

## Unbroken Chains: The fascination of psychedelia with bicycles and the long strange trips that ensued

### Camila Asia

On August 26, 1966 Donovan released his third album, named after his July hit single “Sunshine Superman”, triggering a blessed blend of singer-songwriter folk and psychedelic rock.

The Scottish artist was back from a successful tour in the USA - a professional and personal milestone. He had fallen in love with the sounds of the West Coast bands, with the philosophy of San Franciscan psychedelia, and he had made special friends. One of them was Cass Elliot, the Mama Cass of The Mamas & The Papas fame, who had introduced him to the wonders of Californian stoned adventures. Mama Cass is the addressee of *Sunshine Superman's* ninth track, “The Fat Angel”, a delighted and grateful celebration of psychedelic experiences. The Fat Angel flies high gently handing out happiness and magic - as Donovan sings, “he’ll be so kind in consenting to blow your mind”. It is interesting to notice how, while the lysergic neophyte understandably turns to an airplane, to “Translove Airways”, to get *there* on time - “there” being the higher state of mind -, the Fat Angel’s ride of choice is that of a silver bicycle: “he’ll ride away on his silver bike”.

The same bicycle has already appeared in *Sunshine Superman*; it has been mentioned on track n. 4, “Ferris Wheel”, again as a vehicle for amusing trips: “a silver bicycle you shall ride, to bathe your mind in the quiet tide”. “Fat Angel” makes the wink towards psychedelia even more patent when the “Translove Airways” of the refrain undergoes a rock transformation, as Donovan begins to sing “fly Jefferson Airplane, get you there on time”. This praiseful mention was definitely appreciated by the San Franciscan band, so much that the song became a staple of their live performances. An inspired rendition of it was captured live at the Fillmore East in late November 1968 and included in the Airplane’s first live album *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, released in February 1969. But the good fortune of bicycles in psychedelic rock was not done with Donovan’s imaginative lyrics. A way more famous bicycle was about to capture the attention of rock enthusiasts across the globe.

London-based band Tomorrow (formerly The In-Crowd) released their first and most successful single under their new name in May 1967. “My White Bicycle” is one of the most beloved obscure classics from the psychedelic era, strengthened by spacey sounds, a hypnotic refrain (“my white bicycle”) that takes off after blurry verses, and beguiling guitar licks inspired by some of the band’s favorites, like the ubiquitous Ravi Shankar. The bicycle here is a sort of safe haven, a perspective of bliss in the midst of meteorological and social indispositions. The druggy semblance of the lyrics seems to be a coincidence though, an outpouring of such atmospheric music: the actual subject of the song was the Provos, an anarchic movement from Holland that Tomorrow’s friend Nigel Weymouth had met in Amsterdam and that had quite a lot in common with coetaneous hippies. Members of the Provos would promote their “everything should be free” belief by leaving free means of transport - bicycles, of course - around the city. Nevertheless, the trippy symbolism of the white bicycle is too enticing to be forgotten. “It was, on the other hand, a pretty druggy kind of song. [...] This was definitely a record that challenged the establishment to ride the white bicycle” guitarist Steve Howe would tell music critic Jim DeRogatis. Tomorrow, beloved resident band at the UFO Club, the temple of psychedelic music in Swinging London, recorded “My White Bicycle” at Abbey Road Studios, while the Beatles were working on *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club*.

But the Beatles were not the only illustrious neighbors at Abbey Road, as another seminal album was being recorded in the same period. It was the debut LP for Pink Floyd - Tomorrow’s predecessors at the UFO

Club. The physical proximity resulted in a musical one as well. It becomes evident when comparing *Sgt. Pepper’s* to *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*: the closing track of Pink Floyd’s record, in particular, reveals a strong Beatlesque flavour. It is an idiosyncratic Syd Barrett composition entitled “Bike”; Barrett promises his unidentified lover all sorts of extravagant gifts: a cloak, a mouse, even a clan of gingerbread men, before getting lost into a “room full of musical tunes” that the band depicts through an opulence of sound effects. But the very first gift Barrett promises his lover, the one that opens and molds the song, is a bicycle. “I’ve got a bike, you can ride it if you like. It’s got a basket, a bell that rings and things to make it look good. I’d give it to you if I could, but I borrowed it”, he sings. Once again, two wheels can signify a whole, rollicking and attractive, world. In Barrett’s composition, as in other songs of the era, they work as a fascinating odd key to a place of marvels that rock music - with its rooms “full of musical tunes”, as “Bike” depicts - seems particularly eager to epitomize. In just three-four years, covering the brief yet fruitful psychedelic era, bicycles become a recurrent presence in rock songs: a handful of born pioneers, such as Donovan, or Tomorrow, or Pink Floyd, paves the way; many talented colleagues, sometimes illustrious, sometimes forgotten, nod enthusiastically.

