

THE STORY OF CLOUDS

BY

JAMES P. ALEXANDER

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JAMES ALEXANDER

Dedicated to the unsung heroes

ARCHIE COLQUHOUN

PAUL HUGHES

IAN 'PEPE' BIRCH

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*Scarlet notes
That chime on the sea
To dance their dance
And die*

FROM *DAYS OF DANCING*
BY
CLOUDS

JAMES ALEXANDER

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Introduction

*'The Playroom is still now,
For time grows tired of toys,
But in the drowning night
I see him stumbling on the dark stairs
With no-one to lead him to the light.'*

It was back then, in those same days, when Billy wrote those words. It was supposed to be biographical details for the Record Company, favourite colour, hobbies, things like that. Looking at the words now, I can't help but smile. We all thought he was crazy at the time. Nobody expected him to come out with that stuff, but we should have known, it was typical Billy. He was an awkward customer, always thumbing his nose, anything to be contrary, he couldn't help himself. Maybe he wasn't a genius as some claimed, but he sure had some kind of madness in him all right.

I suppose that all the band - Billy, Ian Harry - had something like that. Even Archie, their self-titled Personal Manager was something to behold, certainly not your run-of-the-mill kind of person. Though they all seemed ordinary at first sight, once you got to know them you realised there was maybe just a twist of something in their makeup, something that made them different. Looking back, I don't even think they were a great band.

They were highly original, and at their best, they were unbeatable *live*, but they were also inconsistent and had no idea of image or the recording business. Nevertheless, they were something special as people. OK, I admit I'm biased, but as far as I'm concerned, with all their flaws, they were the most interesting human beings I've ever encountered on this planet in this lifetime. Me? I'm Paul, but that's not important. I followed their journey all the way, and though for a while I was their general dogsbody and Road Manager rolled into one, I don't have any real part in the story. I was just lucky enough to be there and see the whole thing from the side-lines.

Is it fact or fiction? Now, all these years later, scratching my head in the morning I sometimes wonder myself. To me though, it's like something I once dreamed of, but that doesn't make it hurt any the less.

Chapter One

*Take a look in my Scrapbook and see
See my life as it used to be*

From *Scrapbook*

By

Clouds

1

They turned up at my door in the summer of '65, just kids really, all wide-eyed and innocent, heads full of dreams. I was only a boy myself then, but at the time I felt wise and experienced, being a few years older. Although we were all from the same part of the Country, born under a cold Northern sky, we had never met before that day. Through a mutual friend, I had vaguely heard of the band - their band, the one which they hoped would 'make it', and in their minds, the only place to make it was London. So they ended up on my doorstep, simply because I was the only person they knew of who actually lived in the City of dreams.

There were five of them in those days, six if you counted Archie, their self-styled 'personal manager' who couldn't play an instrument but had plenty of mouth to make up for it. They shuffled down the hall, obviously feeling uneasy, but trying not to show it as best they could. Eventually when they had settled down, they

sprawled around the room, making themselves at home, drinking coffee, as I took a harder look at them.

The chubby one - Harry - seemed the most self-assured of the bunch, though he hadn't too much to say for himself. He had a look of patient resignation on his face, as if he was ready for whatever life might throw, including me and my air of experience. Ian - the other one who stood out somehow - was anxiously making frantic over-friendly conversation while his black eyes fixed me like a rattler's. He did look like a pop star, albeit a down-market version, with his fake leather waistcoat and coloured 'Granddad' T-shirt, and he was handsome then, as a young man. With his Cherokee cheekbones, straight dark hair, and beaming smile, he looked a lot like 'Chip' Hawkes, the bass player from *The Tremolos*, a popular pin-up of those times.

Harry wasn't much to look at in pin-up terms, more of a chubby choirboy perhaps, but he had an air of dignity and quiet reserve unusual in such a young man. His fair hair was largely hidden beneath a silly hat, which seemed the opposite of his personality.

Unlike these two, the other musicians - Shammy, Derek, and Lawrence - seemed modest unassuming human beings, and at first I wondered how they could be so readily carried along on this ride by the wild rhetoric swirling around them, but as the days went on, I soon realised that I too was being drawn in by Ian, Harry, and most of all Archie's infectious enthusiasm, it sounded a lot more exciting than

my dull life, and I found myself becoming interested in them, their hopes, their ambitions.

