Setting The Record Straight **By Michael Konik**

The Strangeloves

Or: How three songwriters from New York learned to stop worrying—while mimicking Australians—and love the royalty checks

"We were a bigger scam than Milli Vanilli," admits Bob Feldman, 56, a Brooklyn Jew who grew up across the street from Neil Diamond. "We weren't British. We were Yiddish."

In the summer of 1965, Feldman, neighborhood buddy Jerry Goldstein and Bronxite Richard Gottehrer had a Top 40 hit (peaking at No. 11), a rhythmic, repetitive anthem called "I Want Candy." (The pop group Bow-Wow-Wow did a successful cover of the tune during that musical period VH1 refers to as "The Big '80s.") Sammy Davis Jr. introduced them on a television program called "Hullabaloo"; thousands of fans mobbed their concert performances; and the greatest publicity generator of the time, "The Ed Sullivan Show," begged for Richie, Jerry and Bobby to make an appearance.

I WANT CANDY
THE STRANGELOVES
BANG RECORDS
MONO BANG 211

The guys turned Ed down. We can't do it, they said. Ed offered them $5,000, double the usual fee. We can't do it, they said. OK, Ed countered, $10,000—and that's our final offer. No, really, they said, we can't.

"That was a lot of money back then," Feldman recalls in his sonorous bass voice. "But doing Sullivan was out of the question." Gottehrer's grandmother watched one show religiously, and that was Ed Sullivan's. This same grandmother was financing his law school studies, which would have been just fine if only Gottehrer had bothered to register for classes. Instead, he was busy making one of the most popular records in America, meeting many extremely friendly women and generally having the kind of fun nice Jewish boys from the Bronx don't normally have.

"Most acts would give their pinkie finger to be on Sullivan," Feldman says. "We had a grandmother problem."

The boys also had a credibility problem. But only they seemed to know that. To their grandmothers and grandfathers, they were Bob, Jerry and Richard. To their adoring fans, they were Miles, Giles and Niles—The Strangeloves. The band's official bio was this: The Strangeloves were three sheepherding brothers named Strange from Armstrong, Australia (you won't find it on any map), on the "junglelike" fringes of the Outback. Thanks to the fortune they made with a unique crossbred sheep (the Gottehrer sheep, it was called), these primitive shepherds were wealthy enough to explore their true passion, American-style rock 'n' roll.

Since it was the permissive '60s, apparently nobody in the music business bothered to question why three "broth-

Photo by Cavin & Stovall ©1996

ers from Aboriginal Australia" neither resembled one another nor spoke with an Australian accent. And nobody seemed to realize that most Australians, unlike The Strangeloves, didn't beat hair drums, wear zebra-skin vests or carry 5-foot-long hunting spears.

"This was before *Crocodile Dundee*," Feldman explains. "British, Australian. Who knew?"

The Strangeloves were a little white lie that grew out of control, an inside joke that nobody got. Theirs is a story that would probably be forgotten—or filed as a footnote to rock 'n' roll history—if not for the endurance of several hit songs ("I Want Candy," "Cara-Lin" and "Night Time," all reached the *Billboard* Top 40) and America's fascination with things not being what they seem. Sony Legacy, which has an extensive catalogue of rock music artifacts, has reissued a Strangeloves anthology, *The Best of The Strangeloves*, and since then Feldman has been besieged with interview requests, coming clean about The Strangeloves to media outlets as sober as National Public Radio.

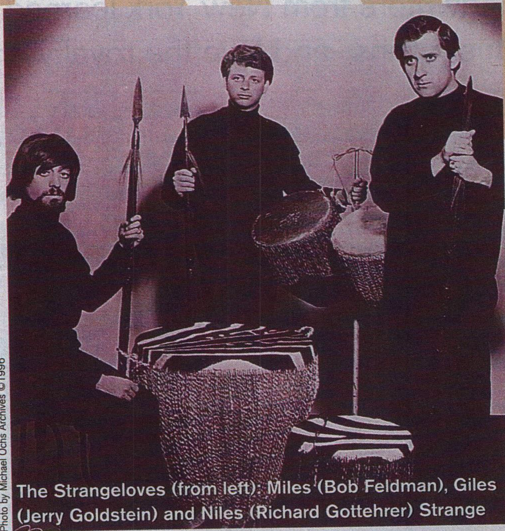


Photo by Michael Ochs Archives ©1996

The Strangeloves (from left): Miles (Bob Feldman), Giles (Jerry Goldstein) and Niles (Richard Gottehrer) Strange

Since it was the permissive '60s, apparently nobody in the music business bothered to question why three "brothers from Aboriginal Australia" neither resembled one another nor spoke with an Australian accent.

