

Happy Times Are Here Again

As the mid-60s began swirling into kaleidoscopic Technicolor, **DOTTI HOLMBERG** was left wondering how to start anew. It was 1st June 1965, and The GoldeBriars, the group with which she sang, imploded. “It all happened so suddenly,” she recalls. “I wasn’t aware of any problems until the day we broke up.”

ZO& WILLARD follows Holmberg’s musical journey, taking in musical legends Curt Boettcher and Gary Usher, changing with the times, saying “No” to drugs, and providing the key inspiration for The Mamas & The Papas

In her short two-and-a-half years with The GoldeBriars, Dotti Holmberg recorded three albums with the band: their eponymous debut, *Straight Ahead!* and an untitled album that was shelved due to the break-up, later released by Sony Japan in 2006 as *Climbing Stairs*. With their otherworldly harmonies, modal tunings, and Japanese influence, The GoldeBriars’ sound was unique. After touring up and down the East Coast, the band made it out to where it was happening: Los Angeles.



The GoldeBriars on stage circa 1964. L-R: Dotti, Curt Boettcher, Sheri Holmberg



"I evolved as a person through songwriting, and with that growth, there were many growing pains." Dotti Holmberg in happier times, Los Angeles, 1968





Ron Edgar, Dotti, Curt and Sheri photographed for the cover of The GoldeBriars' self-titled 1964 album; GoldeBriars 45s, including Dotti's 'Pretty Girls And Rolling Stones'

“When we heard Curt singing, we started to sing with him. We had this naturally beautiful harmonic blend that was unlike anything we’d ever heard”

“The last few weeks of the band were very memorable,” Dotti recalls, “We were riding high after having done a one-night gig at The Coconut Grove. We successfully auditioned for *Shindig!* and *Hullabaloo*. Jack Goodman, the stage manager for *Hullabaloo*, said we were the best live group ever to audition. Most group performances relied on their overdubbing and recording techniques to lip sync to, but we performed everything live.” Up until this point, The GoldeBriars were rehearsing for The Whisky A Go Go. “We were trying to change our sound to fit into a more rock-ish vein, since that was becoming more popular. We got the job but broke up before we could play the gig.”

Problems within the group became irreconcilable, and it seemed as if things ended before they could really begin. “It was a huge shock to me. My dreams of making it were completely shattered,” Dotti sighs. “It was as if a volcano had exploded. We were given a choice: mind or money. My sister Sheri and I chose freedom.”

It hadn’t been an easy decision; the road to success is often riddled with obstacles. For The GoldeBriars, that road seemed to have landmines at every turn.

After serendipitously meeting Curt Boettcher at Le Zoo, a small coffee shop in Minneapolis, Dotti and Sheri realised they had something special. “The coffee shop was so quiet that night, and when we heard Curt singing, we started to sing with him. We had this naturally beautiful harmonic blend that was unlike anything we’d ever heard.

• Sheri and I had our own pop-jazz duet. We’d perform in night clubs and old folks’ homes, but after singing with Curt, we knew the three of us had a distinct and different sound from everything we’d been hearing in the folk scene.”

• Together with friend and guitarist Ron Neilson, the quartet borrowed money to move into apartments. Stone broke, the four teens lived on a 25-pound bag of rice and little else. “Curt grew up as a navy brat in Japan, so he became our chef. He knew how to prepare rice in what seemed like a hundred different ways, but dinner was still like taking a vitamin every day.” Curt’s background contributed to the group’s sound as well. “He was a musical genius, and his interest in Japanese music added a lot to our travelling harmonies.” With Curt on rhythm guitar and Ron on banjo and lead guitar, they relied heavily on intricate harmonies and vocal arrangements, all dictated by Curt. “He was very similar to his mother, he was small in stature, but had a huge personality. He was cracking the whip, and we had to learn our parts fast!” Because Dotti and Sheri couldn’t read music, Curt taught the sisters their unique harmonies by ear. “We were like computers learning our parts... no lead sheets, just our parts being sung to us by Curt.”

