

“Forever Changes”—Love (1967)

Added to the National Registry:

Essay by Ted Olson (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



The band

During the urban folk revival of the 1950s and early 1960s, Elektra Records was one of the leading companies that specialized in recordings of revivalist folk music. By the mid-1960s, however, Jac Holzman, who founded Elektra in 1950, was charting a new direction for the label. Long championing solo acts that performed tradition-influenced acoustic music, Holzman had begun to observe that younger musicians were gravitating toward band-oriented, electronic, high-energy rock. Accordingly, he began actively searching for a rock act that could help Elektra enter into the new popular music culture. Although his label had been based in New York City, Holzman had a hunch that the type of band he was seeking would be found on the West Coast. And indeed, at the West Hollywood club Bido Lito's in December 1965, he first heard what would soon become the first rock group signed to Elektra.

Titled, simply, Love, this band was a racially integrated unit fronted by prodigiously talented Memphis-native Arthur Lee. Love performed surprisingly diverse material with unwavering intensity, combining rhythm and blues drive with psychedelic attitude. Love's eponymous first album, released on Elektra in April 1966, featured revved-up renditions of the Bacharach-David soundtrack song “My Little Red Book” and “Hey Joe” (the popular period piece attributed to Billy Roberts), as well as some striking original material—most notably, Lee's “Signed D.C.,” a stark song about the perils of drug addiction. Despite Love's distinctive blending of black and white musical influences, that debut LP and “Da Capo,” a follow-up album released in January 1967, did not fully reflect the band's range or fulfill its potential. “Da Capo,” for instance, sparkled with brilliance—especially two Lee-penned songs, “She Comes In Colors” and “Seven & Seven Is”—but side B of that album constituted a single extended jam that, granted its ambitions, essentially bogged down under its own ponderous weight.

At this juncture, Holzman, drawing from his long experience with folk music, wondered if Love might be wise to embrace a more subtle soundscape. Having produced numerous recordings by folk musicians over the previous 15 years, Holzman confessed, “I had, over the years, developed a deep appreciation for the sonority of the solo acoustic guitar. I suggested to Arthur that I thought there was a quieter tonality which might be a winning

context for the band. What would happen if you advanced backwards? What would it sound like if their [Love's] rock'n'roll sensibility was applied to songs accompanied by acoustic instruments?" While notoriously independent—even iconoclastic—in his musical choices, Lee heeded Holzman's suggestion, and this set the scene for Love's third album, the legendary "Forever Changes."

In Spring 1967, Bruce Botnick, who had engineered Love's first two albums, was enlisted to oversee the production of the sessions toward Love's third album. Botnick, who had just finished working on Buffalo Springfield's second album, invited Neil Young to co-produce the forthcoming Love album, but Young, after initially agreeing, "excused himself," Botnick recalls, "as Neil really had the burning in his heart to go solo and realize his dream without being involved with another band."

At this phase of its existence, Love featured Lee (vocals and guitar), Bryan MacLean (vocals and guitar), Johnny Echols (lead guitar), Ken Forssi (bass), and Michael Stuart (drums). The sessions for "Forever Changes" would extend from June to September 1967. "During the first sessions," relates Holzman, "the album was plagued by internal problems within the band and lack of preparation. This was to be the album in which all of Love's past experimentation would blend into something glorious. It clearly wasn't happening." From Holzman's perspective, Botnick was an "album savior" for shepherding "Forever Changes" through some trying circumstances. Botnick recalls the situation:

We started recording at Sunset Sound Recorders [in Hollywood], and the band members weren't prepared and did not show any signs of wanting to be in the studio. Previously I had gone through all the songs with Arthur and Bryan and knew that we had a marvelous album, but no band to play it. I made a decision to bring in The Wrecking Crew [Phil Spector's studio band] to work with Arthur, and the other members of Love sat in the studio on the couch in front of the console, very disconsolate. In a single three-hour union session we recorded "Andmoreagain" and "The Daily Planet." After this session, the band asked for a second chance, and after a short discussion with Arthur, with a wink between us, the wish was granted. Because Sunset Sound Studio 1 was booked when we were ready to record, I booked us into Western Recorders Studio 1 for all the rhythm tracks and most of the vocals. Both Arthur and Bryan sang live in the studio so that the track had the proper tempo and feel.