Not long ago, I visited him in Nashville, where—the story gets weirder—Feldman is trying to break into the country music business. "I can't write old-time country tunes. That ain't me," Feldman tells me, sounding as Brooklyn as a Damon Runyon horse-player. "But you gotta understand. Country music these days is more like rock 'n' roll with steel guitars and fiddles. That I can do."

His pedigree as a songwriter is impeccable. Gold records and autographed notes of thanks from appreciative recording artists line the walls of his rural château. In the living room, there's one from George Thorogood (who covered "Night Time"). Near the staircase leading to the master bedroom, there's one from David Bowie (who had a hit in Europe with the Feldman-penned "Sorrow"). And Melissa Manchester. And The Angels.

The Angels, you may recall, were one of the 1960s "girl groups," and in addition to being cute and young and fresh, the three women from Orange, New Jersey, were friends of Bob Feldman and Jerry Goldstein, at the time two aspiring songwriters. The lads, with their partner Richard Gottehrer, worked out of the legendary Brill Building in Manhattan, where the Gershwins and Porters of the day hustled tunes to anyone who would listen. One afternoon, Feldman and friends wrote an infectious sliver of a song that sounded like a child's playground taunt. They gave the tune to their pals, The Angels. The Angels recorded it. The song, "My Boyfriend's Back," promptly went to No. 1 in August 1963. (The song has since been covered by many other female artists, including Melissa Manchester, which translates into more royalties for the guys.)

If not for a certain band called The Beatles, who landed on U.S. shores in early 1964, Feldman and company might have settled into a comfortable existence penning catchy melodies for milk-fed American lasses. But the arrival of John, Paul, George and Ringo—and Mick and Keith and The Animals and The Searchers and all the other invading Brits—doomed the girl groups (and their writers) to oblivion.

"Like the saying goes, we couldn't get arrested," Feldman remembers. "We'd gone through the money from 'My Boyfriend's Back,' and we were nearly broke. Nobody wanted our songs anymore."

Desperate to survive the British Invasion, Feldman and crew came up with a tune called "Love, Love," whose gimmick was a brief stream-of-consciousness voice-over, done in a spoof of a British accent. For demonstration purposes, the guys did the vocal tracks themselves, with Feldman supplying the mock British oratory. They called themselves The Strangeloves because they had just seen Peter Sellers in the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, and they thought he was cool. ("We were running around wearing those dark sunglasses,

"Isn't this something," Feldman says, surveying the woods behind his cabin in Brentwood, Tennessee. "I'm a kid from Brooklyn, and now I live out here, where they got *crittahs*."

touring and avoiding Gottehrer's grandmother, The Strangeloves disbanded. "We wanted to write songs, not perform," Feldman says. "At the end we were turning down gigs because we had season tickets to the [NFL's New York] Giants. We didn't take it seriously, because we weren't musicians at heart." Indeed, he reveals, "I'm musically illiterate. I can't read or write a note."

Even today, though, these three New Yorkers still have an impact on American popular music. The Feldman, Goldstein and Gottehrer–produced "Hang On Sloopy" by The McCoys reached No. 1 in 1965 and can still be heard today blasting from jukeboxes and radios tuned to oldies stations. (The song was also released by The Strangeloves—same instrumental track, different vocals.) And "My Boyfriend's Back" and "I Want Candy" remain nearly as popular today as they were over three decades ago. "I've probably earned more in royalties from those songs in the last five years than I did in the previous 25," Feldman says. "In fact, all the television stations used to use 'Candy' whenever they ran a series of John Candy movies. Since he died, it's cost me about $15,000 a year in royalties."

