

# The Heavy Load of *Free*

by Frank Jarvis

Emerging from an era of heavy blues, Free moved from the late '60s into the early '70s, with style and power as attributes, pulling what amounted to a "heavy load"—of chart success and failure, personal problems and personnel changes. The "heavy load" of Free also amounted to a somber, reflective, but often tempestuous sound, with a bottom-heavy and often laid-back feel, prone to erupt in moments of intense energy with a keening vocal or guitar sound.

Free vocalist Paul Rodgers was born on December 12, 1949, in Middlesbrough, England. At age 17, he came to London with the Roadrunners, which included a young commercial artist named Bruce Thomas, who later became bassist with

Bodast and Elvis Costello, and future Whitesnake guitarist Micky Moody. After a name change to the Wild Flowers, the band dissolved.

With Rodgers' early teenage experiences as guitarist and bassist well behind him, he moved from Wild Flowers to a band called Brown Sugar. Guitarist Paul Kossoff, born September 14, 1950, approached Rodgers to sit in with the band, at a club called the Fickle Pickle in north London. The son of British actor David Kossoff, Paul Kossoff stunned Rodgers with his powerful approach.

Kossoff played in a band called Black Cat Bones, which would later include future Foghat guitarist Rod Price. Together with Bones drummer Simon Kirke, born July 28, 1949, Kossoff and Rodgers decided to form a band.

Bassist Andy Fraser, born August 7, 1952, would soon join, having left John Mayall's Bluesbreakers in avoidance of that band's progressive turn.

Another kingpin of British rhythm 'n' blues, Alexis Korner, named the young band Free, after his own 1967 comeback group Free At Last. The new band played its first gig in April 1968. They became Monday night regulars at the Marquee club in London, one of the main breeding grounds of the English progressive rock scene in the late '60s.

Korner introduced Free to white Jamaican producer Chris Blackwell, who signed them to his nascent R&B/ska-oriented company Island Records, later to patronize the English classical-rock crowd.

Blackwell wanted to name the group the Heavy Metal Kids, apparently ignoring the British release *Haphshash And The Coloured Coat—Featuring The Human Host And The Heavy Metal Kids*. The young band, with no single member out of his teens, was still too mature to accept a moniker suggesting a naive act, and with the psychedelic period dissolving into the seriousness of what was then labeled progressive-rock, the choice of Free as a name proved in retrospect a wise one.

The first Free album, *Tons Of Sobs*,

appeared in November 1968. Kossoff, later famous for his reticent, concise approach, offers up a more profligate serving of bluesy wails. His hand-vibrato, reminiscent of Quicksilver's John Cipollina and Steppenwolf's Michael Monarch, offered thick slabs of Free's trademark sound on this fiery debut.

The opening cut, "Over The Green Hills, Part I," sets up a pastoral feel which is soon interrupted by the sideways entrance of the askew "Worry," whose vivacious tension expands like a swelling balloon. The focus zigzags between guest pianist Steve Miller's fills, Rodgers' violent vocal attack, Kossoff's jagged rhythm and lead, and Kirke's disorienting cascade of bashing. In spite of the "Purple Haze"-like blowout, one is aware that the overall feel is really contained, even moderate.

"Walk In My Shadow" continues in a more Cream-like vein, though Led Zeppelin, Free and Jeff Beck were by this time already making Cream seem like an antique. "Wild Indian Woman" initiates Western imagery which seemed to follow Rodgers through his subsequent career. Kossoff's interjections hang on and drop off like a wolf nipping at an oversize prey, as the rhythm section plows through intently. The powerful "Goin' Down Slow" becomes a blues showcase for Kossoff's intense vibrato and cutting outbursts.

The second side opens with "I'm A Mover," Fraser joining with Rodgers to compose the archetype of Free's future plodding riff-rock, adding more of a groove to the Cream sound. The focused bashing would carry the hard-rock sound through the next decade with scarce modifications.

"The Hunter," credited to Booker T. and the MG's, was presented almost concurrently to Led Zeppelin's version in the composite track "How Many More Times?" In the Free version, Kossoff multi-tracks a guitar emulation of a big band. "Moonshine" previewed the dark tone and depth of the next album, Simon Kirke's shading accenting Rodgers' lament and Koss's lyrical keening. "Sweet Tooth" reflects the Indian whimsy of Jimi Hendrix, and the R&B feel of Spencer Davis.

"Over The Green Hills, Part II" ends the album with acoustic guitar and electric lead, evoking the great outdoors when the listener would seem to have journeyed from and entered back into, now leaving the experience of a stunning album ignored in its day, and improperly assessed by some rock archivists who probably never bothered to give it a listen.

