

Being a relatively brief, utterly biased, and somewhat rudimentary history of the band:

Christopher Milk

[Most of the quoted material is from John Mendelssohn's "I, Caramba: Confessions of an Antkiller", a book/CD set that you should already own and prize, and published by Rhino Records in 1995.

Any quotes in italics are gleaned from the Christopher Milk Fan Club Facebook site or from related correspondence.]



Contrary to popular belief, it was well before John Mendels(s)ohn would achieve a fair amount of notoriety as a provocateur rock journalist (in the tradition of his then-hero Nik Cohn) that the band *Christopher Milk* was born.

For John Mendelssohn, The Beatles' appearance on Ed Sullivan was a non-starter. However, by the time "A Hard Day's Night" smacked his retinas, it would be all over but for the shouting: "Much as I adored every frame, I could hardly wait for it to end so I could assemble a group of my own with me as the American Ringo." Perhaps it was no small coincidence that this group, The Fogmen, would include Jim Odom – who, some years later, would appear on stage as Paul McCartney in one of the earliest stage productions of "Beatlemania". The Fogmen (in a manner befitting their name) dissipated rather quickly: "I joined the workforce, first serving junk food in a snack bar at Zuma Beach and later selling admissions to its parking lot while the two Fogmen who'd actually known how to play their instruments went on to The Inrhodes, sort of The Beatles of greater Santa Monica."

John's freshman year at UCLA would bring more opportunities for the "American Ringo": "In spite of my aversion to jazz, I formed a jazz-rock trio, The 1930 Four, with a 15-year-old guitarist (Mark "Tot" Taylor) and a keyboardist who hated me for my ineptitude (Victor Spiegel)." After Ed Robbins joined on keyboards to make it a legitimate quartet, John brought in fellow Bruin Dennis Castanares: "*JM [John Mendelssohn] asked me to come in and help the band cut a demo of their theme song "1930" (Why that seemed an interesting subject or theme is lost unto the ages), so I borrowed Greg Laughlin's (dormie at Sproul Hall) yellow P-bass and met them in a studio somewhere on UCLA's north campus, but in temp buildings long since gone, up by Campbell Hall. We cut the demo with me on bass (Vic Spiegel had been doing bass-lines a la Doors on the keyboard) and high backup vocals, and the band liked the result enough to ask me in.*"

As the fates would have it, John once again found himself without a band: “I was thrown out of The 1930 Four, which had gone from a trio to a quintuplet, but kept drumming, poorly. I joined a blues band in spite of my hatred of the blues”. Naturally, John’s tenure in this outfit would also be short-lived, but for reasons purely his own: *“I don't even remember what that blues band was called. I do remember being amazed that one of them could play both keyboards and guitar. I left because of the Groucho Marx Syndrome. Inexplicably, they really liked my playing; how was I supposed to want to be in a group that wanted me?”*

Having survived his freshman year at UCLA, John “became semi-friendly with a guitarist who’d formerly been the sole Anglo member and saxophonist of an otherwise entirely Japanese-American surf band, and who tried to disguise his great shyness as surliness”. The band was DAVE & THE VAN-TAYS – and this former guitarist and reedsman was Ralph Oswald (second from the left).



Ralph’s tenure in the band afforded an early exposure to the professional recording studio environment (at Capitol) and of sharing the stage with the likes of Dick Dale, Cannibal & The Headhunters and Gary Lewis & The Playboys. The band enjoyed serious Hollywood connections, thanks to Barry Weinstein, including a booking at The Daisy Club -- playing at Frank Sinatra’s 50th birthday party. According to Ralph, *“by late 1965, Steve and Barry left in quick succession to the kind of colleges their folks could afford, and The Van Tays turned in a new direction.”*

Armed with a mutual sense of the equal (yet opposing) parts of ambition and opprobrium, chaos and craft, John & Ralph's meeting was immediately fruitful: "We wrote a rock opera together in about 45 minutes and played with different bass guitarists as *Christopher Milk*, a name I'd seen in San Francisco and been amused by, at fraternities & aerospace socials, the latter thanks to my dad."



John Mendelssohn also recalls:
"In the summer of 1969, Ralph and I were nearly able to recruit as singer Mr. Greg Munford, the lead voice on Strawberry Alarm Clock's Incense and Peppermints, and sort of the Todd Rundgren of Pasadena, leader of the Who-ish Shapes of Sound. We'd written a rock opera, you see - A Thrilling Account of My Adolescence. While Ralph played and sang the whole thing into his tape recorder, poor Munford looked on with mounting incredulity."