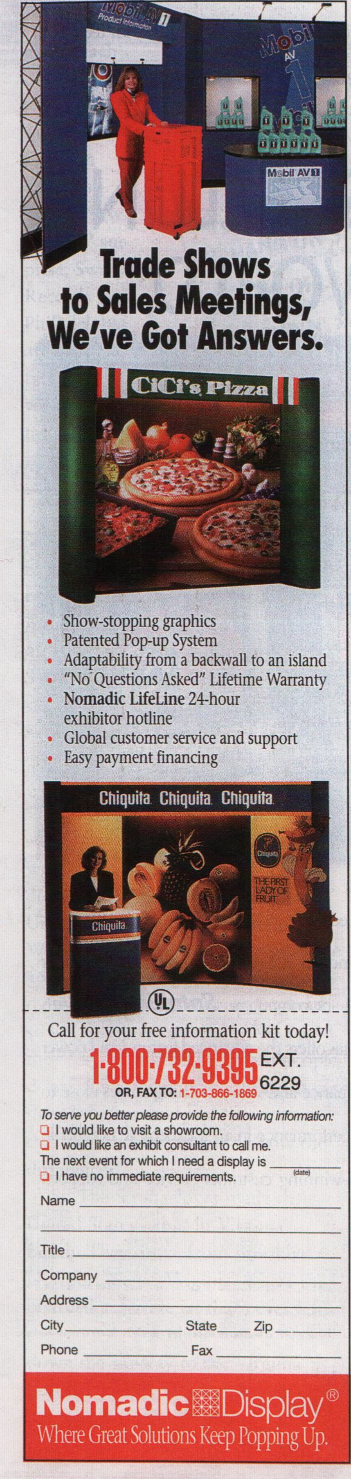
After his hair-drumming days were over, Goldstein went on to produce albums and write a string of hits ("The Cisco Kid," "Low Rider," "Why Can't We Be Friends?" and "Summer") for War; he also produced a couple of albums for Tanya Tucker in the '80s. Later that decade, he started his own record company, Avenue Records, based in Los Angeles. His next big project is to co-produce an album with Sly Stone, the first for Stone in nearly 20 years, to be released sometime next year on the Avenue label.

Gottehrer never did become a lawyer after he and his mates disbanded. In 1966 he formed a partnership with Seymour Stein that ultimately became Sire Records. Later, he produced the debut album for Blondie and the first two albums for the Go-Go's. He now has his own production company, Instant Records, and has started an independent record label, Sol 3, both of which are based in New York and cater to alternative bands.

While two of the "brothers" Strange currently reside in big cities, Feldman can be found hanging around his eight acres in rural Brentwood, Tennessee, just outside Nashville and down the road from country music stars Alan Jackson and Dolly Parton. There he plays with his three dogs and dreams up new tunes. "Isn't this something," he says, surveying the woods behind his cabin. "I'm a kid from Brooklyn, and now I live out here, where they got *crittahs*."

Whether Feldman will conquer Music City as The Strangeloves did America remains to be seen. (He has already sold a couple of songs.) But if in the coming months you hear a song called "My Urge to Roam Wasn't Built in a Day," performed by a middle-aged crooner with a pronounced Alabama twang, who says he's just a good ol' hillbilly from deep in the woods, the kind of guy who's real fond of chitlins and grits and songs about pickup trucks and cheatin' hearts, listen carefully—very carefully—for the Brooklyn accent.

Since writing this story, Michael Konik, Sky's West Coast editor, can't get the song "I Want Candy" out of his head.



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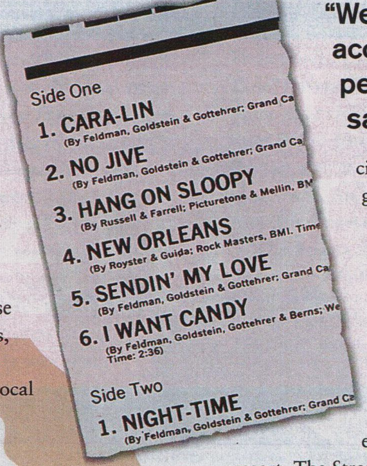
giving each other those crazy salutes," Feldman explains.) To the New Yorkers' surprise, Swan Records in Philadelphia agreed to release the song as was, with Feldman's faux cockney vocal track.



