

MYSTIC EYES. 1965

It came barreling out of car radio speakers like a flood on a black night. Surrounded by some of the best and most tuneful pop music ever made—the Beach Boys’ “I Get Around,” Petula Clark’s “Downtown,” the Supremes’ “Stop! In the Name of Love,” Wilson Pickett’s “In the Midnight Hour,” the Beatles’ “Eight Days a Week,” the Miracles’ “The Tracks of My Tears,” Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” Otis Redding’s “I’ve Been Loving You too Long (to Stop Now),” the Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!”—even up against Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs’ “Wooly Bully”; even up against Them’s own “Gloria” or “Here Comes the Night”—this made no sense. You couldn’t see through it, you couldn’t see into it. What was happening?

It starts in the middle, as if you’ve switched stations halfway through some other song without realizing it. It’s moving so fast you feel as if you’ll never catch up. The band—guitar,

drums, bass, an organ hovering in the background—can't catch up with the harmonica that's leading the charge, Little Walter as a nightrider; suddenly they do, and then they take a step ahead. You realize that the last thing you want is for the harmonica—high, implacable, uncaring, a body without a mind, it seems to be its own force, not some mere instrument played by some particular person who has to get up in the morning and go to sleep at night—to lose this race. It doesn't; it cuts in front of the stampeding combo, playing a swirling pattern that focuses the band. There's a call and response, a joining of forces, no longer one against the others, but a whole against a part, and the part is whoever's listening. You're the target. You're about to be left behind, to the wasteland this flood will leave in its wake.

When lyrics appear in the song—as the Them guitarist Billy Harrison once put it so perfectly, when Morrison begins to “throw words at it”—you notice for the first time that there haven't been any. Suddenly what was chaos, unformed, threatening, thrilling, a giant, gaping mouth—is now a story. There's a singer and he's going to tell you about something, something about walking down by the old graveyard and looking into the eyes of the dead. But then that breaks up, too. “Eyes,” he says again and again, the word fraying with each repetition, slipping the “mystic” that stands at its head, except when it doesn't. Morrison seems to turn away from the word, from words altogether, as if only fools actually believe that phonemes can signify, that a word is what it names, that there's any chance of understanding anything at all. The moment doesn't have the force, the desire—the termite instinct, as the critic Manny Farber un-

earthed it, of “doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it”—of the first rampage of the music, which is like the harshest instrumental passage of Howlin' Wolf's 1951 “How Many More Years” turning into its own monster and turning against its own song. But the moment has its own humanity, which everywhere else is abstract: that half-second when the particular person singing the song's words gives up on words, in frustration, in disgust, in triumph, fully entering the music as himself and nobody else, throwing a single “eyes” against the wall with the knowledge that neither it nor any other words will ever catch a half of what he means. You're caught up in an irresolvable adventure that is taking place as you listen, in the notion that you can drop someone into the middle of a story and then jerk him or her out of it as if it were nothing more than a few minutes on the radio, now a bad dream you're certain is yours alone.

Them, “Mystic Eyes” (Parrot, US, Decca, UK, 1965). Included on *Them* (Parrot, 1965) and *The Angry Young Them* (Decca, 1965). Collected on *The Story of Them Featuring Van Morrison* (Polydor, 1998).