

# Life

## MUSIC

### RETURN OF THE ZOMBIES!

By Peter Jones

It was the hit that almost wasn't.

By the time the Zombies scored one of their biggest chart toppers with 1968's "Time of the Season," the band was no longer among the living dead. Frustrated by a general lack of commercial livelihood, the Zombies had already made a beeline to the graveyard and were not inclined to reanimate in the interest of a hit single.

The album from which the song came – although now considered among the finest of the era – was barely released in the United States. The hit that closed the record could have ended things right there when the band's chief songwriter Rod Argent and lead singer Colin Blunstone impatiently disagreed on how the song should be sung.

"We had a very tight budget so there was a lot of pressure on recording quickly," Blunstone said. "I was struggling with the melody, and it got to the point where it got a bit heated. The

irony is while we were having this argument, we're singing 'It's the time of the season for loving.'"

As fate would have it, the album, titled *Odessey and Oracle*, would eventually become a hindsight classic of sorts from the era's psych-pop genre, though few could have predicted the posthumous accolades. Discouraged by poor sales and disastrous tours, the individual Zombies were ready to find a second life on their own.

"It was quite a common idea that making records in a rock band was a two or three year career," Blunstone said. "I certainly wasn't thinking we'd be playing *Odessey and Oracle* for the first time in America 50 years later."

That re-dawning of a Zombies masterpiece comes to the Paramount Theater on Oct. 19 when the surviving original members perform the album in its entirety.

Never mind that artist Terry Quirk misspelled "Odyssey" and no one in the halcyon 1960s noticed the error until the album was released.

Founded in Hertfordshire, En-



The Zombies, featuring Rod Argent and Colin Blunstone in foreground, will perform Oct. 18 at the Paramount Theater. Photo by Andrew Eccles

gland in 1963, the Zombies were essentially the melding of Argent's song craft and Blunstone's ethereal vocal style. Like Jimmy Webb and Glen Campbell, the pair was a near-perfect partnership, with the singer acting out the songwriter's emotional intentions as Argent sat Buddha-like at the keyboard.

"I don't know if it takes some of the romance out of our songs, but there's very little left to chance – probably nothing left to chance," Blunstone said of a rela-

tionship that saw Argent literally direct the singer's phrasing.

"We've lived our whole lives with the kind of partnership where he writes songs and I do my best to interpret those songs."

In "She's Not There," the band's first hit in 1964, Blunstone acts out the double heartache of love lost and the betrayal by friends who could have set things straight on a former lover's insincerity, but didn't. Argent's lyrics were unusual for a pop song at the time, with "She's Not There"

as a recurring observation on emotional absence.

Such lyrical play and emphasis on melody were in stark contrast to the more rougher-edged R&B of the British Invasion. While not charismatic enough to fully ride the Beatles' coattails, the Zombies also lacked the edge of the Rolling Stones and the Who, leaving the band in a kind of commercial netherworld.

"Whether you liked us or

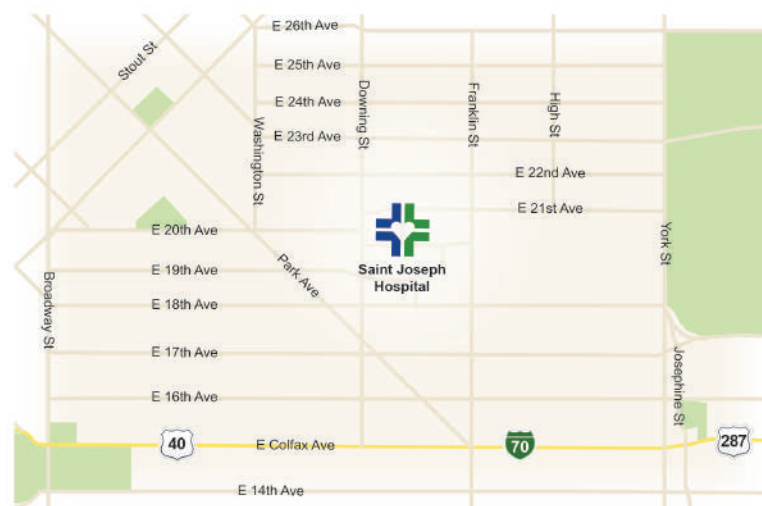
*continued on page 22*

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Continued from 21

didn't like us, we had a unique sound and I think people in the media found it very difficult to categorize us and that can be a big disadvantage," Blunstone said. As it happened, the Zombies' hits would come few and far between, with the plaintive "Tell Her No" as the band's last chart topper for some time. Even so, the group maintained enough popularity to warrant a few international tours – but not enough to ward off the unscrupulous business deals that went with them. "Somewhere in the managerial and agency world, the money got lost," Blunstone said of a 1966

Far East excursion. "It's disheartening to come back from a really exciting tour and realize that you just didn't make any money and you know someone did." Against a backdrop of that disillusionment, the Zombies went into London's legendary Abbey Road studios, shortly after the Beatles cut *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* there, to record what would be the final album by the original Zombies. Like a fine wine, *Odessey and Oracle* would eventually become an acclaimed cult classic with its high bar for melody, odd lyrical ideas and psychedelic pop sensibility. "When we finished the album, I really did think it was the best we could do," Blunstone said. "When it wasn't a commercial success, I think all of us started to think maybe it's time we started to look for other projects. It didn't seem like there was a demand for our band or our music." While Argent formed the harder-edged, more progressively minded group that bore his last name, scoring a major hit with 1972's "Hold Your Head Up," Blunstone took a workaday position in the insurance industry. "We all had to get jobs," he said. "I wanted to stay in the music business, but I didn't have a choice. It happened to be insurance because they were the first people to offer me a job."