Despite being a non-musician, Archie was in many ways the most interesting of the bunch. The subsequent years have seen him all but written out of the *Clouds* story, but if anyone in the circle of the band was a genuine genius, it was definitely Archie. He had an instinctive and brilliant grasp of words, with a devastating turn of phrase that could kill at a thousand paces, and he wasn't shy or slow about using it. Everyone in the room including myself felt the rough edge of his tongue, but he was also very very funny, even though the humour was always somehow black and vicious. He was a weedy insignificant little man, but you underestimated him at your peril, as many would find out during the travelling of these pages.

And of course, he was wildly enthusiastic about the band - *The Premiers* was their name, and according to Archie they were "the best semi-pro outfit in the Country (so he repeatedly said - if repetition created reality, they would have 'made it' there and then). He also trumpeted loudly about *Cyril Stapleton*, the famous big-band leader who had been scouring Britain looking for talent and had 'found' *The Premiers*. "Instead?" I added, as a humorous afterthought, only to be told by Archie that "If you had fifty per cent more brains, you'd be a half-wit". Having dismissed me to his satisfaction, Archie went on to say haughtily that the band was down in London for the recording test at *Radio Luxembourg* studios, and "anything was possible". Despite their obvious lack of perspective, I remained curious, so when Archie

somewhat regally invited me to witness the big moment, I accepted with enthusiasm, albeit mixed with healthy scepticism and some incredulity.

Given the build-up of bullshit I got from Archie, I'm afraid the recording was even more of a shambles than I had expected. Seeing them in action was interesting, but even though I had wanted them to prove me wrong, I have to say that they exceeded my wildest expectations in terms of mediocrity. Ian didn't seem to sing particularly well, and his voice had an unusual nasal sound, as if he needed a good sinus repair. The others - well, the bass player Lawrence was solid, and dependable, the guitarists, Shammy and Derek, did their job confidently, but something was missing, music for one thing. On the plus side, Harry on the drums was good in terms of his technique, but unfortunately he seemed oblivious to the music going on around him, concentrating instead on his own personal performance, like a drum clinic tutor playing games with a tape machine. However, he did in occasional brief bursts completely confound his quiet personality with a thunderous display of speed and dazzling brilliance that left you gasping for air. Perhaps that was part of the trouble, even in those moments, the whole thing was out of balance, a drum solo with intervening noises. As well as that, the material was poor. Covers of R & B tracks, soul hits, and obscure pop songs was the *norm* for the time, but it was still galling to hear my new friends let themselves down with this pile of garbage. However, when they asked me what I thought, I mumbled weak platitudes in

the best mealy-mouthed traditions of group followers the world over.

I can't say I was surprised when nothing further came of that session, though the band seemed to be bewildered and broken-hearted. I couldn't help feeling sorry for them, even Archie was for once quiet, so when they pulled me into their analysis, the best compromise I could make with my integrity was to say that there was something missing in their sound. The room went suddenly quiet, and all eyes turned to Archie who savoured the pregnant pause, drawing deeply on his cigarette before uttering the immortal words "You bastard Paul, what you know about music could be written on the back of a postage stamp". I realised that they hadn't really wanted the truth, even the diluted version was too much for their fragile egos. Ian glared at me, and Harry affected a hurt resignation every time he looked my way, as if a beloved brother had let him down. The others looked like they had doubted the whole thing from day one - sensible people don't make Rock stars. I thanked my cowardly inner self for saving me from worse, and smoothed the ripples on their troubled brows by leading them into a deep conversation about the merits and demerits of various band line-ups.

My comments must have had some effect, for when they calmed down, the general consensus seemed to be that they needed a keyboard player to give them the missing ingredient, so they thought, though in my opinion at the time, what they needed was a series of brain transplants, or possibly grafts. To me they had as much chance of making it as that Australian twit *Rolf Harris*

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recording a *Led Zeppelin* track. Still, stranger things had happened, and their bare-faced cheek and ridiculous arrogance - particularly Archie's - amused me, so I found myself wrapped up in their story right from the off.