Side One

1. CARA-LIN (By Feldman, Goldstein & Gottehrer; Grand Ca
2. NO JIVE (By Feldman, Goldstein & Gottehrer; Grand Ca
3. HANG ON SLOOPY (By Russell & Farrell; Picturetone & Mellin, BM
4. NEW ORLEANS (By Royster & Guida; Rock Masters, BMI. Time
5. SENDIN' MY LOVE (By Feldman, Goldstein & Gottehrer; Grand Ca
6. I WANT CANDY (By Feldman, Goldstein, Gottehrer & Berns; We Time: 2:36)

Side Two

1. NIGHT-TIME (By Feldman, Goldstein & Gottehrer; Grand Ca

"We weren't sure we could pull off the accents well enough to convince all these people we were from England," Feldman says, "so we settled on Australia."

Given the *Zeitgeist*, The Strangeloves' record received good airplay in several regional markets, including Virginia Beach, Virginia, where a local disc jockey hoped to bring The Strangeloves down for a big show with Chuck Berry and The Shangri-Las.

"You've got to understand something: We never wanted to be performers," Feldman says. "We were songwriters, music publishers. What did we know from performing? Unfortunately, we needed the work. We weren't sure we could pull off the accents well enough to convince all these people we were from England, so we settled on Australia. We knew they sort of talked like British people down there, Down Under. And in case they didn't, nobody in America at that time would probably know the difference."

So The Strangeloves made their United States debut in Virginia Beach. They drove from Brooklyn to Newport News, Virginia, where they boarded a private jet that never left the ground. The plane merely taxied down the runway to the Virginia Beach terminal, where 3,000 screaming fans, a flotilla of limousines and the mayor—bearing the key to the city—were waiting to greet the band's "arrival from Australia."

"Let me put it this way," Feldman says with a smile. "It was hysterical."

Surrounded by television cameras and a police escort, The Strangeloves, wearing jeans and matching Perry Como–style cashmere sweaters—"We hadn't refined our bushman look at that point," Feldman says—took the stage. Backed by a rock trio, the boys accompanied themselves on hair drums, singing in unison. "Our first song was 'Shout,'" Feldman remembers. "We did like a 20-minute rendition, beating the drums, dancing like maniacs. And when we finished, there was complete silence. We looked at each other, and you could see the dread. Then, after this pause, the applause started. I mean *riotous* applause. Like a mob scene. We played five more songs, finished our set and met our first groupies."

In the spring of 1965, Feldman and friends took some rough tracks and their "concept" to the legendary Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records. He encouraged them not only to record more songs, but to play up the bizarre Aboriginal Australian angle. Though virtually nothing about The Strangeloves looked remotely Australian—indeed, in vintage pictures, The Strangeloves look like nothing so much as three New Yorkers auditioning for a bad biker movie—the public bit.

Seldom did the boys encounter even a whiff of incredulity. "Sure, we perpetuated the myth," Feldman says. "But I think most people just wanted to believe, like they do with professional wrestling. They wanted to believe we were part of the British music scene. So we let them."

Feldman, Goldstein and Gottehrer had a standing policy of never trying to cover their tracks in the media. According to Feldman, "Whenever someone asked us a question, we decided just to say whatever came off the top of our head, even if it contradicted something we might have said the day before." But even as the stories grew more incredible, the boys were nearly found out only once, in Pittsburgh.

"That particular day we were scheduled to do a live television show," Feldman says, smiling. "That day I was fooling around with some of our props, with the spears and the boomerangs, and I was claiming to be the world champion boomerang thrower."

A member of the television crew noticed Feldman toying with the boomerang, boasting of his boomeranging prowess. "The guy comes up to me and says, 'Excuse me, Mr. Strange, I know a thing or two about boomerangs and, well, that's not how you hold a boomerang.' I thought fast and I said, 'No, 'ats not the way *you* 'old a boomerang. And 'ats why *you're* not the world champion.'"

Still doubtful, the crew member challenged Miles Strange to demonstrate his boomeranging skills. Feldman coolly let fly a mighty toss and nailed a nearby cameraman in the forehead. The resulting gash required 22 stitches. "Still, I don't think anyone else suspected," he says.

After a few years of recording and