



## FORGOTTEN LPs NOT YET ON CD

### FEAST OR FAMINE

#### *Brecon Beacon*

Philo/Fretless (1980)

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#### *Tomorrow the Birds Will Sing*

self-released cassette (1983)

### SUNDOG

#### *You Needn't Act So Wild*

self-released (1988)

In 1980, while much of the world was head-banging to punk or boogie-oging to disco, a quiet little revolution in an even quieter little town in northern Vermont was underway. *Brecon Beacon* was an LP record released on the small and newly formed Philo/Fretless label (now a division of Rounder Records) by a quartet named Feast or Famine. Three of the four members had come out of a semi-acoustic band called Trout while in college in upstate New York. Richard Ruane played guitar, mandola, and especially mandolin and possessed a lovely, lyrical voice that seemed like it should belong to someone older and more experienced than him. Michael Chorney was an ace guitarist who was also quite capable on tin whistle and even soprano saxophone. He had a fine voice and a good ear for harmony vocals. Michael Corn was another string wizard, adept at guitar, mandolin, and dulcimer. Ruane and the two Michaels met dulcimer and recorder player Ron Rost when he opened for the trio at a gig in Burlington, Vermont. It wasn't long before he became a full part of the band and Feast or Famine was officially born.

Ruane had already honed a great love of British traditional music after hearing Fairport Convention, Pentangle, and the guitar playing of

John Renbourn and Bert Jansch, as well as Irish import albums by groups that were making their way to the United States, such as Planxty and the Bothy Band. Chorney was equally excited about this music, and one album in particular captured the young musicians' imaginations: the eponymous record by Irishmen Andy Irvine and Paul Brady (1976), the duo's only release. "We caught them in concert together and went home and learned that *entire* album," Ruane recalled more than two decades later from his house in Ripton, Vermont.

The early incarnation of Feast or Famine wore many of these influences on its sleeve, yet added a distinctly laid-back New England feel to the proceedings. On its first album, the band covered songs usually associated with Fairport Convention, such as "Polly on the Shore" and an especially gorgeous acoustic arrangement of "Matty Groves" paired with the traditional reel "Kitchen Girls," which Ruane had learned while in the contradance band Crowfoot. The Pentangle and Planxty influences could be heard on songs such as "Lord Franklin" (matched to the traditional "Return to Fingal") and Chorney's shimmering rendition of "Maid of Coolmore."

The real standout tracks were the original compositions, starting with the Ruane-penned title track, which chronicles a time spent in England and the Brecon Beacon mountains of Wales. The song tells of love, found and lost, and manages to capture perfectly a beautiful and terrible sense of longing. Chorney contributed the lovely instrumental "Winter Waters," paired with the traditional "Morning Star," which featured a delicious dance between the string players and Rost's woodwinds. The album finished with a delicate full-band improvisation,

which melded seamlessly into the Chorney-penned "Jericho."

By the time of their self-released *Tomorrow the Birds Will Sing* (1983, cassette only), the band was playing mostly original compositions, with songwriting duties divided between Ruane and Chorney. Corn had taken a back seat due to other commitments and was on only three of the album's tracks. Great songs were still abundant, and the band began to add more instrumental colors to its palette. Chorney started to play sax more frequently, Ruane picked up an electric mandolin, and Rost, who had been anchoring the band with double bass and dulcimer, even added in some balafon. The whole band was experimenting with various forms of percussion. The album began with Chorney's fine tenor and Andy Irvine-inspired bouzouki on "Colored Glass." A trio of Ruane songs followed, including the fine storytelling of "Vermont Driller (Great Plains, Great Mountains)," and the nature-filled, pastoral love song "October." The centerpiece of the album was an instrumental suite collectively titled "La Cantata Sfumata." The album also featured two other instrumentals: the piano, sax, and percussion jazz of "For the Baker" and the expansive all-percussion tune "Ode to the Falling Stars," which closed the album.

While Feast or Famine might have rightfully taken its place among the acoustic world-music bands of the day, it wasn't to be. A new direction beckoned. "We had kind of bad timing on that one. The second recording came out just as the band was breaking up, which made it kind of hard to sell at gigs," mused Ruane. "Michael Chorney had left the band to follow his girlfriend out to San Francisco. We did a few gigs and some side projects without him, but it didn't seem right to call it Feast or Famine anymore."

Enter electric guitarist Steve Rosenfeld, who was a fan of the band and

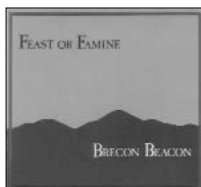
managed to convince the other members to form an electric group. For a short time, the group was called the Insatiables, and they performed split bills with Feast or Famine. "More and more people were coming to gigs wanting to hear just rock 'n' roll and dance. So after the Feasts broke up, we became Sundog," explained Ruane.

Ironically, Chorney returned from California just in time to join the newly formed Sundog, and the band released one excellent album in 1988, *You Needn't Act So Wild*. To the Ruane, Chorney, and Rosenfeld lineup was added Rick Wilson on electric bass, drummer Jay Catalano, and the amazing talking drum playing and percussion of Cameron O'Brian. The band's slogan was "Think globally, dance locally."

The recording featured nine songs, four each by Ruane and Chorney and one by Rosenfeld. The sound and approach pre-dated the concept of the jam-band nearly 10 years before it became a popular form of music. The album opened with the African-influenced groove of "Bartender Blues," on which Ruane and Rosenfeld's twin lead approach of electric mandolin and guitar recalled the famous duels between Duane Allman and Dicky Betts. Chorney's "Conical Night Pasture" was punctuated by ska-style horns. Soweto-style bass and full-tilt boogie talking drum and percussion drove "One Root," in which Ruane meditated on the loss of his father and the sacredness of life. One of the weirder songs from which the album gained its title was Ruane's "Buddha's in the Kitchen," which imagined a philosophical breakfast between Nietzsche and Buddha in a kitchen in Cornwall, Vermont. The album finished with O'Brian's talking drum dominating the lively good advice of "Don't Go Back to Sleep." Interestingly, the song has a shared writing credit of Chorney and the 13th-century Sufi mystic Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi. "Yea they got together on that one," chortled Ruane. "Michael was reading a lot of Rumi and we kinda jam around on that."

Though the band laid down at least six more tracks for a second album, including an intriguing Sundog treatment of Feast or Famine's epic "Domani Gli Uccelli Canteranno," *You Needn't Act So Wild* remains its only recording. Many of the band's members were new parents or had young children at the time and the age-old story of family taking priority over the road played out.

— Lahri Bond  
(Leverett, MA)



Sundog (1987) - Steve Rosenfeld, Cameron O'Brian, Jay Catalano, Richard Ruane, Rick Wilson, and Michael Chorney