. Instead of moving to San Francisco, where their music might have found a popular base, Autosalvage broke up, and there was no second album.

T HE UK ACADIA LABEL re-released *Autosalvage* on CD in 2001, and to their great credit, has kept it in print. Listening to it in 2007, it seems impossible that this music could have come from anywhere but the late 60s.

The closest comparison is to the Jefferson Airplane's 1967 psychedelic masterpiece, *After Bathing at Baxter's*. Lead guitarist Rick Turner has some of Jorma's buzz and bite, while sharing many of the same folk and blues roots—the traditional “Good Morning Blues” is the album's one cover song. Drummer Darius Lanoue Davenport has some of the same snare-centric, tireless invention and energy of the Airplane's Spencer Dryden.

The album flows seamlessly from track to track, with interstitial material that is also very much of its time, including a music box, backward guitar and percussion, and the first sounds on the album, a spoken introduction in a

woman's soft British accent that still seems like pure magic to me: "I know a place, high in the mountains, in Switzerland, where there are lakes, and trees, and woodland paths—and music! Beautiful music everywhere."

The virtuoso instrumental tracks include cornets and sackbuts played by Davenport's father, as well as banjos, lutes, dulcimers, oboes, and pianos played by the band, all mixed deeply into the electric, eclectic rock and roll.

Over this soundtrack 2nd guitarist Thomas Danaher (with harmony from Davenport) sings words designed to help you "Come away from the everyday/Thoughts of how you're doing." The backward-looking theme of "Auto Salvage" continues in "Ancestral Wants" ("Grasp the hands and family ties/Of those who've gone before you") and "A Hundred Days" ("and a hundred days/A hundred years ago"). If some of the lyrics are obscurely metaphysical ("Second Hours wants to go where the sun don't never shine"), at least they never fall into Brill Building prefabrication.

The band had some important connections—bassist Skip Boone was the brother of the Lovin' Spoonfull's Steve Boone; Turner had played with Ian and Sylvia, Tom Rush, Taj Mahal, and others; Frank Zappa was a fan. They had a smart album full of great songs and great playing. But it wasn't enough.

YOU CAN READ the word "autosalvage" as a neologism that means "saving yourself." When I listen to this joyous, intricate, unique, and ultimately beautiful music, it revives a vital part of me, the part that lived and loved and believed in 1968.

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