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Country life

Labour of love cross-label compilation of the ace Face's solo output, with lashings of outtakes and live cuts. Anymore for anymore? asks **Andrew Male**.

Ronnie Lane



Just For A Moment:
Music 1973-1997

UNIVERSAL MUSIC CATALOGUE CD

RONNIE LANE'S final appearance with the Faces was at Edmonton Sundown Theatre, North London, June 4, 1973. The gig is on YouTube, if you fancy a look. It's a tense, difficult watch. Kenney Jones appears drunk, Ron Wood looks bored, Lane rarely smiles and the group find themselves going through the motions for what is essentially a contemptuous Rod Stewart solo gig.

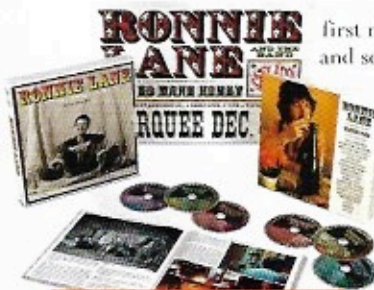
Lane left the next day. Aged just 27, he needed to get away from the fame, the fashion, the business this Plaistow-born kid had been part of since leaving school at 16 in 1963. He also wanted to write more songs like his rough-edged, warm-hearted wanderings for the Faces – Debris, Love Lived Here – or Just For A Moment, the sweetly stoned, contemplative number he'd written with Ronnie Wood for their 1973 soundtrack to a modern-day Canadian western, *Mahoney's Last Stand*.

Recording as Slim Chance, a band name fully stripped of rock-star hubris, his first single, How Come, is a rolling song about witchcraft and superstition. Defined by the accordion, banjo and mandolin of future hit-writing duo Benny Gallagher and Graham Lyle, it reached Number 11 in the UK and was the blueprint for Lane's new, ragged British folk roots sound, which drew from trad jazz, music hall, zydeco, bluegrass, gospel and early rock'n'roll.

Using his Faces royalties, Lane invested in the travelling gypsy life, building a mobile studio (LMS) and buying Fishpool Farm, a smallholding near the village of Hyssington on the Welsh-English border. He also started dressing like a Romany vagabond, sporting neckerchief, waistcoat, and collarless granddad shirt.

Recorded at Fishpool, his first solo LP, *Anymore For Anymore*, is a mix of crafted and carefree, a lyrical country walk from pastoral hillsides to the local pub which shows Lane as a master of the melodic, the heartfelt and the boozy knees-up. Vocally, his underrated croon moves from Dylan roughness to salving croon. Highlights are many but few match *The Poacher*. Threaded with a baroque oboe refrain and waltzing strings, this is Lane's sylvan epiphany, drawn from the sighting of an old fisherman on his land, with "no use for riches... no use for power...", letting the world go by.

It would become Lane's pastoral mantra. Hiring a circus tent and some ancient trucks, he set out on tour with his band. Named *The Passing Show*, after guru Meher Baba's description of life, the idea of the tour was that the group would stop wherever they wanted, play for the locals, then move on. With no PR, no pre-publicity, the reality was not so simple. Gallagher and Lyle had already left, saxophonist Jimmy Jewell quickly jumped ship, and MC Viv Stanshall was fired on the



"Lane was the master of the melodic, the heartfelt and the boozy knees-up."

first night. Vans broke down, planning was non-existent, and some nights Lane's huge touring entourage would be setting up stall for just a handful of punters.

Regrouping at Fishpool, Lane assembled another Slim Chance line-up and began working on a second album. Recorded over two weeks at Mick Jagger's country house Stargroves, with Ronnie's mobile parked on the lawn, *Ronnie Lane's Slim Chance* is an album written in the moment, about the moment, inspired by the life he was living. Defined by Charlie Hart's accordion and violin, which shimmer like sunlight on a babbling river, it's an album heavy with a yearning to be "free of this social go-round" (*Little Piece Of Nothing*). It's also adrift on the spirit of the midnight carouse, shackled with some very scrappy cover versions (*Blue Monday; You Never Can Tell*).

No doubt due to Virgin's lacklustre marketing, the LP didn't sell. Now funded by EG Management, Slim Chance began album three. Far more finely crafted than *Ronnie Lane's Slim Chance*, *One For The*

Road is caught between determination and disillusion, nine modern country-folk songs with a golden Arcadian glow. The haunting *Burnin' Summer* and *Snake* now come threaded with a sinister pagan cast. Even celebratory Delta numbers, like the title track, possess a bittersweet melancholy.

Lane knew the records weren't selling, and his money was running out. He also noticed that he was prone to mood-swings and was finding it difficult to get dressed in the mornings. Dropped by Virgin, running out of cash, Lane asked his friend Pete Townshend if he wanted to record with him. Produced by Glyn Johns at Olympic Studios, with support from Eric Clapton, Charlie Watts, John Entwistle, Ian Stewart and more, *Rough Mix* is exactly that, a jumble of acoustic country/folk, city rockers and ballads. Four Lane tracks are included here, including the autumnal hymn to old age, *Annie*, and magical Faces throwback *April Fool*.

Released in September 1977, the album scraped into the Top 50, briefly salvaged Lane's finances, and led to a European tour-support slot with Clapton, from which he returned with new songs for what would be his final studio LP. Recorded with Charlie Hart, plus The Grease Band's Henry McCullough and Bruce Rowland, and Cat Stevens' guitarist Alun Davies, *See Me* shackles some of Lane's very finest songs (*One Step; Kuschty Rye; Lad's Got Money; Only You; Barcelona*) with an overly bright, lush production. Hearing the acoustic demo of *Barcelona* (a tale of chaos on the Clapton European tour), suggests what might have been.

After the *See Me* tour, and now diagnosed with MS, Lane sold his farm and moved to America, seeking treatment for his illness. There'd be no more albums, but along with accompanying session and live tracks for each of Lane's studio albums, this excellent collection has done an amazing job of bringing together two CDs of post-*See Me* recordings; old songs of heartbreak made more poignant by Lane's weakened voice, yet infused with a keening spirit that recalls Doug Sahm's tight-but-loose Tejano groove.

Most moving is the final session, five previously unheard tracks, recorded in January 1989 at Arlyn Studio in South Austin, Texas. Lane's voice is weak, certainly, yet possesses a slurred defiance that sounds uncannily like Pete Doherty or Joe Strummer. The songs are raggedly joyous, snaking hymns to life. A perfect farewell.

Lane died of double pneumonia in Trinidad, Colorado on June 4, 1997. He was 51. His tombstone reads *God Bless Us All*, a line from his song *Annie*. It would be hard to find an attendant memorial more fitting than this compilation.



BACK STORY: OOH LA LA

Curated by Slim Chance musician Charlie Hart, this is one of the most lovingly assembled box sets we've seen, with cracking unseen pictures and a beautifully written tribute to Lane by Pete Townshend (above), in which he rightly describes the collection as "a chance to hear Ronnie Lane completely in charge... throwing music around like garlands, sometimes tight, sometimes lazy, always smoky."

Free as a bird:
Ronnie Lane with
stepdaughter
Alana at Fishpool
Farm, 1975.