Free then established a reputation for being one of the hardest gigging of British bands. In the summer of 1969, they received a trial-by-fire opening for Blind Faith on that band's six-week American tour. Subsequently, they began recording new material.

Free's second album, *Free*, came out in

October 1969. The album opens with "I'll Be Creepin'"; Kossoff's wah-wah guitar is set against Fraser's thumping and loping bass line, with Rodgers' vocal delivery gaining new power. Unbelievably, no member of the band was yet over 21, and yet the mature sound of '70s hard-rock was fully in evidence. With the Rolling Stones and Cream as precedents, Free was updating the sound of British rock, with an infusion of American rock attributes.

The second number "Songs Of Yesterday," brews up a storm, as Rodgers' voice dances on top of alternating accents, and the instrumentalists cook to a heated climax. The tide of American country-rock had washed back on British shores, and Free was percolating and cooking in a near-American fashion. Free had left the competition behind in the dust, and yet had not attained any great fame.

"Lying In The Sunshine," redolent of the fading Woodstock sentiment, provides a nice breather, with Kossoff's loping acoustic prominent on the left channel. "Trouble On Double Time" brings a semi-Hendrix country-rock flavor, with Kossoff pulling

off one of his most incisive solos yet. "Mouthful Of Grass" takes us back outdoors, with a wordless chorus backed by sustaining pedal tones and a boomy lead guitar texture reminiscent of the dank 1965 Stones.

The second side of the album reaches new heights, which still haven't put any of these songs on "classic-rock" radio, leaving them in a blissfully dormant state for those who would discover them. "Woman" opens the side, with Rodgers' "burning heart" showing us the object of his desire for the first of countless times, and Fraser pulling off some expert flourishes. "Free Me" falls into the misery of love relationships. Arguably the band's biggest classic ever, it becomes a signature tune and a showcase for the band's expertise, including backing vocals.

"Broad Daylight" is a prototype for the basic sound of Mountain, the James Gang, etc., a banal but powerful strategy for 1969-70 rock. "Mourning Sad Morning" goes into minor-key Moody Blues-territory to close the side. Kossoff plays acoustic guitar, while the band augments strong vocal

Paul Kossoff



harmonies with flute. The emotional departing ends an album as clear-cut and unaffected as its name.

Free differed from many hard-rock outfits in eschewing the production devices the late '60s brought to bear on Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, the James Gang, etc. Backwards echoes and tape-flanging were certainly superfluous to their straightforward hard-rock endeavors. Nevertheless, the band progressed on its own terms, with each release sporting a bigger and clearer sound, and the members expanding their



Simon Kirke

versatility and skill.

In the tradition of Jack Bruce, Andy Fraser favored the fat bulge of the Gibson EB-3 bass. His approach updated the Bruce tradition with a funkier feel, inspiring dozens of subsequent English rockers who escaped from the ubiquitousness of Fender and Rickenbacker bass sounds. Even today, his influence is cited by the likes of Billy Sheehan and Steve Harris of Iron Maiden, who ironically favor Fender-style instruments.

Paul Kossoff favored the Gibson Les Paul Standard and Fender Stratocaster, both the most typical of hard-rock implements. The piercing Les Paul tone of Eric Clapton on Cream's "I Feel Free" manifested itself in multiplication in Kossoff's work. As with the earliest electric blues greats, articulation and force of impact were carefully measured before expertly delivered. Kossoff remains, by legend, the connoisseur's rock guitarist.

Paul Rodgers' fine vocals, placed in contrast to the backing instrumental's rhythmic accents, gave Free a distinctive identity from the very beginning. He has been called English rock's finest vocalist, by the likes of Rod Stewart and Ritchie Blackmore. In an interview with *Guitar Player* magazine, Blackmore also called Free England's best band, contrasting Rodgers' natural stage perambulations with the gratuitous posturing of Pete Townshend and others.

Rodgers' charisma, and the band's unassuming image, gave the band a more extended following among the portion of female fanship normally averse to the perceived misogyny of hard-rock. In Kossoff's case, this would later prove detrimental, as

well-wishers supplied him with drugs.

With Rodgers' compositional contributions there were always subtle but persistent references to the American West, manifested in the name of his subsequent band, Bad Company, named after a Robert Benton western. The image of the six-gun toting loner provided a metaphor for the rock performer and lifestyle. Though this has made him the target of some vituperative rock critics, his abilities and lack of prepossession have managed to deliver these western images far more convincingly than others have attempted.

Drummer Simon Kirke has an approach of tension and release. Interlocking with Andy Fraser, it became a strategy to hammer the point home, or to bounce accents off the obese bass sounds. On recording the next release, Kirke would attain a bigger sound.

