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 Monkees
- Harpers Bazaar
- The Left Banke
- The Tremeloes
- The Badd Lads
- The Cryan' Shames
- The Shadows of Knight
- The Teemates
- The Cyrkle
- The Byrds
- 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 Doors
- Saturday's Children
- Changin' Times
- Every Mother's Son
- The Limelights
- The Shadows
- The Legends
- The Association
- The Seekers
- The Mysterians
- Sounds, Inc.
- The Daughters of Eve
- The Royal Guardsmen
- The Tides
- The Free Spirits
- The Challengers
- The Roving Kind

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

- The Righteous Brothers
- The Saints
- The Deep Six
- The Spiritual Five
- The Soul Congress
- The Sons of Souls
- The Soul Aggregation
- The Apostolic Intervention
- The Soul Brothers Six
- The Angels
- The Chosen 5
- 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 Villains
- The Vampires
- The Repulsives
- The Animals
- The Rejects
- The Inroads
- The Barbarians
- The Zombies
- The Thugs
- The Freak-outs
- The Vagrants
- The Intruders
- The Revengers
The Eliminators
The Wild Ones
The Bandits
Carnibal 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 Lamp of Childhood
Zilch
Lothar and the Hand People
The Grateful Dead
The Detergents
The Yellow Balloon
The Jefferson Airplane
The Mind Expanders
The Pink Floyd
The Electric Flag
The Small Faces
The Gas Co.
The Latest News
The Mothers of Invention
The Fifth Estate
The Mindbenders
The Hard Times
The Box Tops

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!

This is the tale of a famous British puzzle around the turn of the century. The Switch Puzzle is a four-armed switch puzzle, resembling a railway signal. It has twelve movable arms, and each arm will just hold no more at the corner than the twelve letters, a seven-letter word, of the blocks into the distance from the top to the base. That the word will read correctly from the top to the bottom in the fewest possible twelve moves. For example, there is a solution of twelve moves:

A solution to the Switch Puzzle is published in the book *Switch Puzzle* by Dudenpont, published in 1910.