2

*And when I look for you,
You are nowhere to be found*

From *Seeds*
By
Clouds

The search for a keyboard player, or organist as it was called then, went about as well their recording session. All the physical answers to those silly *Melody Maker* ads turned out to be as silly as the ads themselves, long on rhetoric, short, to the point of the curlies, in music. One night in particular comes to mind, when, after a mind-crushing display of musical ineptitude, the guilty party involved requested that we help him transport the instrument of torture, a *Hammond* organ into his van outside. After much gasping from this bunch of lager-filled louts, totally unused to anything remotely resembling work, the said coffin was duly delivered into the ancient relic of metalwork this clown called his van. Hardly had we turned to bid our fond farewells when a wail of anguish came from within the travelling dustbin - in perfect symbolism, the battery of the vandalised van had given up the

ghost, managing only a pathetic *phut* in response to the pleading key. As veterans of many a motorway breakdown, these modern tramps of the road knew the drill - out came the tow rope, looking like an Egyptian Mummy's cast-off. With great gusto, Ian leapt into the superior wreck of the two, which passed as *The Premiers* roadmobile and tore up the road with the crusted relic trundling gamely along in equal, if not actually umbilical pursuit. There was an almighty *Clang!* as the front bumper of the vanquished van and *The Premiers* roadmobile parted company. Oblivious to all this, Ian and *the Premiers* roadmobile continued on its merry way, but the offending article came grinding to a halt, clinging grimly to the back bumper of the roadmobile, like a beached shark still hanging onto its prey. Not wishing to appear fazed by this turn of events, without further ceremony Ian hitched the crustacean to his front bumper and swiftly proceeded reversing up the road every bit as frantically as before. Unfortunately, as I could have told him, the front bumper was not built on any better principles than the rear, and another scalp was taken, leaving the roadmobile looking like a knickerless Maiden - but more of that later.

Suffice it to say that the organ-grinder was subsequently left to his own devices. Hopefully he was arrested for the musical murder, and subsequently given the electric chair. Thankfully, history could not record adequately the burst of invective and sheer frustrated spite that Archie poured on this poor sap's head as we prepared to sail off into the sunset in self-righteous indignation.

Gathering up our bumpers, we retired exhausted to the first pub we could find for urgent need of anaesthetic and rehabilitative treatment. Appropriately enough for these brigands, this den of iniquity was called *The Rising Sun*. There in suitable regal splendour the natives of this land, mainly Irish, Scottish, and Nigerian yobs, with a few English louts thrown in (and out) for good measure, fought and lurched their way through a fine evening's entertainment, which in this case consisted of a bunch of numbskulls dressed like civil servants on their day off, playing a string of faceless tunes with as much enthusiasm and fire as *Shirley Temple* in *The Good Ship Lollipop*.

Naturally, our experts felt smugly superior, Archie in particular opined that we should send for the RSPCA to "put the bastards down", and this smug gratification became all the more increased by the procession of would-be singers, drummers, guitarists, and organists who graced the podium with their presence, squawking, clattering, shrieking, as the case may be, in their efforts to join the elite band of blue bloods on stage, as fine a case for an indictment of the class system as you could ever come across.

We smirked to ourselves as the latest recruit took his place at the organ. He was a scruffy bastard, skinny and long-haired, taking his time, acting as if he was *Beethoven*, God's gift to the masses, and, noting our amusement, he had the bare-faced cheek to sneer back at us. He pointed a finger threateningly, then pointed back at the keyboard as if indicating he was about to play a masterpiece instead of another trashy lump of

pop culture. The band lurched into *House of the Rising Sun*, obviously their theme tune. We smiled knowingly at each other, especially when the organ player hadn't even sat down to play yet. Suddenly, the hall erupted with the blasting sound of the *Hammond* organ, completely obliterating the band on stage with a barrage of notes and crashing rhythms, urgent and dynamic. Our jaws must have dropped, even Archie muttered "Fucking Hell!" open-mouthed, and that bastard on stage had the affront to smirk in satisfaction as he blitzed his way through the song, absolutely dominating the band who looked shattered as they tried to hold on to this ride on *the Waltzer*. It slowly dawned on us that this specimen had no intention of sitting down to play the sideboard, which was usual for the time. That would have been too much of a sideshow for him, he obviously wanted the spotlight. The poor guitarist could hardly play a note that counted, this guy was blazing him off the stage without so much as a by-your-leave, there was no shame in this fellow either, he sabotaged all the solos for himself and used as much volume as he could get his hands on. We were stunned, even more so when at the end of the number, this joker played a violent stream of screaming notes while holding the organ up and forward by pushing his thigh underneath the keyboard, obviously so that the audience could see what his hands were doing - flash bastard! Then suddenly, as the drummer smashed the cymbals to end the song, the guy on the organ gave a heave with his knee and tipped the organ over with a *CRASH!* The reverb unit sounded like

a horde of exploding bombs as the organ hit the deck! We all shit ourselves, I nearly drowned myself in beer, the place erupted - the punters know sod-all about music, but they always appreciate somebody doing their nut on stage.