American bicycles were getting higher and higher as well: in 1967 Colorado band The Higher Elevation, formerly known as The Monocles, released their single “The Diamond Mine”; the b-side was an effervescent psychedelic tune called “Crazy Bicycle”. The lyrics are vivid and colorful, they celebrate imagination through a series of inventive and often synesthetic images. But every verse goes back to the crazy bicycle of the title, described flying on the ground over an increasing frenzy. Also in 1967 a song called “Bicycle” was included on Wisconsin band The Baroque’s self-titled (and only) LP, a regional success. Once again, the hypnotic insistence on the word “bicycle” is the key element for the psychedelic flavour of the song.

Back in the UK, Kippington Lodge released “Lady on a Bicycle” on October 26, 1967 as b-side to their single “Shy Boy”. What seems like a standard mid-Sixties love song at first - featuring memories of teenage love, longing for a lost girlfriend - turns out to be a quite mysterious piece of music. The girlfriend must actually be older than the narrator: she takes him to school and she makes the young boy feel cool and envied by everybody around him. She is always seen on her bicycle and what is most interesting about the song is that the true subject of the narrator’s longing seems to be the bicycle itself. He wants the bicycle, “won’t you please bring back your bicycle” he sings to his former lover whom he currently does not know anything about. He supposes she has moved on and moved away, remarking “it’s my suspicion she had to get married and settle down”. He almost suggests that settling down implied getting rid of the bicycle. And after the second and third refrain he loses himself in a reminiscent sigh that sounds like a mental chase for past delights.

The fascination of psychedelic rock with bicycles was not limited to song lyrics and titles. English quintet The Robb Storme Group developed into a psychedelic pop group and changed its name to Orange Bicycle. They released a fistful of moderately successful singles in the late Sixties - including “Sing This All Together” in 1968, with meaningful b-side “Take a Trip on an Orange Bicycle” - before recording their self-titled and only LP in 1970. In ’68 Orange Bicycle performed at the Isle of Wight festival alongside Jefferson Airplane, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Pretty Things, The Move, Tyrannosaurus Rex and Fairport Convention. Another band simply called Bicycle also existed, and it was probably of American origins, as it is mentioned in a 1969 poster for a Family Dog concert in San Francisco.

Donovan had left quite a legacy for bicycles in airy folk rock tinged with psychedelia. Fellow singer-songwriter Ralph McTell would follow his lead in 1969 with the atmospheric ballad “Girl on a Bicycle” - third track of his third album *My Side of Your Window*. The bicycle depicted by McTell is once again a vehicle for surrealistic experiences, giving the little girl of the title transcendent features. The two wheels trigger the

whole metaphysical process: “wheels spin like they’re riding on air”, “and the wheels go round but the bike has stopped moving” he sings until all ends in mystery as “suddenly she is gone”. McTell wrote “Girl on a Bicycle” with Gary Petersen of Formerly Fat Harry, a short-lived British-American band which also recorded the song - later included in their 2009 collection of rarities *Goodbye For Good, The Lost Recordings*.

In 1970 another folk great would get groovier than usual thanks to a bicycle: Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn included in his self-titled debut album a fascinating tune called “Bicycle Trip”. What starts as an earthy musical portrait of bucolic beauties quickly reveals a more introspective depth. As Cockburn gently starts moaning, the song - still simply accompanied by an acoustic guitar - becomes rhapsodic, almost rambunctious. The bicycle ride is now crossing internal landscapes as well, offering fragmented pieces of truth to the enthusiastic rider: “you can just take so much of your own advice, who needs a king...”. It starts creating images, visions of a surrealistic quality: the everyday of “pigeons have a way of taking wing” stands next to the transcendental “bane of the Eternal Dancer”. Cockburn’s visionary recount accents the synesthetic vocation of trips once and for all, something that the contemporary renaissance of both poster art and album cover art was putting at the very center of its artistic ‘mission’.