• The group’s first gig was at Le Zoo, where they agreed to play for 13 weeks. Their naiveté, however, provided the owner of the coffeehouse an opportunity to take advantage of them. “He kept giving us false promises of pay each week,

• and after a few weeks we understood we were out several hundred dollars,” Dotti recalls. It wasn’t a total loss; a series of chance meetings with future manager John Haeny provided bigger opportunities for the foursome. Haeny’s promotional skills worked well after the group cut a demonstration record; Mercury, Columbia, and Dot Records all offered to sign them. They decided on Epic, a subsidiary of Columbia, and recorded their first album in New York in 1963. “Epic said we were the fastest group they ever recorded! We were told Peter, Paul, & Mary took several days to record one song, when we only took a day to record several songs,” Dotti chuckles.

• Advertised as the “New sound of ’64”, The GoldeBriars went on several promotional tours that included a TV appearance on *Hootenanny* and a small role in *Once Upon A Coffeehouse*, a hippie movie about the Miami folk scene.

• After performing in various clubs in New York, Illinois, and Washington DC, the group got a booking in Miami for a few weeks. Though they were achieving more and more success, the stress of surviving on such a small budget was wearing everyone thin. “Curt, who was handling our finances, fired our manager





Dotti with Ray Molina of Gary & Ray, whose single features GoldeBriars' backing vocals, 1966; mid-60s promo photo; Dotti writes a song at home



after finding out that he embezzled \$14,000. No wonder we were starving!”

Between broken-down junkers, several bouts of food poisoning, and hospitalisations, tensions ran high. “After one of our performances in Miami, I collapsed. Our diet was so poor that I became anaemic and spent the rest of our Florida tour dates in bed.” Dotti recalls. Sheri suffered a nervous breakdown after Curt, her first love, broke up with her. She left the group for three and a half months. During this time, Cathi Weaver, an old friend of Curt’s, substituted for Sheri. “Cathi used to perform with Curt as a duo during high school. They called themselves The Chalices.” The only recording of Cathi with the group is in *Once Upon A Coffeeshouse*, where they perform an original called ‘Honey Bunny’ and an old spiritual, ‘Slow Me Down, Lord’.

When Sheri did return, she wasn’t alone. Keith Olsen, who would go on to play bass in The Millennium and The Music Machine, was then in Minneapolis. Keith had played bass for Gale Garnett & Jimmie Rodgers. “Sheri met Keith in a coffeeshouse during that time she was away. They became practically inseparable! A few years later, they actually got married and Keith became a huge producer. But in those days when they first met, The Twin Cities were abuzz with many folk artists. You would run into people you knew all the time, which was great for Sheri. She was the social butterfly of the family, and in those days, it was such a small world!”

Meanwhile, Epic hired Bob Goldstein to create a stage act with the group. “He



was known for penning the international hit ‘Washington Square,’” Dotti recalls.

“He wrote many novelty songs for our group, and he added more of a Broadway style to our stage act. He wrote ‘Castle On The Corner,’ ‘I’m Gonna Marry You’ and ‘Licorice,’ among others. It added an extra layer to our already unique sound.” With their conglomeration of styles, The GoldeBriars didn’t really fit into one box. International Talent Agency, their new management, didn’t know where or how to book them.

Luckily, in March ‘65, they received a booking at The Exodus, a club in Denver, Colorado. There, another stroke of good fortune would come in the form of Bob Stein, owner of The Ice House in Pasadena, California. “Bob flew to Denver to see us and booked us at The Ice House for three weeks. We were the first

amplified group to perform there, and by this time, we had added a couple of new members to the group.” Bassist Tom Dorholt joined The GoldeBriars, along with Murray Planta, who replaced Ron Neilson on lead guitar.

“At The Ice House, a group of guys would always meet in between our sets. Funnily enough, Curt ended up producing them after they became The Association. ‘Along Comes Mary’ was the huge hit that Curt produced, along with ‘Cherish.’”

After their short stint at The Ice House, the band got booked for an upper-echelon charity dinner at The Cocomat Grove. “To fit into this classy atmosphere, Sheri and I wore floor-length gold embroidered dresses with gold-coloured heels. Our hair was topped with buns too. We felt that we were the height of sophistication! Our new manager, David Mirisch, had booked us for this performance. Little did we know this would be our last performance together.”

Now alone in California, Dotti had a decision to make: stay in LA, or move back home. “I was told on several occasions that I should move back to Minnesota, as I didn’t fit into their flower-child drug scene. They said I might want to consider being a nun. These were lonely and sad times, but I knew my path in life was to pursue my dreams.”