Meanwhile, the organ player strolled off the stage like *King Kong* with the girl, oblivious to the band organist nearly in tears over his vanquished instrument.

That was how we met Billy.

3

*Some days
I could believe in your World
Were it not for my bad dreams*

*From The Bleak Sun will
soon be here
By Clouds*

The minute you met him, you knew he was trouble. Not in the punch-you-in-the-gob sense, just.....well, dangerous. He made you uneasy, unless you were dense enough to believe the smooth diplomatic charm he could pour over you sometimes, though plenty did fall for it. He was charismatic, overwhelming, you had the feeling he could swallow the whole room with one gulp of his mind. He seemed to think so too, maybe he had believed his own image of himself as a sort of musical *Rasputin* for so long that the real person had long since vanished from the competition. He

didn't have any hesitation in throwing in his lot with us, he could see that Ian and Harry were as smitten as him when it came to ambition, blind, deaf, and dumb, in this case. Then of course, there was Archie. Straight away, Billy and Archie were trying to outflank and generally talk each other down, both aware that here was a worthy adversary. Archie was the natural protagonist, making sarcastic biting remarks without pause or favour, but Billy could give as good as he got, and dish out afters as well.

It was usually Archie who started it of course. One day as we travelled in the van, Archie as per norm was giving his version of *The Dimbleby Lecture* on Rock music when he noticed Billy's sceptical gaze. Turning on Billy with venom, Archie spat out "What the fuck are you looking at you brainless bastard!"

"I don't know, the label's fell off" said Billy.

"If you had brains, you'd be dangerous" replied Archie, his voice full of indignant contempt. "Of course, you're the font of all knowledge, I don't think!" said Billy, just as dismissively. "You said it Pal - you DON'T think!" was Archie's response. "There speaks the brain of Britain" said Billy, adding with a more than a touch of venom, "You obviously think you're Bernard Shaw - well, I'm here to tell you you're more like Sandi Shaw". Archie puffed up with indignation and spat back just as spitefully "You skinny bastard! If brains came in boxes, yours would arrive in a letter!". "Of course....." said Billy, but his reply was drowned out by everyone else howling for the two of them to shut up, otherwise it would have gone on and on without

either giving quarter. Henceforth, Billy's standard opening phrase 'Of course.....' Then became a kind of metaphor to all of us as well, whenever a response to an insult was called for. Sometimes one of us only had to say "Of course....." to set everyone rolling up, and it generally always diffused any tension that had been building up. It didn't always work however, and it was unusual to see Archie face true competition in the mouth stakes, but he rose to the challenge, and it was almost grisly to see the two of them tearing verbal lumps out of each other. The result was that they became uneasy friends, amused by each other, though wary and distrustful at the same time. There were striking similarities between the two in temperament. Beneath all the noise and blustering, both were very insecure and like all disillusioned Romantics, they had turned to a withering cynicism as a kind of shield against their own shattered dreams.

I think honestly that one of the reasons Billy joined was his meeting with Archie, a meeting of minds that instinctively understood each other, yet it was a real love-hate relationship, always with the potential to boil over into heated invective. The truth is, they had never crossed swords with an equal before, and they were both unsure whether to be pleased or angry, but they were definitely fascinated with each other's ability to be awful. Archie recognised too that Billy was an essential ingredient for the band's ambitions, and that also helped him accept the challenge of Billy head on.

I'll never forget that first rehearsal. We got to the Church hall, and as we set up we listened to

the record we were covering that day, a *David Bowie* number I'd heard on the radio. David, though destined to become a true Superstar, was totally unknown at this point in time, but I wasn't completely dim, I knew talent when I heard it and I was keen for the band to do something different. Billy, our new recruit, was guzzling a can of beer even though it was only ten o'clock in the morning, and he seemed more interested in the beer than the music. Having finished setting up, the other guys waited as Derek sat down to work out the music from the record as he usually did at rehearsals. As Derek put the record on to listen again, Billy suddenly slung his empty can into a corner of the room, making everybody jump. Then he wiped his hands on his shirt and proceeded to play the whole bloody thing straight off without so much as a pause. We all looked at one another; Archie raised his eyebrows and gave a low almost unwilling whistle. Billy pretended he didn't notice our reaction, but he didn't fool me, he knew damn well what was going on; when he was reasonably sober he missed nothing, though he was often as inscrutable as *Charlie Chan*.

