Musical Nouns of Multitude

In the 14th and 15th centuries, a large number of so-called "nouns of multitude" made their way into the English language. Most of them were colorful designations for groups of birds and animals. Surviving to the present day are such surprising expressions as "a shrewdness of apes," "an exaltation of larks," "a skulk of foxes," and "a murmuration of starlings."

In recent years, our language has become the target of a very different invasion by nouns of multitude. This time, the names of popular singing groups and bands are making their impression on English, and the time has come to focus our attention on what is happening.

Long, long ago, groups of singers went by innocent, logical names such as "The Andrews Sisters." Some current groups, clinging to the past, still use titles of that kind: "the Chad Mitchell Trio"; "the Statler Brothers"; "the Johnny Mann Singers"; "the Baja Marimba Band"; etc. To a large extent, however, such ordinary names have given way to exotic, weird concoctions that are studies in irrelevancy. That is, the name of a pop group is often as far removed from suggesting music as anything can possibly be. Let's examine some of the trends discernible in today's naming craze.

The first rung on the ladder to the world of fantasy is occupied by names, some appropriate, others not, that rely on alliteration, carrying that device to its absolute extreme. Examples: "Herman's Hermits"; "Frenchy's Freakies"; "Randy's Rainbows". The corresponding device of rhyme is pushed just as far: "The Smothers Brothers"; "The Jive Five"; "Gals & Pals."

On the second rung, there appears an aggregation of groups that have resorted to self-praise in the competition for public notice. A sampling:

The Supremes The Magnificent Men
The Incredibles The Fantastic Four
The Miracles The Showstoppers
The Paragons The Spellbinders
The Sensations The Magics
The Fireballs The Premiers

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Next on the ladder are groups that deliberately misspell their collective title. This is a subtle ploy, intended to appeal to record buyers, for those of us who listen to popular music on radio and on television remain blissfully unaware of these deformed spellings. Specimens:

The Beatles  The Cryan’ Shames
The Monkees  The Shadows of Knight
Harpers Bazaar  The Teemates
The Left Banke  The Cyrkle
The Tremeloes  The Byrds
The Badd Lads  The Cleo-Slays

Unless one haunts record shops, it is difficult to catch all of the deviationist orthography, and we wouldn’t be surprised if one or two such cases had slipped past us, into the lists that follow.

Comprising a category difficult to mark off from other categories is one that may be described as conveying impressions of intensity, or dignity, or power. Our choices for this category are necessarily subjective, but we believe you will get the general idea from these examples:

The Searchers  The Seekers
The Doors  The Mysterians
Saturday’s Children  Sounds, Inc.
Changin’ Times  The Daughters of Eve
Every Mother’s Son  The Royal Guardsmen
The Limelighters  The Tides
The Shadows  The Free Spirits
The Legends  The Challengers
The Association  The Roving Kind

Going a step further, there are groups with titles exhibiting a distinctly religious flavor. Observe:

The Righteous Brothers  The Soul Aggregation
The Saints  The Apostolic Intervention
The Deep Six  The Soul Brothers Six
The Spiritual Five  The Angels
The Soul Congress  The Chosen 5
The Sons of Souls  The New Christy Minstrels

Swinging to the opposite extreme is a sizable collection of groups that have adopted highly negative names, totally unrelated to music. Thus:

The Enemies  The Barbarians
The Villains  The Zombies
The Vampires  The Thugs
The Repulsives  The Freak-outs
The Animals  The Vagrants
The Rejects  The Inroads
The Intruders  The Revengers

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The Eliminators  The Tornadoes
The Wild Ones  The Weird-ohs
The Bandits  The Raiders

Caliillibal and the Headhunters

That brings us to the last and largest grouping of names, really the pièce de résistance of this article. The names that follow may best be characterized as out of this world. Their function is to startle, to amaze, to shock. We caution you to read the list very slowly, stopping to let the full import of each name sink in. Translate the names into synonymous expressions and savor them. Here goes:

The Iron Butterfly  The Unspoken Word
The Lamp of Childhood  The Electric Prunes
Zilch  Oedipus and His Mothers
Lothar and the Hand People  The Happenings
The Grateful Dead  The Lewis & Clark Expedition
The Detergents  Pieces of Eight
$½  Sopwith Camel
The Yellow Balloon  The Mesmerizing Eye
The Jefferson Airplane  The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
The Glaciers  Unit 4 plus ²
The Mind Expanders  The Fifth Dimension
The Pink Floyd  The Moby Grape
The Electric Flag  U F O
The Small Faces  The Leathercoated Minds
The Gas Co.  Hedgehoppers Anonymous
The Latest News  The Peanut Butter Conspiracy
The Mothers of Invention  The Third Rail
The Fifth Estate  The Five Stairsteps
The Mindbenders  The American Breeze
The Hard Times  The Stone Poneys
The Box Tops  Homesick James & His Dusters

The Strawberry Alarm Clock

At the moment, there are, possibly, some 2,000 pop groups vying for public favor. The rate of turnover among these groups is high. Every day, new groups are being formed, while others fade into oblivion. Some of the names presented here already belong to history, and more will "join the majority" before this issue of WORD WAYS gets into print. For the dedicated name collector, the task of recording fanciful names is an uninterrupted one: many of the groups come and go too quickly to allow the collector any time off from his project.

What is the most remarkable single name we have come upon? It is that of a group which formed, but never made it into professional status: THE SCUM OF THE EARTH!

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