It would be around this time that the erstwhile winner of Orville Wright Junior High's annual writing contest would be given the opportunity to ply his trade. Once a regular contributor to the school paper's entertainment section, John suddenly found himself providing copy to the likes of Rolling Stone magazine and Warner/Reprise (on behalf of The Kinks). "Thus, while most of my fellow new B.A.'s in sociology would spend the next couple of years working a succession of numbingly demoralizing jobs for peanuts and wondering what to do with their lives, I'd start pulling in gigantobucks in a glamour industry the Monday after the Friday I finished college."



Somewhat rather expectedly, the humble beginnings of *Christopher Milk* were hijacked in the process, though John kept his hand in music by briefly joining a brotherly pair of classmates from UCLA named Ron & Russell Mael in the band Halfnelson, later to be known as Sparks. A number of demos were recorded (some with the help of fellow Bruin and Christopher Milk founder, Ralph Oswald), but, as with The 1930 Four before, the Mael brothers would be moving on without him: “They wanted to be precious and adorable, as they wrongly imagined The Kinks to be, while I, a Who fan, wanted to be intimidating. I was soon asked not to be in the group any more.”

A couple of chance meetings would eventually lead to a rebirth of *Christopher Milk* proper, however. Enter Kirk Henry, whom John would first encounter at his girlfriend’s birthday party, then again on the UCLA campus. Kirk had been a member of the late ‘60s outfit, The Stack, whose claims to near-fame included a signing with Columbia records, a Pepsi-Cola commercial in the can, and a behind-the-scenes contribution to the soundtrack of “Wild In The Streets”.

John would later encounter Mr. Twister, “a little photographer who’d taken to hanging out at the office of the magazine I worked for” – and during a discussion of Iggy Pop’s stage antics while performing at The Whisky A Go-Go with The Stooges, Twister “intimated that if he were in a band, he’d be willing to do likewise” (i.e., leaping off the stage, crawling between tables, and gnawing on people’s shoes).

“Out of this conversation was *Christopher Milk* reborn, with Kirk, whom I quickly rechristened The Kiddo because I shared my disinclination to call anyone by the same name everyone else did, on bass guitar. There was some discussion about when we’d rehearse. It seemed to me that to rehearse was the last thing we wanted to do, the first being setting up somewhere without permission and making as much noise as possible while the little photographer – whom The Kiddo rechristened Mr. Twister – gnawed on shoes.”



While the members of the new *Christopher Milk* lineup “compromised the purity of our musical vision and rehearsed”, John continued to write challenging and uncompromising prose for *Rolling Stone* magazine. Despite his ascent into the top of the Rock Cognoscenti pecking order, the lure of the stage still beckoned: “I decided that nothing less than the Pope’s balcony could satisfy me now, and appointed myself *Christopher Milk*’s lead singer.” Tres Feltman, a friend of Ralph Oswald’s brother Jim, was enlisted to fill the drum throne and guitarist Donnie “Flashfinger Bazbo” Alvarado was also pulled into the fray. John also picked up the promotional gauntlet, dropping the name of *Christopher Milk* in the pages of the aforementioned *Rolling Stone* (here, in his review of The Who’s “Who’s Next” LP):

“And there you have it, chums, an album that, despite a degree of sober calculatedness that would prove fatal to a lesser group, ranks right up there with David Bowie’s and Black Oak Arkansas’s and Crazy Horse’s and Procol Harum’s and Alice Cooper’s and *Christopher Milk*’s as among the most wondrous of 1971.” - John Mendelsohn, *Rolling Stone* #90, September 2, 1971

The “most wondrous” *Christopher Milk* release alluded to was gestated in a stop-start fashion (due to postponements at the behest of Carole King’s muse) at A&M Records’ studio. None worthy of an earful of the proceedings would be denied; amongst those favored