Psychedelic visual art also seems to have embraced the mystery and charm of bicycles. Seminal British collective Hapshash and the Coloured Coat drew inspiration from Tomorrow’s “My White Bicycle” for a bewitching promotional poster realized in 1967 [See image 1]. It was even too bewitching, perhaps: the sultry figures drawn by artists Michael English and Nigel Weymouth were considered too provocative by EMI and had to be replaced. The second poster would then highlight the hallucinogenic overtones of the song even more [See image 2]. Bicycle oddities also fill up a quirky poster created by San Francisco master Victor Moscoso in October 1966. Emerging from a bright pink background, five winged riders are taking psychedelia to a delightful level of fantasy: the central character is a rooster on an unicycle, while on the upper left we are able to notice a bird going fast on - that’s for sure - a bicycle. There is a certain singularity to this kind of imagery in mid and late Sixties psychedelic posters, Moscoso’s in particular. And once again bicycles (and, in this case, the like) are meant to represent the vehicle of choice for an unexpected trip [See image 3]. Similarly, in 1968 English band Family chose for their debut album *Music in a Doll’s House*, their most overtly psychedelic LP, a back cover that is as bizarre as enigmatic. Here we can see a doll depicted in a fascinating cloudy photograph credited to Jac Remise - the eerie concept accentuated by a puzzling antique, an almost sinister tricycle that puts imaginative wheels in front one more time [See image 4].

The recurrence of such a singular theme - that of bicycles, in a decade as motor-powered as the Sixties - surely strikes as fascinating. It would also be tempting to venture that this insistence on the theme might be due to the environmental concerns of the hippie community. But while the hippies were undoubtedly pioneers of green lifestyle - presenting themselves as trailblazers in many fields, from organic and health foods to alternative energy - it seems like for the vast majority of people the question of air pollution was not a completely scrutinized question yet. Many songs have actually eulogized different kinds of ‘wheels on fire’ as emblematic of a generation’s lifestyle and goals. Just as rebellious bikers Wyatt and Billy (Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper) of *Easy Rider* glory embody one of the most iconic and unforgettable symbols of late Sixties aesthetic, motorcycles, with their implication of speed, wildness and frontier, are a constant of music of the era. Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild” would be the obvious example, as its famous incipit - “Get your motor runnin’ / head out on the highway” - reminds. Psychedelic Peruvian band Laghonia included a similar song in their second and last album *Etcétera*, released in 1971. On “Speed Fever” they persuasively assert: “Is the symbol of your freedom/ Riding on your motorcycle”. And while not interested in motorcycles, The Who’s 1971 song “Going Mobile” is quite explicit regarding priorities and concerns: “I don’t care about pollution/ I’m an air-conditioned gypsy”, author Pete Townshend sings.

The fascination with old bicycles then seems to imply something else - something *higher*. In all the songs previously analyzed bicycles acquire a transcendental nature, a capability of going beyond factual reality. The act of riding, in general, is seen as a passing of normality; Boston band The Art of Lovin’ explained it neatly in 1968 song “Take a Ride”, a captivating invitation to sublime spins. “You may not be touching the ground/ Not necessarily true/ Your senses will all be unwound/ But what you’ll be hearing is you”, they reveal. Similar sensations are usually associated with lysergic adventures - it’s the kind of phrasing that songs normally choose to depict LSD trips. It becomes more and more intriguing then to remember that a bicycle played quite a relevant role in what we could describe as the first day of psychedelic culture, the day LSD showed itself for the first time.

On April 19, 1943, Dr. Albert Hofmann ingested a solution of lysergic acid diethylamide, 250 micrograms of the ergot fungus derivative he had synthesized five years before. He couldn’t imagine how powerful the effects of LSD-25, his “problem child”, would have been and he couldn’t anticipate the cultural revolution he was about to trigger. Sitting in his Basel lab, the 37 years old chemist started to perceive a strange vibration within himself and suddenly all the things around him started to respond: it felt like he was able to hear for the first time, able to really see colours like never before. This unexpected sensation quickly turned into panic, fear of the unknown, and so he started longing for home. He then decided to get back to the safe walls of his house and just like any other day he got on his bicycle to do so. What followed is the first LSD trip in history - a crazy ride through peaceful Switzerland nature suddenly transformed into a surreal transcendent new world. Dr. Hofmann later described his now legendary bicycle adventure using words that closely resemble those of the songs previously reviewed. It was the very first epiphany of LSD, and by chance the trip became even more memorable because of a bicycle.

