



## Blackbyrds Flyin' High with 'Happy Music'

BY MICHAEL BARACKMAN

"Happy is a good adjective to describe our music," said Kevin Toney, keyboard player and spokesman for the Blackbyrds. "Who wants to hear a record that's gonna make you depressed?"

"Happy Music," the Washington D.C.-based group's festive soul and pop hit, is a raucous disco number written and produced by jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd, who formed the original group as a backup unit in 1973 while he was director of Howard University's Jazz Studies Department. Last year Byrd produced the Blackbyrds' lilt-ing hit, "Walking in Rhythm," and he remains the group's manager and influential musical overseer. Byrd and the Blackbyrds perform together onstage even though he is signed to Blue Note and they to Fantasy.

"Happy Music" originated spontaneously at a rehearsal jam before a 1974 New Year's Eve gig in Camden, New Jersey. "We were really just messing around," Toney recalled. Byrd added, "We came in for a soundcheck, and all of a sudden the guitar player played this riff while we were jamming. It was just a rhythm track for the longest time. We used to play it in the background as an intermission thing while I announced the band."

That line eventually became the staccato hook for "Happy Music." Jazzy choruses and strong rhythms were added, and the song appeared on the Blackbyrds' fourth album, *City Life*. Because the album concept emphasized vocals, Byrd decided late in the sessions to add lyrics to the already completed instrumental track. Byrd,

*Happiness is the Blackbyrds: (left to right) Stephen Johnson, Kevin Toney, Joe Hall, Keith Killgo, Orville Saunders*

who'd never written lyrics prior to his association with the Blackbyrds, wrote the song's simple but catchy phrases ("Happy music makes you feel good all the tiime!" etc.) while listening to drummer Harvey Mason play in a Los Angeles club. Harmonies by the Blackbyrds and guest singer Merry Clayton were added, but Byrd kept the frills to a minimum. "The groove was so strong that it didn't need any complex elements," Toney asserted. "Any complex orchestrations, vocals or solos would have destroyed the song."

Initially, the band didn't believe in "Happy Music" as a single. "We didn't really think that song would do it," Toney said. "Flying High," a meticulously polished, more blatantly disco song, was pulled as the single but it sold only moderately well. Byrd then settled on "Happy Music." A seven-minute disco version was cut to 4:32 for the album by deleting a two-minute introduction. For the single Byrd cut it further, to 3:04, by dropping a trumpet solo from the middle of the song.

Byrd admits that making a single out of "Happy Music" wasn't entirely his idea. After "Flying High" didn't, he asked several DJs and record distributors for their second choices. But, he said, his decision was really based on the enthusiasm of live audiences. "If they're jumping all over the god-damned bandstand going nuts," he said, "what else are you gonna do?"

## A Year after Gabriel

# Genesis: A New Beginning

BY STEVE CLARKE

LONDON—When vocalist and on-stage figure Peter Gabriel quit Genesis last May, many thought that the band was in serious trouble. Now, with a new album, *A Trick of the Tail*, and a North American tour which began in Toronto on March 31st, the band members and Gabriel agree that everything's going well.

After Gabriel announced his decision, some 400 applicants auditioned to replace him. Eventually it became apparent that the best successor was already in the band.

"It was very frustrating," Genesis drummer Phil Collins recalled. "I was singing and teaching them, and none of them were coming up to scratch. We even went in to record the album without a singer. I was down to sing a couple of acoustic songs. As far as the heavier songs went, I was an unknown quantity."

"It came to the point where we had to do 'Squonk' [the album's most Zeppelin-like cut] and I had a go. Obviously it went okay, so we went through the rest of the album. At that point we felt very confident. We knew as a four-piece group we could exist in the studio without any hassies."

At the encouragement of his wife, Collins then suggested that he should do the band's onstage singing. The idea was immediately dismissed, but two months later, with no sign of another lead singer, guitarists Mike Rutherford and Steve Hackett and keyboard player Tony Banks agreed—as long as another drummer could be found. Former Yes and King Crimson member Bill Bruford was drafted as a guest touring member.

"I'm still the drummer and I'm still playing onstage," Collins said, "especially during the instrumental sections. Visually it should be interesting. There'll be points where we'll both be playing together and times when only one of us is playing."

It turned out that Collins's voice was not remarkably different from Gabriel's. "There was no striving to sound like Peter," Collins asserted. "When it comes down to it, you can't really do that. I used to sing behind the kit most of the time because Pete would be running around and he'd be off mike. At least there'd be one voice."

Apart from the lack of vocal difference, it's apparent from listening to *A Trick of the Tail* that Genesis has reestablished its identity as a band. In the past, Gabriel did the vocals only after the instrumental tracks were

completed, and all five members were together only at the mixing stage. This time around, Collins did the vocal tracks with the rest of the group staying around to offer encouragement.

Gabriel's departure did cause some difficulties. "Lyric writing was more of a challenge 'cause we didn't have a very individual style, and Gabriel had been entirely responsible for the humor within the band," Collins said. "Otherwise, the material was put together much as before—sitting around the rehearsal room having the odd pieces of material and later on gluing them together." Gabriel's elaborate mime routines also seem to be a thing of the past. "The actual visual presentation of the stage will be the same as before, but more refined," Collins said about the forthcoming tour. "We'll be using movies as well as slides. There'll be a few special effects. We won't be using dry ice. I won't be wearing costumes."

What does Gabriel think of all this? In New York to talk to producer Bob Ezrin and search for a U.S. label (he's signed to Charisma in England), Gabriel said that he'd heard and liked *A Trick of the Tail*—"quite a lot. A few

*Genesis begins again: (front, left to right) Phil Collins, Tony Banks (rear, left to right) Steve Hackett, Michael Rutherford, Bill Bruford*

people have rung me up and said they thought it was me singing. I think Phil's voice is a little more fluid than mine, but I think I have greater variety."

Gabriel claimed he'd left Genesis because "I wanted a change—both personally and musically. I was becoming a little hollowed out." He's thought of doing two albums, one "more personal than with Genesis," the other taking some of the ideas on *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* "to their logical conclusions."

Gabriel is toying with the idea of joining a "self-realization" commune that is ironically called Genesis. "What my wife and I are looking for is a place with a better way of living." But he cautioned that he is "a sucker for all these self-realization courses. I follow the Top Ten guru charts to see who's moving up with a bullet."

Gabriel admitted that "I suffer from a Kryptonite complex that weakens me when I think about Genesis too much," but felt "encouraged about some of the feedback I'm getting off my own material." Collins is also happy with the new arrangement. "No one is pressuring me to be another Pete. Everybody in the band will project themselves as more of a personality. Subconsciously a weight has been lifted from everybody's shoulders."