Keith Olsen, now bassist for The Music Machine, offered to help Dotti find another group. “He called a couple of his LA friends, but without luck. He phoned Cass [Elliot], who was performing in The Bahamas, and she said she didn’t know of any new groups needing a female singer,”



Dotti in Griffith Park,
LA, late '60s

Dotti recalls. "John [Sebastian] said he didn't know anyone either, but he did say that he recently joined a new group called The Lovin' Spoonful." Not too long thereafter, Cass attended a movie premiere in Hollywood with Keith, where she told him that her newly formed group, The Mamas & The Papas, stole The GoldeBriars' sound!

Despite this, Dotti's newfound freedom in Hollywood allowed her to rediscover her love of writing. "I was able to tap into my inner feelings by writing poetry and songs. It was almost therapeutic. I tried to not listen to music in Hollywood so my music wouldn't be influenced by what I was hearing. I wanted my creativity and music to come from within. A few months after the band broke up, I got a call from Curt. He wanted to know if I'd like to record for Our Productions."

After Curt departed The GoldeBriars, he started a record label with former Tower Records exec Steve Clark. Our Productions, the name Curt chose for the label, needed artists to jumpstart its output. Dotti just so happened to be the perfect candidate. "I recorded five songs with Curt, 'I Sing My Song', 'Foolish Times', 'Sea Of Tears' and two of my originals, 'It's Not Worth It At All' and 'Hopscotch'. Curt said that he imagined me as another Jackie DeShannon, and the recordings we worked on together were

all highly produced." Toxey French, Ben Benay, Mike Deasy, Allison Buff and Jerry Scheff all played on Dotti's songs. When she wasn't recording her own material, she sang background vocals for other Our Productions artists. You can hear Dotti's voice behind Tommy Roe, Lee Mallory, Bobby Jameson and Sandy Salisbury.

Because Our Productions used Columbia Studios for their artists, there was a constant flow of new talent being introduced. One of these artists was Chilean guitarist Randy Garcia. "Randy and I got along well, and he agreed to stay in Hollywood to be my guitarist."

As enjoyable as these sessions were, they were slowly becoming unbearable because of the heavy drug use.

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"The studios started filling up with the smell of drugs and it was against my nature to breathe all of that in. I've always felt that true growth needed real experience. That means taking things one stumbling step at a time. You can't do that with drugs, it's like taking artificial quantum leaps that don't really fulfil inner growth."

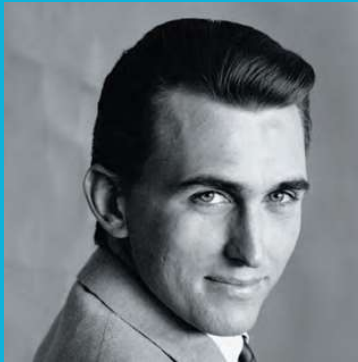
A flower child in her own right. "As a child from a broken home, I craved stability. I was only seven months old when Sheri, our brother Gary, and I were put on a train to Minnesota from LA. Our parents were getting divorced, and neither one of them could take care of us. So, in our early years, we grew up with our grandparents. But when I was nine years old, our father got remarried to a very troubled woman. We endured so much abuse. One night, I was so distraught that an angel appeared, encompassed in a ball of light. She consoled me and said my musical dreams would come true. Through all the hardship, that is what kept me going. Even though I looked and acted like a hippie, I didn't want drugs to get in the way of fulfilling my dreams."

Sometimes Dotti's hippie image was enough to scare off the un-hip older generation. "I was looking for Steve Clark one day because he owed me a pay check for all of the background



A long lost GoldeBriar?

DOTTI HOLMBERG recalls meeting a real-life doppelgänger and working with Gary Usher



In the late '60s, Dotti became a member of The Builders Of The Adytum, a small religious sect in Pasadena. There she met Gary Usher for the first time, despite having moved in all the same circles. "He invited me to be background vocalist on *The Blue Marble*, which was the second Sagittarius album he did with Curt. I took my fiancé with me to one of the recording sessions, and we never forgot Gary's comment in the studio. When we came in, there was a water cooler by the door. Gary pointed to it and said, 'Don't drink the bottled water! There was LSD or some kind of hallucinogenic drug in the water!'"