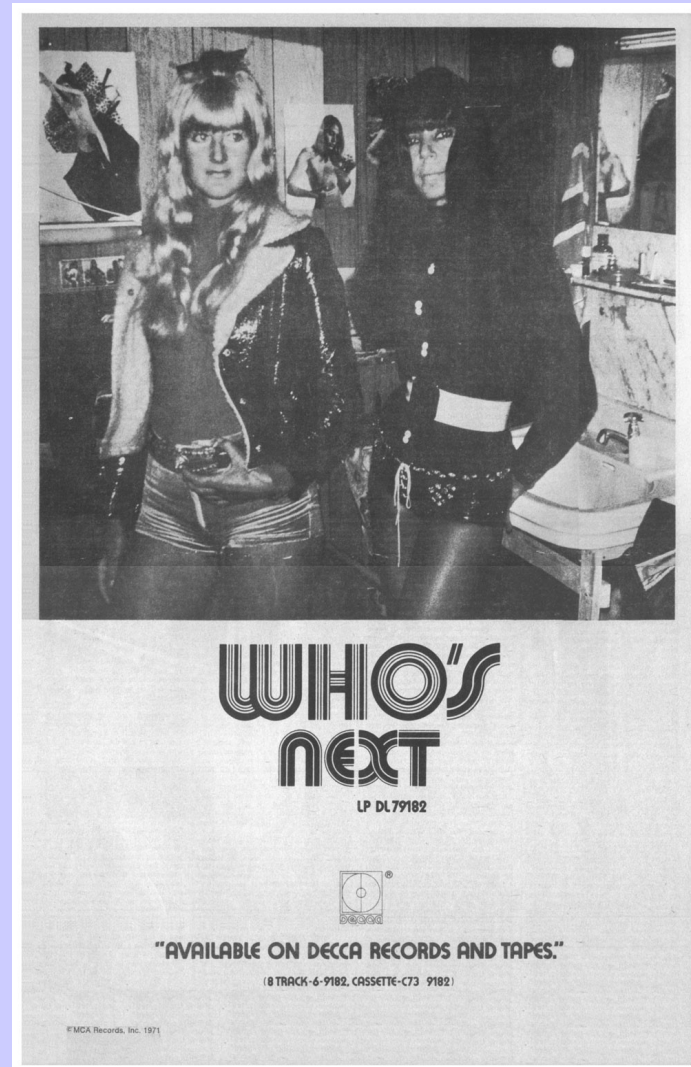
was a young David Bowie, who would place them at the #3 slot for an NME feature, “How The World’s Best Picked The World’s Best”. United Artists would be deigned fortunate enough to release the results.

“Now I had a Porsche and the most stunning blonde in Los Angeles on my arm. And a record deal with a major label, for which, with me producing, made a disastrously amateurish E.P.”