Benny Goodman, who was recording in an adjacent studio, dropped by for one of the songs and hung around awhile, enjoying new music and recognizing the jazz influences that Arthur brought.

From Western Recorders the sessions moved around a lot, including recording some guitar solos at Leon Russell's home studio.

Of the 11 songs included on the album, the nine composed by Lee bear the mark of his unique world-view, articulating eloquent, and at times compellingly obtuse, ponderings

about mortality, hypocrisy, and psychic freedom from conformity. Lee's lyrics memorably merge mystery with realism and wit, and his song titles themselves are beguilingly poetic, such as "Maybe the People Would Be the Times or Between Clark and Hilldale" and "The Good Humor Man He Sees Everything Like This." Two key songs on "Forever Changes" were contributed by MacLean: the album opener "Alone Again Or"—a minor hit in 1968 and then again in 1970 and, in Holzman's phrase, "the perfect portal song"—and the tender "Old Man."

Recorded during the notorious "Summer of Love," "Forever Changes" (in the words of critic Mark Deming) "heralds the last days of a golden age and anticipates the growing ugliness that would dominate the counterculture in 1968 and 1969." But though its songs evoke the hopes, fears, and issues associated with that era, the album is anything but topical—indeed, "Forever Changes" is essentially timeless, remaining as meaningful and as beautiful today as in 1967.

Granted the serious themes underpinning this powerful song-cycle, the album's arrangements are spirited, seamlessly crafted, and essentially baroque in emphasizing ornamentation, texture, and contrast. The orchestral accompaniment heard on "Forever Changes," contributed by arranger David Angel, is arguably the most distinctive sustained orchestration in rock music history. Botnick describes how these arrangements came to be:

When we had the majority of the album recorded, the thought came, why not add some strings and brass to a few of the songs? I called my mother [Priscilla Nemoy], who was the music copyist for Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole, and I asked her if she knew of an undiscovered arranger that might be a good fit for Love. After playing her a couple of songs she recommended David Angel. I hooked up Arthur with David, and I sat in on the head sessions where Arthur would sing a counter-melody for the strings and brass and then David would turn that into arrangements.

At that time in the 1960s, sharing styles from other kinds of music was normal. In this case, the Tijuana Brass were ruling the airwaves, and I thought that we could stylistically borrow the flavor without doing a direct copy, more of a Spanish influence than Mexican.

The listener first encountering "Forever Changes"—hearing the deft interplay between Lee's and MacLean's acoustic guitar picking, Echols' electric guitar leads, and Stuart's drumming, as well as some deeply inspired singing—might find it difficult to believe that Love was dysfunctional immediately before, during, and immediately after these historic recordings sessions. "Forever Changes' had a life of its own," says Botnick, "and the album flowered by itself without much thinking getting in the way of the music. I credit Bryan for the deep softness of his heart and what he always brought to Love. Arthur, on the other hand, was one of the greatest poetic songwriters of his generation."

The album's enigmatic title has engendered some speculation as to its meanings. According to John Einarson's biography of Love's enigmatic frontman, Lee based the title on a third-party conversation conveyed to him by a friend. Allegedly, a man—upon severing a relationship with a woman, who had moaned “You said you would love me forever!”—had responded, “Well, forever changes.” Once in an interview, Lee mentioned that he thought of the album's title as “Love Forever Changes.”

Released in November 1967 with now-iconic album cover art by Elektra's head of design Bill Harvey, “Forever Changes” peaked at #154 on the “Billboard” 200 Album chart in 1968 (the album fared better in the UK, where it rose that same year to #24). It took a decade for the album's artistic achievements to be widely recognized. In 1979, “Rolling Stone” magazine awarded the album 5 stars (its highest possible rating) in the first edition of the “Rolling Stone Record Guide,” while in 2003 that same magazine ranked “Forever Changes” as 40th among “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time.” Love's classic album continued to be highly regarded in the UK, influencing many of that nation's leading musicians and being declared, in 1996, as #11 in “Mojo” magazine's list of “The 100 Greatest Albums Ever Made.” Eventually receiving the highest recognition possible for an album in the US, “Forever Changes” in 2008 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, while in 2012 the album was selected for inclusion in the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry.

Today, Holzman is quick to give much of the credit for “Forever Changes” to Botnick: “Bruce was able to pull all the parts together to make it work. He was the most important person in the studio besides Arthur and Bryan. Without Bruce, this album would not have made it into the Registry.”

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.