



**Lost Generation  
Elliott Murphy  
RCA ALP1-0916**

by Paul Nelson

"It's not so teenage anymore."

—"Lookin' Back"

Elliott Murphy's first album, *Aquashow* (Polydor), released 18 months ago, showed exceptional promise and intelligence, prompting many, myself included, to ready a place in the higher echelons of rock & roll for the talented Long Islander. Now, after a lengthy season of hard times—new label, new manager, new producer—Murphy returns to stand, deliver and collect. On *Lost Generation*, a brilliant but extraordinarily difficult LP, the artist is hurt, angry and confused by the shifting role of the hero in modern times and the growing division between intoxicating myth and sobering reality in his personal and public lives.

If we are all, to some extent, a compilation of those whom we most admire, Murphy takes it a huge step further; he needs heroes and desires dreams for personal and artistic sustenance. He wears his idols—most of them, significantly, dead ("The past is all that lasts," he has written elsewhere)—proudly on his sleeve: James Dean, Greta Garbo, Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Lord Byron, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones and Lou Reed are all characters in this album. Haunted by their singular ac-

complishments and trapped by their collective unrealized expectations, none so different from his own, the artist discovers a common ground in the painful struggle to both answer and retain the romantic's archetypal dilemma: How does one deal with the loss of important illusions when those illusions are clearly the key to one's own survival? For Murphy, a man or a generation are lost only when they can no longer believe in those who have taken the greatest risk in aspiring toward personal mythic heroism.

"The stuff of dreams," Humphrey Bogart once remarked about the object of a similar quest; and Murphy's search for his own Maltese Falcon derives from books, records and films—a tragicomic "problem" most Americans surely share. But oftentimes in such cases, the hunter can feel more like the hunted as his obsessions ironically turn the tables ("Hollywood/You shaped my life with a Technicolor carving knife/And now I don't know what to feel") to move in on him ("You know, I just can't find nothing real/And the movies are all outside, baby . . .") as he tries to understand their meaning. A paranoid moralist not unlike many great rock & rollers (Bob Dylan and Ian Hunter immediately come to mind), Murphy will take the risks a potential hero must, up to and perhaps including "Brian Jones and the final getaway," but his pilgrim's progress through the issues of our time—love, war, the costs of stardom, dreamy art, et al.—seems enormous to him, a matter of life and death ("And just when I thought I'd take a Hemingway shot/The F. Scott in me says, man, you'd better not"), and he cannot accept a generation's lack of concern with the trivialization or worse of beliefs for which he'd die. Perhaps too closely attuned to these times, a "rebel with too many causes," he screams in agony:

But who's gonna tell  
those kids  
About all the things  
we did?  
You tell me who's  
gonna turn them on  
To the secrets born  
with the bomb?

But do they really care? At times, Murphy admits, "I just want to know when it's over."

If it is a long way from the sad suburban epitaphs of *Aquashow* to the gloomier philosophical complexities of *Lost Generation* ("Last of the Rock Stars" on the former LP seems a good transitional song), both albums share an acute epigrammatic sensitiv-

ity, a penchant for unhappy endings and the artist's sense of perennial displacement. In the Seventies, everything's gone to hell; and Murphy, like another Elliott's Philip Marlowe in Robert Altman's film of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, wanders through the big-city debris, muttering, "But that's all right . . . /That's okay," while he tries to find solace in sex ("History," "Bittersweet," "Visions of the Night," "Lookin' Back"), music ("Manhattan Rock") and the legends of the past (almost all of the songs). "Hollywood," the LP's opening cut, offers one symbolic explanation of how he (we?) got that way; "History," another: "Summer in suburbia we'd catch fireflies/Put them in a jar and watch them die/You and me, baby, we could have gone so far."

"Visions of the Night" and "Lookin' Back" are both corrosive "love" songs, the latter railing vengefully against an early lover's misuse of the myth, the former even more vicious. While the missed opportunities for romance in "History" are recalled with heartbreak and poignancy ("And there must have been a thousand times I could have had your hand/I could have been your man, you could have been my life"), only in "Bittersweet" is there any real sense of happiness as the woman who became Murphy's wife teaches him a valuable lesson: "You really gotta do something/If only waiting for a brand-new style."

In "Bittersweet," Murphy shows his keen sense of perspective, has the good humor to admit defeat ("And look at me/So blind I thought I could see") and possible error in his fanatical mythopoeic quests. He clearly recognizes the dangers that can befall those who are hung up on heroes, and, in "Eva Braun," chronicles what happened to a poet (Ezra Pound) and a nation (Germany) too dazzled by the charisma of Adolph Hitler. Pound's—and Braun's, for that matter—"excuse" is rooted in erotic aestheticism: "But his eyes at night were chilling/And his words were oh so thrilling." The music business seems more than a little like Nazi Germany in "Manhattan Rock," with its Velvet Underground sound and superb first verse:

Here comes that man  
Dressed in Miami tan  
He's got a head full of  
charts  
Got numbers in his eyes  
And when he talks to me  
About the industry  
I want to join Buddy  
Holly  
Write my name in the sky

once again keyed to the artist's survival. "I'm sitting on top/Of Manhattan rock," Murphy sings, "Just hoping this backbeat/Gets me by." But it won't, of course: "I'm feeling so low/I got no cash flow/How's this corporation rock & roll/Gonna get by?" Another heroic vision—rock & roll this time—is being subverted by men who are "jamming plastic pop/On the radio."

Things come to a head in the title song. Half-anthem, half lament, "Lost Generation" pinpoints the widening gap between vital, viable myth and rapidly degenerating "reality." On this song and throughout the album, Murphy writes like a man in constant touch with big questions, someone who doesn't look away from ambiguous situations too many are afraid to face: Why it doesn't work; why didn't I love her—she me? the death of the family, the horror of corporate blandness, the stain upon our country, ad infinitum. As in that saddest of old jokes, everything around the artist seems to be dead or dying, and he doesn't feel so well himself; he's scared and hurt, but he still has a bit of Ahab in him when he demands:

And who divides  
the oceans  
When a generation's  
lost its place?  
And who sets the  
motion  
Of the human race?

On *Aquashow*, Elliott Murphy had the audacity to merge Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* with Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" to create a song called "Like a Great Gatsby"; on *Lost Generation*, he invokes Hemingway's Paris in the Twenties, the magic of Hollywood and many more gods, then winds up tying Pound, Braun and even Hitler to a rock & roll stake and setting the whole works on fire. One would think Murphy's future bright indeed. *Lost Generation* is in many ways a better album than *Aquashow*—deeper, more melodic, possibly more mature—although perhaps less accessible, more remote. Paul A. Rothchild handled the production with invention, efficiency and professionalism, though one might wish that the assisting studio musicians, first-rate all, sounded somewhat less smoothly anonymous. But Murphy has more than enough bite to make up for that. He's not lost in his own castle yet; he's out there with the rest of us. When he's on the street, the sun also rises on one of the best.