Being a member of BOTA led to another strange encounter, but this time it was about family. "One day, Gary came up to me and complimented me on a performance I'd done at a nearby club. The only problem was, he wasn't talking about me. I hadn't performed live in a few years at that point." It wasn't the first time Dotti had been mistaken for this individual; other members of the church were complimenting her on these live performances, so much so that Dotti took her fiancé Bill with her to find and meet this woman. "She was in a duet with her husband, and they called themselves The Goldshires, which was really strange. She did look very similar to me, and the style of music they were playing was very similar to The GoldeBriars.

"I spoke with her after the show, and she said she was from one of the Dakotas. I can't remember if it was North or South Dakota, but much later, I suddenly realised why she looked and sang like me." Ten years before Dotti's father died, he told her that they had a half-sibling in the Midwest. "He had fallen in love with someone in Minneapolis who was originally from North Dakota. He wanted to marry her since she was pregnant. But since he couldn't track down our mom in LA, he couldn't finalise their divorce. So, he left my half-sister's mother and never met his daughter. To this day, I believe I unknowingly met my half-sister."

By the time their father told Dotti about this, she had no way of finding her half-sister again, leaving her to wonder what things could have been like had they known of each other's existence.

another dead end. "Little did I know that Bobbie Gentry was only using her company for tax write-offs. Nothing became of these recordings, and all of my work remained unreleased."

By '69, the music was changing, and even the little work Dotti could find as a background vocalist was drying up. It was time to move on. "I discovered that I was

vocal work I had been doing, I headed over to The Sunset Tower, which was a restaurant on the top floor of Tower Records. I was wearing a long, colourful dress that was covered in bright flowers. It was so long that it touched my bare feet! I had pigtails and looked like such a hippie that Steve was in shock when he saw me. All the label's executives were eating, and I looked pretty wild. He told me not to move while he ran over to the elevator. He escorted me to his office immediately!" she laughs.

Unfortunately, Our Productions didn't last long. Once the label went under, all of its artists' careers sank with it. "Rumour had it that it went bankrupt because of Steve Clark's gambling habit. He gambled with the company's assets and lost everything," Dotti sighs. After the rights to her recordings were given to her, Dotti was once again on her own. To make ends meet, she worked at The Paramount Theatre in Hollywood for a few months. "One night I was working in the ticket booth, and I heard these loud whispers from movie-goers. Everyone thought that I was Sally Field doing a PR stunt! I never thought I resembled her, but they sure did!"

Following a series of small jobs, Dotti received a call from Sheri. "She was worried about me. I hadn't had any breakthroughs with any of my recordings. Sheri talked Keith into recording a free session for me at Original Sound, where The Music Machine previously recorded. Here Keith produced a couple of my original songs, 'To Touch Upon The Light' and 'Let You Know'." Sadly, these recordings were ultimately shelved as well.

Still determined to work towards her dream as an independent recording artist, Dotti received an opportunity through Bobbie Gentry. Bobbie's company, Gentry Ltd, agreed to record some of Dotti's original songs at Hollywood Sound Recorders: 'Essence' and 'The Bird (Didn't Die)'. But that turned out to be



Laguna Beach, early '70s; Sheri and Dotti in 1986. "My sister and I chose freedom"



the happiest when I could express myself through music and poetry.

After The GoldeBriars broke up, I evolved as a person through songwriting, and with that growth, there

were many growing pains. Trying to make it in the Hollywood scene began to feel like an insurmountable mountain to climb, so I changed my life's direction."

Focusing on character-building and children's education, Dotti went on to create The Right Choice Kids, a group of educational tools that are still being sold today. "I've written plays and songs that teach kids confidence and how to say 'no' to drugs. There were a couple of musicians I had put together to record these songs, one of which had Randy Ferrell from The Bellamy Brothers on guitar!" Dotti also continued to write poetry and compiled all of her work in an eBook titled *Your Own Ship*.

After Dotti married her fiancé Bill in '74, they moved to Florida, where they still reside today. "Over the years the angel's message gave me hope, keeping my dreams alive. I've realised my angelic message has turned out to be a compilation of all my music and writing. It's made me who I am today." ❏

Sometimes Happy Times is out now on Sundazed.

Whatever Happened To Jezebel? captures the history of The GoldeBriars through Dotti's personal diaries.

For more information about eBook and The Right Choice Kids, please visit thegoldebriars.com and rightchoicekids.com