Maybe that is what psychedelic rock has tried to imply over the years, mentioning all those mysterious pairs of wheels. Maybe the impossibility of properly conveying acid-powered sensations through common words was meant to be outwitted with a powerful symbol, an image that could encapsulate a rich meaningful story - an impish understanding among peers that would trick those who were alien to their counterculture. Maybe the trippy emblem of the bicycle became an enticing trope for psychedelic rock - so much so that it could end up ignoring the factual origins of the genre and its subculture. It has been already stated how the direct inspiration for Tomorrow’s *My White Bicycle* was the Provos’ initiative in Amsterdam. Tomorrow were not aware of Albert Hofmann’s famous ride, guitarist Steve Howe told Jim DeRogatis. But a certain naivety is quite common in psychedelic rock language. After all, many bands (mostly from minor cities) would write about trips and lysergic visions without even having tried psychedelic drugs. They would “get the idea” from more experienced colleagues and make it their own. “By 1965 or ’66, LSD was available in certain big-city communities, like Detroit, Chicago, L.A., and New York [...]. But the suburban kids had no idea what it was. They were just singing about something that was in the air”, Amboy Dukes singer John Drake revealed<sup>7</sup>. It is possible then that something similar happened with the use of bicycle related imagery. Some artists (and listeners) may have ignored the details of LSD’s colorful story, but they undoubtedly got the message right. And that message looks reasonably enduring these days, as “bicycle day” is celebrated every year on April 19, and has been since the mid Eighties, among those who keep turning to transcendental wheels (either figurative or literal) hoping they will still be, as Donovan put it, so kind in consenting to blow their minds [See image 5].

## References

DeRogatis, J. (2003). *Turn on your mind*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.  
Hofmann, Albert. LSD, My Problem Child ; And, Insights/outlooks. Oxford: Beckley Foundation, 2013. Print.  
Klassen, Michael L. Hippie, Inc.: The Misunderstood Subculture That Changed the Way We Live and Generated Billions of Dollars in the Process. Sixoneseven Books, 2016.

## Discography

The Art of Lovin', "Take a Ride", from *The Art of Lovin'*, 1968.  
The Baroques, "Bicycle", from *The Baroques*, 1967.  
Bruce Cockburn, "Bicycle Trip", from *Bruce Cockburn*, 1970.  
Formerly Fat Harry, "Girl on a Bicycle", from *Goodbye For Good, The Lost Recordings*, 2009.  
Donovan, "Fat Angel", from *Sunshine Superman*, 1966.  
Donovan, "Ferris Wheel", from *Sunshine Superman*, 1966.  
The Higher Elevation, "Crazy Bicycle", from the single *The Diamond Mine*, 1967.  
Jefferson Airplane, "Fat Angel", from *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, 1969.  
Kippington Lodge, "Lady on a Bicycle", from the single *Shy Boy*, 1967.  
Laghonia, "Speed Fever", from *Etcétera*, 1971.  
Ralph McTell, "Girl on a Bicycle", from *My Side of Your Window*, 1969.  
Orange Bicycle, "Take a Trip on an Orange Bicycle", from the single *Sing This All Together*, 1968.  
Pink Floyd, "Bike", from *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, 1967.  
Steppenwolf, "Born to be Wild", from *Steppenwolf*, 1968.  
Tomorrow, "My White Bicycle", from *Tomorrow*, 1968.

The bicycle-themed tunes are available on the "Unbroken Chains" playlists:

Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/user/1167991953/playlist/7tWk82kbthvXG7qvcaz5FW>



YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvHv9HNFExNubZfLimfSFiuRj063yNkGV>



## Images:

Image 1

Hapshash & the Colored Coat, "My White Bicycle" (original poster):  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129163/my-white-bicycle-poster-english-michael/>

Image 2

Hapshash & the Colored Coat, "My White Bicycle" (second version):  
<http://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2013/06/24/tomorrow2.jpg>

Image 3

Victor Moscoso, FD-32:  
<https://www.classicposters.com/images/FD-32wm.jpg>

Image 4

Family, *Music in a Doll's House* back cover:  
[https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-x9rMikJnUI0/WNu6w\\_MNVRI/AAAAAAAAeSY/d1yHU09MKXE3vMnT4NfaWby-WEG16AMsYwCLcB/s1600/1aafamb.jpg](https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-x9rMikJnUI0/WNu6w_MNVRI/AAAAAAAAeSY/d1yHU09MKXE3vMnT4NfaWby-WEG16AMsYwCLcB/s1600/1aafamb.jpg)

Image 5

Michael Divine, Bicycle Day poster (2014):  
<http://www.blazenfluff.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/poster.jpg>

---

**Camilla Aisa** is a MA candidate at London South Bank University, where she is currently completing a Media Writing project on psychedelic rock and psychedelic visual arts. She is writing a book on the subject and she is the creator of the blog "Feed Your Head - psychedelic side trips". Camilla graduated summa cum laude in Art History at Università degli Studi di Perugia with a thesis on psychedelic visual arts. She has written for different websites and social media pages, both for music artists and record companies. Camilla plays bass and she is an avid music researcher (and, above all, music lover), her favourite genres being psychedelic rock, English folk and modern-day all-female trios. She is an enthusiast of cinema and tv serial narratives and dabbles in photography.

camillaaisa@gmail.com

aisac@lsbu.ac.uk

[www.psychedelicsidetrips.wordpress.com](http://www.psychedelicsidetrips.wordpress.com)