DAVID BOWIE



1. Iggy Pop
2. Paul Rodgers
3. Christopher Milk

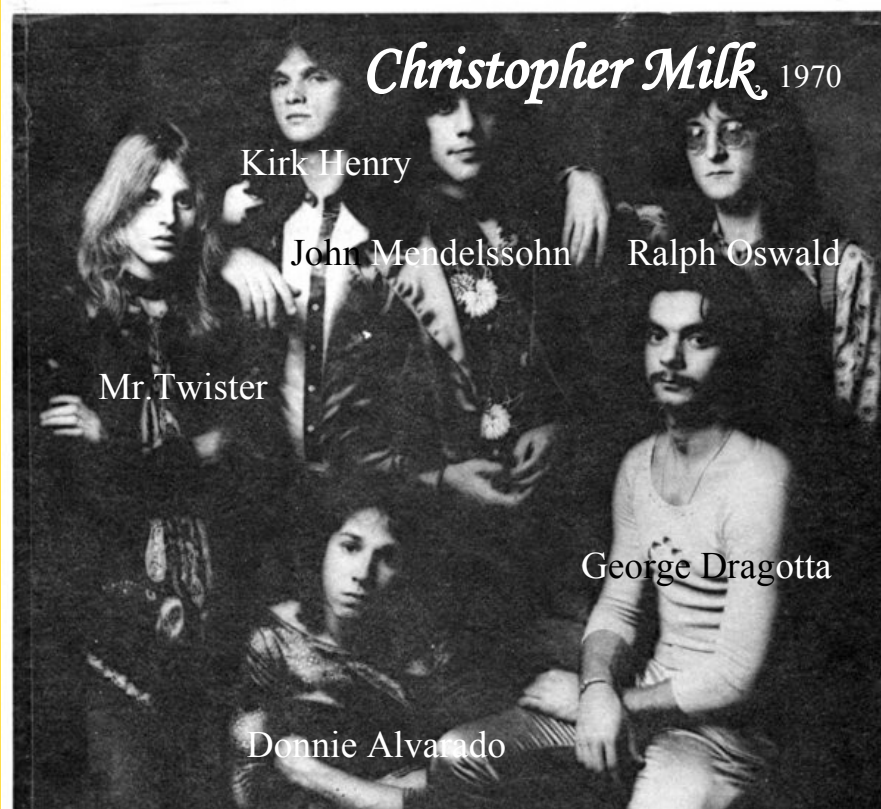




From the remarkable opener, “Hey, Heavyweight!” to each and every successive song, there was something happening here that was evident nowhere else; there was whimsical wordplay supported by musically sympathetic settings. Each track led in a new direction, bearing no relationship to the one preceding or ensuing in either texture or attack – but with an unfailing tongue held most securely in cheek. Here was a “thinking man’s band”, in both definition and form – offering a mordant view of a morbid world, albeit in an age of sincere singer-songwriters, purveyors of treacly pop, primordial metal-slingers and blues ‘n’ boogie outfits. It was, quite simply, a musical concept that was, at once, too difficult to promote – and too brilliant to be understood.

Christopher Milk would soldier on most fearlessly, though – finding John proudly fronting his assault on a modern musical society with his most stalwart songwriting companion, Ralph Oswald. Despite being dismissed by fellow music journalist, Lester Bangs (“It doesn’t make it”), Chris Thomas, erstwhile engineer for The Beatles’ “White Album” and up-and-coming producer (having worked with Climax Blues Band and Procol Harum) showed interest:

“A new guy assumed leadership of our record company and pronounced our EP dogshit, not entirely unreasonably, but Procol Harum’s producer, Chris Thomas either thought that we had terrific ideas, as he claimed, or liked the idea of spending two months in Southern California at someone else’s expense, and agreed to do an album with us.”





By this time, the band had whittled itself down from a sextet to a fine quartet. George “G. Whiz” (a.k.a. “Pee Wee”) Dragotta took over as the new drummer, adding dexterous and virtuosic percussive touches for Kirk “The Kiddo” Henry to perch his propulsive basslines upon. With a most able rhythm section in place, John and Ralph set about the task of creating their epic masterwork, “Some People Will Drink To Anything” (later changed to the somewhat more deferential “Some People Will Drink Anything” at the behest of Chris Thomas). With the ink on the contract with Warner Bros. well dry (“Surly Ralph did a chart to ensure that we were signing at an astrologically propitious moment”), the touring commenced, sometimes in support of acts who had received less-than-laudatory treatment from Mr. Mendelssohn in his “day job” as a discerning music journalist.

Though there were no less than a plethora of opportunities for the promotion of *Christopher Milk* within the pages of the hippest muso rags of the day, it appeared as though the arbiters of the rock world perceived John to be a rock thrower...and they, as owners of the glass house, were not very willing to share any part of their real estate with such a provocateur:

“When our LP was released, Nick Tosches beat it to a bloody pulp in *Rolling Stone* and ceased overnight to be one of my favorite writers. Fair is fair, everyone agreed, not noticing that, with a couple of exceptions, I’d gone after only your big established superstar acts, your Moody Blues, your Stephen Stills.”

Despite the attempt by various reviewers to discredit this effort (perhaps as an act of solidarity with any offended “superstar acts”), the album sales were actually better than, if not on par with, expectations. According to Kirk “The Kiddo” Henry, “we were told at the time that the *Christopher Milk* LP had sold no less well than either *Roxy Music's* first or *Halfnelson's* second (*Sparks' first*). However, we had no manager, agent, producer, or support from anyone at WB except Mr. [David] Berson.”

Armed with this knowledge, John relates: “David Berson wangled us a small budget to try and record a hit single, the only thing that could keep his evil superiors from giving us the bum’s rush. We did my glam rock genre exercise “Dynamite”. The record company rolled its eyes and said it didn’t think so. We tried again, this time with Terry Reid’s strangely catchy but chorus-less “Speak Now Or Forever Hold Your Peace.” Both John and Kirk did their best to promote the release, “but nobody much played the record, and the label showed us the door. We broke up after much bitter quibbling about who should get which equipment.”



Break up they did – but in 1977, “Christopher Milk reformed to play a couple of nights at The Starwood. We wore our ridiculous sequined overalls from the El Monte gig, played a couple of The Kiddo’s songs, and reveled in our ill-preparedness. For the only time on our history, a club owner loved us and wanted us back. But former Doors organist *ordinaire* Ray Manzarek, the kingpin of the group for whom we were to open, got wind of my involvement and had us flung off the bill”; apparently, “*I had grievously offended [Ray Manzarek] Himself with my review of The Doors' famous Aquarius Theater show seven years before.*” And so this phase of the story ended. Any corrections, additions, remembrances and anecdotes are most welcome by e-mail to this address: glittermimp@christophermilk.com.