When the Zombies failed to reunite for "Time of the Season," phony versions of the band began to fill the void, each booking themselves under that name, but none having even the slightest connection to the original musicians. "In one case, I was told that a Zombies fan was very disgruntled and went into the dressing room with a gun. They never played again," Blunstone said. Eventually, the real Zombies rose from the dead – almost by accident – after Blunstone and Argent began working together again and promoters insisted that the resulting concerts be billed under that more marketable name. A new album, *Still Got That Hunger*, is slated for release this month, just in time for the Denver date. Although cover designer Quirk was again – somehow – entrusted to design the CD jacket, this time he managed to spell all the words correctly. "I went to school with Terry. He's a lovely bloke and a great artist," Blunstone said. "But we went to the same school and I can't spell either." At the Oct. 19 show at the Paramount, the Zombies, complete with original and newer members, are expected to play new and older material, as well as perform a complete recitation of *Odessey and Oracle*. Blunstone was so well trained by Argent to sing the album's "Time of the Season" that this columnist suggested the singer might do well to use the song's second verse as a kind of pickup line in a bar: "What's your name? Who's your daddy? Is he rich like me?" "I've never done that," Blunstone said with a laugh. "But you having said it, I think I may try that and see how they respond." Contact Peter Jones at [pjones@lifeoncaphill.com](mailto:pjones@lifeoncaphill.com).

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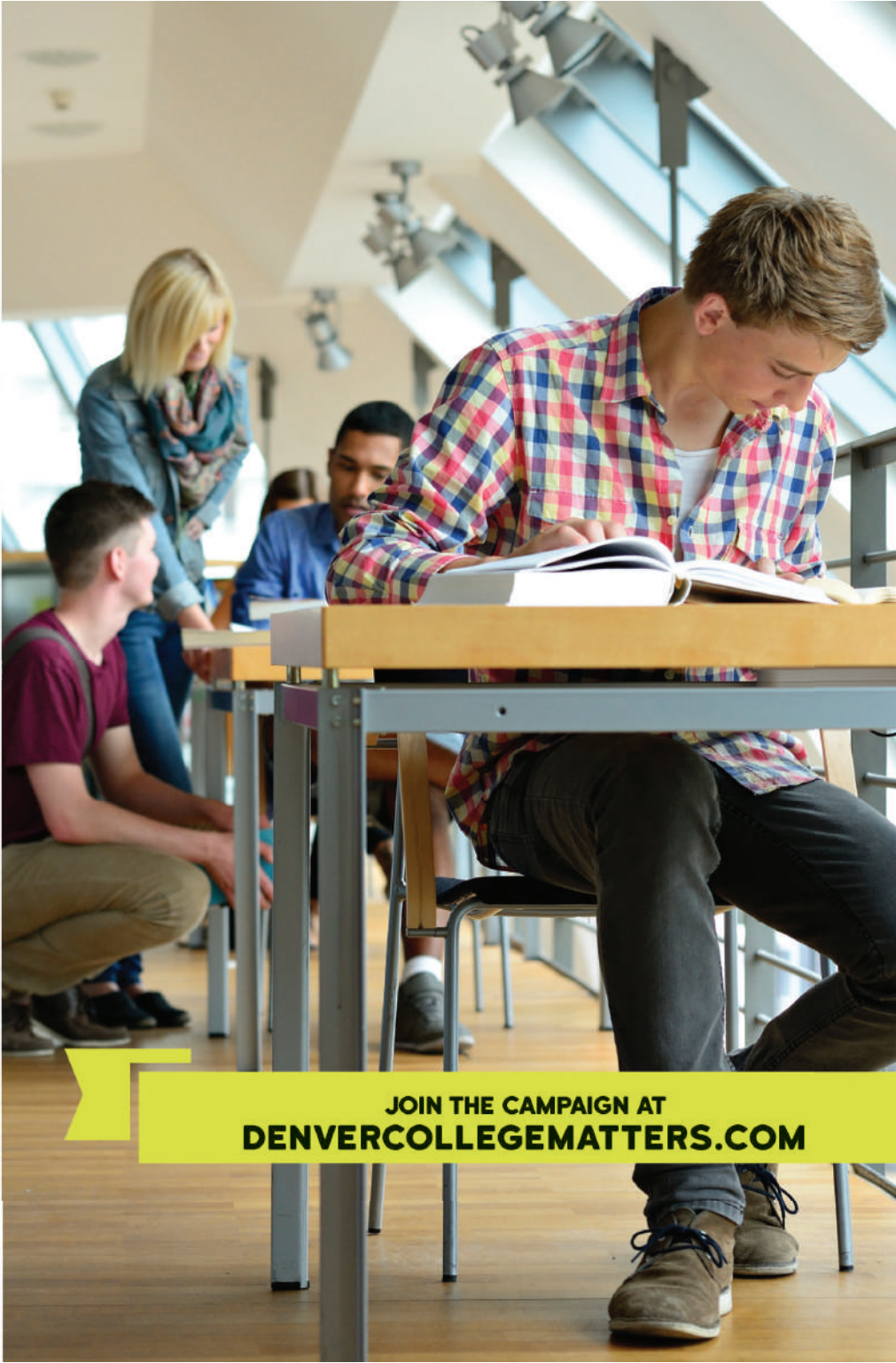
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