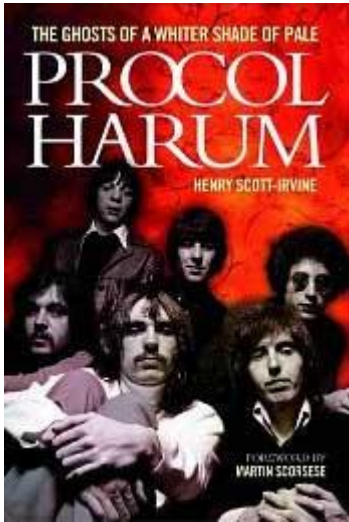


# Book Review: PROCUL HARUM: The Ghosts of A Whiter Shade of Pale

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Review by Carl Macki



By Henry Scott-Irvine

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8 pages of color photographs; 8 pages B&W photos

For a band that formed out of a local Essex, England, group that had a minor, top 40 hit in the late Sixties, Procul Harum went beyond all expectations. In many ways they were a progenitor of what is now called “progressive rock,” and they gave it a bluesy pallor, marrying it with high-minded, symphonic strains that gained the group great international success. It earned one the band’s major hit -- "A Whiter Shade of Pale" – the epithet of being “the most played single on British Radio in the last 70 years.”

This book, a no-holds barred, straightforward account, takes a chronological tack, and explores the nature of the band through extensive and exclusive interviews with band members, as well as with heavyweights such as Alan Parker, Jimmy Page; various managers, disc jockeys and others in the music scene; at key segments of the band’s career .

Noted film director Sir Alan Parker wrote the introduction. The Afterword is by author, journalist and broadcaster Sebastian Faulks.

Highlighted is a foreword by film director Martin Scorsese, who thus hailed the band:

“Procul Harum’s music drew from so many deep wells – classical music, 19<sup>th</sup> Century literature, rhythm and blues, seaman’s logs, concretist poetry, that each tune became a cross-cultural whirligig, a road trip through the pop subconscious.”

*The Ghosts of A Whiter Shade of Pale* tells the story of their start in the 60s in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, a resort town in an historic, seaside county of England, where the Thames River meets the North Sea. At first, most of the group formed the core of a rhythm and blues band called The Paramounts, which actually came from an even earlier band called The Raiders.

The Paramounts had some success with their cover of “Poison Ivy,” a Number One song in the US by the Coasters. Much acclaimed by critics, they had a loyal following; and had opened for the Rolling Stones, who took a keen interest in them.

But, as time wore on, the American-oriented rhythm and blues in which the band specialized no longer sounded so special, in that American soul and blues artists increasingly began to tour England and Europe. Also, they failed to continue their Top 40 success after their one hit, so, disappointed over their lack of progress, the group disbanded.

One of the principals in the band, Gary Brooker, wanted to concentrate on developing songs. Upon meeting with poet-lyricist Keith Reid, and a well-known impresario in the music industry, Guy Stevens, Brooker found his music match in Reid. Reid reportedly said to Brooker: “You write music? Well, I don’t!”

Creative juices began to flow, and their first single “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” was recorded at Olympic Studios in London, England with Brooker on vocals and piano, classically-trained Matthew Fisher on organ, Ray Royer on guitar, David Knights on bass and drummer Bill Eyden. The single shot to Number One in England and several other countries—Number 5 in the US—when it was released in May of 67.

Robin Trower, who played in the Paramounts and their earlier incarnation, The Raiders, would shortly join the band later, replacing Ray Royer. And so would Paramounts drummer B. J. Wilson, both joining in the summer of ’67. By then the band had already replaced drummer Bobby Harrison, with session drummer Eyden on “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” The return to more of the original Paramounts lineup seemed to give the band an illusion of stability.

Guy Stevens would serve as their original manager, and he also came up with their name. A friend of his had a Burmese cat whose pedigreed name was *Procol Harun*, *Procul* being Latin for “from afar,” and Harun, actually Arabic for “Aaron,” which, in Hebrew, may have meant “heavenly place.” (Author Scott-Irvine translates ‘Harun’ as meaning “light bearer.”) Therein came the name Procul Harum, with misspellings and all.

Procul Harum would continue to enjoy worldwide success until a bitter breakup in 1977, after ten years; and then, to their reforming in 1991, when they released “The Prodigal Stranger.” The band, which has undergone a series of personnel changes, are considering a new tour.

Much of the narrative is devoted to a detailed accounting of the back-and-forth lawsuits for a share of royalties by the former organ player in the band, Matthew Fisher, for their most famous song. In 2009, the Law Lords, the highest court of appeal at the time, ordered that Fisher receive a 40% portion of the proceeds from “A Whiter Shade . . . .” This decision continues to create reverberations to this day.

If you are an ardent admirer of Procol Harum, or just want to catch up with a band that has been lost to your musical radar, then this book is for you.

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