I think that's really what did for Derek, the loss of his prestige, his special role. He was a good semi-pro guitarist, organised musically, and in his personal life. Being a public Schoolboy, middle class, respectable, he couldn't handle the thought of this scruffy working class yob outdoing him so effortlessly. Only days after the rehearsal, Derek lit out for home, and the safety of anonymity.

The blow to morale hit Ian and Harry the worst, Archie, though quiet, seemed sanguine.

Shammy and Lawrence were gloomy, but the other two were suicidal, visions of failure haunted them, they had no other eggs in their life basket, what now? Looking at Billy, he merely seemed disinterested, saying nothing, showing no reaction, he and Archie looking at each other in silent understanding.

A few days after Derek, Shammy and Lawrence followed. Lawrence had been offered a steady job with good prospects, and very sensibly took it; Shammy was simply missing his Wife, Mary, and just as sensibly, put that as first priority. That left our three heroes with half a band.

They sat in the bedsit in Highgate, contemplating the scabby wallpaper and cracked ceiling. Harry was trying to be positive, stubborn as ever, refusing to give up easily. "We'll advertise for a guitarist in *Melody Maker*" he said. "A bass player shouldn't be so hard to find, and we can do without a second guitarist, can't we?" Ian seemed cheered by the thought. "Yeah, true" he said, "But how are we gonna find a guitarist - the right guitarist - quick enough? It ain't gonna be easy" (Ian always affected a self-conscious pseudo-American accent).

I, of course, said the wrong thing - "The problem is, why should any guitarist of any real talent throw his lot in with us?" As soon as I said it, I realised my folly. There was a painful moment of silence, heads turning towards Archie for a response. Surprisingly, on this occasion, he contented himself with saying "Paul, it's an effort for you wipe your arse, never mind comment on our music". This relatively mild rebuke was no

doubt tempered by Archie's conviction that next to him I was a mental pygmy, hence the patronising tone of the dismissal. Still, honour had been satisfied, and the moment passed.

Looks were still being exchanged between Billy and Archie, and Archie nodded silent agreement. Suddenly Billy stood up, eyes blazing "We don't fucking need a guitarist anyway!" he said. "We don't need anybody!" Then just as quickly he sat down, docile again. It was the first time he had spoken about the enforced changes to *The Premier's World*. We waited for more, but he had gone back to guzzling his beer, leaving us to work out the ramifications of what he had said. Having waited the usual pregnant pause, Archie stepped in and said it was a great idea - Ian could play bass, the lead parts would be handled by the organ. Ian seemed doubtful. "But Archie, I've never even touched a bass before; I only play a bit of guitar, rhythm guitar at that!" Archie, hating any idea of defeatism except from himself, said to Ian "Well maybe you're not as talented as I thought you were", sounding almost like a

disappointed schoolteacher talking down to a miscreant pupil. Before Ian had a chance to take all that in, we all boosted his morale by pointing out that he definitely had the ability to do it. I said I thought it was a great idea too, and I think my contribution more than anyone else's helped convince Ian that he could do it. For all the contempt Archie poured over me, the others knew that my musical criticisms were usually proved right, even if they went down like lead balloons at first - hadn't I been right about an organist? For another thing, I was older than them, and though

that often made me a target for their pranks and worse, at times of crisis they looked upon my relative maturity with more open minds and respect, apart from Archie, that is, who was always insecure about anyone or anything that looked like taking control from him.

I wasn't just saying it was a good idea for the sake of it. It seemed to me that the new suggested line-up might especially suit Harry with his great need of musical space. It would suit Billy too, I thought. Organs/keyboards were usually regarded as an optional extra to a Rock band, giving a layer of sound that could add colour to the background rather than the foreground. That however, wasn't Billy at all. He always commanded the foreground, and in conjunction with Harry's playing, there would be enough happening to support a full sound without further instrumentation other than the solid ground of a bass guitar. It would even be an advantage, I thought, that Ian was relatively inexperienced, for it would ensure that someone was holding down or marking the place of the musical structure rather than playing around with it, as the other two were certain to do. I hadn't thought of it before, but it seemed to me an ideal solution, and as a prospect, very exciting too.

Nowadays such a thought wouldn't be so revolutionary. Rock organ/keyboard trios raise no eyebrows these days, but the first time it happened was back there in bedsit land where most of the best creativity of the sixties was born.

So it began, the true birth of the band; the first rehearsals were a total joy, in some ways, the