

Robert George "Joe" Meek was Britain's first independent rock'n'roll record producer. He was a visionary, a genuine eccentric, and his story bears repeating because it's a good one. Pay attention, youngsters, for were it not for the accident of birth, this could be *your* story too.

Joe Meek was born, or perhaps beamed down, on April 5, 1929 in the small British farming village of Newent where he taught himself to fix radios and TVs and do magic tricks. He joined the Royal Air Force as a radar technician. He left the service in 1953, moved to London and soon found work as a recording engineer at IBC studio, quickly building a reputation as a guy in the know. British recording studios of that era were staid places where musicians were required to wear coats and ties at all times. The old farts running these places were attempting to come to grips with the rock'n'roll discs being imported from the US (where studios required the musicians to be drunk) and, with rare exceptions, they could not produce credible rock'n'roll discs to compete with the American sound. Meek—young, ambitious and obsessively in love with American rock—was soon a force to be reckoned with. In 1956, he and a partner opened Landstone studio where he engineered many early Brit rock hits. Then, splitting with his backer, Meek opened a second studio in a flat over a leather store on Holloway Road. This legendary spot would be the scene of his finest achievements, greatest successes and, finally, his death.

Meek was a queer fellow in every sense of the word. His recordings have best been described as "perverse," an adjective that can also be applied to his fans. A Joe Meek production (the label read RGM production or Meeksville Sound), like a Phil Spector disc, was always the product of the producer's vision. Meek often dealt with themes of supernatural phenomena, death and outer space, and could create an unearthly feel in the studio better than anyone. Although tone-deaf (his songwriting demos are said to be hilarious), he was a fabulous technician. His experiments with echo, reverb, compression, microphone placement, backwards masking and exotic instruments including (especially) the sound of his toilet flushing, along with speeded-up tape effects, heavenly choirs and a thunderous stomping beat created discs the likes of which had not been heard before or since.

By 1960 Meek was working as a producer, songwriter, arranger and A&R man, recording groups in his tiny studio and leasing the masters to various labels, hitting the charts with the Flea-Rakkers, Lance Fortune and Michael Cox, among others. The year 1961 saw his first UK



by James Marshall

THE EXTRANEIOUS WORLD OF JOE MEEK

mega-smash, "Johnny Remember Me"—a maudlin teen-snuff ballad, the chorus of which is sung by the voice of the supposed cadaver. It hit #1 and stayed there for 15 weeks.

With these early successes under his belt, Meek's pace picked up. He produced Mike Berry and the Outlaws' "Tribute to Buddy Holly," working out another obsession, the dead American rocker whose spirit Meek claimed to be in touch with via nightly seances (co-writer Geoff Goddard went further, claiming Holly co-wrote the song from beyond the grave). Other fine Meek productions from this fruitful period include the Moontrekkers, Cliff Bennett and the Rebel Rousers, perpetual Prime Minister candidate Screamin' Lord Sutch and the Savages, the Saxons and Peter Jay and the Jaywalkers.



Meek's crowning glory came in 1963. Fascinated by the space race, he decided to dedicate a tune to the satellite Telstar. Using the instrumental combo the Tornadoes—featuring Meek's protégé Heinz—he created an outer-space classic. From its spacey opening (the beloved toilet flush played backwards) to its majestic clavivolin refrain, reverbed-out guitar solo and otherworldly sound, "Telstar" by the Tornadoes was an irresistible piece of trash and it topped the charts worldwide, giving it the distinction of being the first British record to hit #1 in America (a year before the Beatle's chart debut).

Meek's moment in the sun was short-lived. Like the American rock'n'roll he loved, the "beat boom" (or British Intrusion, as it was known in the US) made the Joe Meek sound obsolete. Convinced that the beat groups were a short-lived fad, he went about his business, grooming Heinz for stardom as an Eddie Cochran tribute/clone, scoring a UK hit with "Just Like Eddie." Soon, however, Meek took a flying leap onto the beat bandwagon, producing discs for the Puppets, the Syndicats, the Riot Squad, and hit international pay dirt with the Honeycombs, featuring drummer Honey Lantree, whose "Have I the Right" gave Meek his second US chart topper. Despite this temporary reprieve, Meek was rapidly becoming an anachronism, and his tightly wrapped mind began to unravel. He held seances for Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran nightly, he talked to cats and was convinced that the big record companies were bugging his studio and stealing his ideas (he kept his homemade reverb tanks and echo units under lock and key). Gay, he was subject to much harassment and an embarrassing arrest in a public john (maybe he was testing the echo) made headlines in late 1966.

By early 1967 Meek was almost completely dysfunctional. He was a suspect in the murder of a gay sailor whose dismembered torso was found in a trunk. Convinced that he was about to be arrested for murder, Joe Meek loaded up a single-barrel shotgun, blew his landlady's head off then turned the gun on himself. The date was February 3, 1967, the eighth anniversary of Buddy Holly's death. I told you it was a good story. ●

Joe Meek re-issues on CD:
(All UK releases)

The Joe Meek Story Volume One: Triumph Records (Line)

The Joe Meek Story: The Pye Years (double) (Sequel)

Joe Meek and the Blue Men: I Hear a New World (RPM)

If your local discery can't get them, try writing to Downhome Music, 6921 Stockton Ave, El Cerrito, CA 94530 or Midnight Records, PO Box 390, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10011.