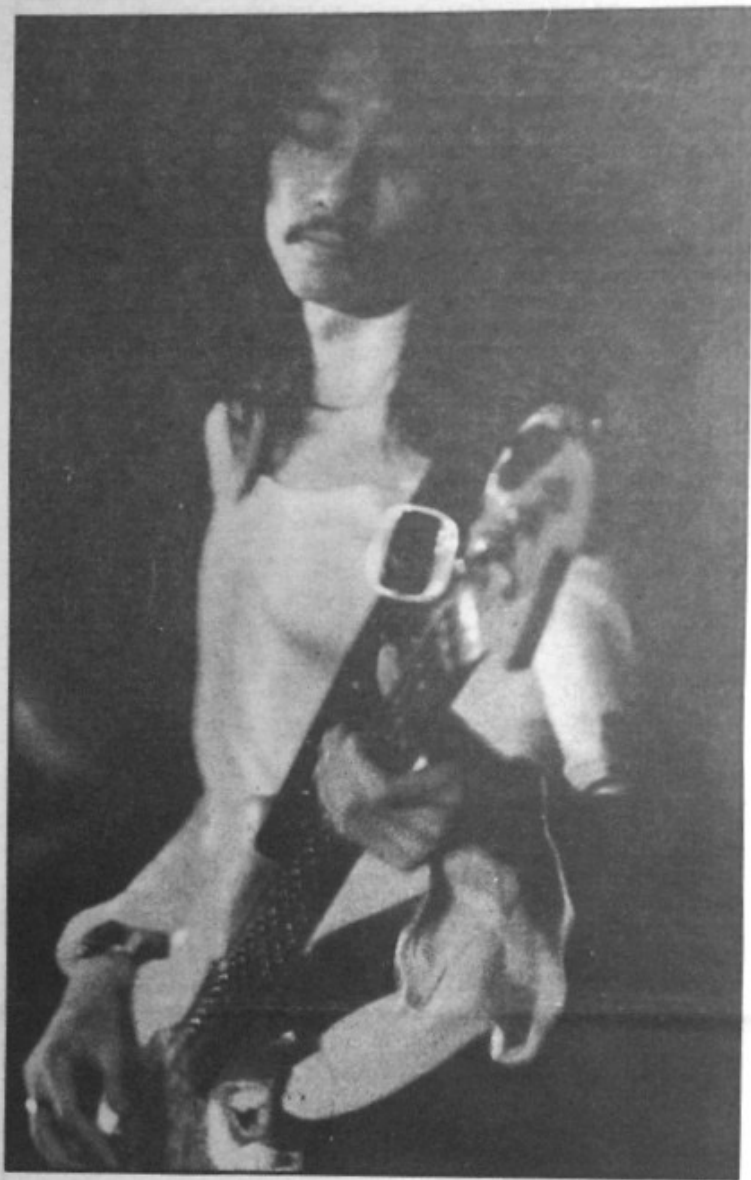
*Fire And Water*, the third album, appeared in June 1970, and reached #17 on the American charts, #2 in Britain. The title track, "Fire And Water," opens the album, with Kossoff's multi-tracked solos building pressure, and Kirke's drums taking greater command of the mix, at a time when rock recording was improving by leaps and bounds. "Oh I Wept," written by Rodgers and Kossoff, shows Rodgers' rhythm 'n' blues vocal talent, as Fraser and Kirke evidence a vivacious sense of dynamics.

"Remember" is a typical hodge-podge in the tradition of blues albums, which so often include a change-of-pace number to lighten things up. The "Heavy Load" of emotive power was by this time the Free trademark.

On side two "Mr. Big" showcases Fraser's massive sound and sustain, as his solo is set up and then supplanted by Kossoff's tenacious bends. A transcendent break-in by Rodgers explodes the expanding force, ushering the era of do-or-die heavy metal anthems. "Mr. Big" inspired the names of a mid-'70s British band and a latter-day "supergroup" of the late '80s.

"Don't Say You Love Me" is a slug-slow ballad, which in those days were often detrimental to the commercial success of a hard-rock band. Free's rhythm section hits it home as the song fades away. Kossoff's dual rhythm section hits it home as the song fades away. Kossoff's dual rhythm fig-

Kossoff



Tetsu Yamachi

ures roll around Kirke's powerful punch on "All Right Now." Fraser's bass takes after the tuba rather than string bass as ancestor, pounding out Free's first big commercial success.

"All Right Now," the album track, finishes the record on a positive note. "All Right Now," the hit single, attained position #2 in the English charts, and #4 in the U.S. It entered the U.S. Top 40 on September 5, 1970. As with Mountain's "Mississippi Queen," this marked one of those rare occasions where hard-rock crossed over into AM-radio territory. The song epitomized where hard-rock was at in the fall of 1970. But the place Free had come to was *en route* to catastrophe.

Free played the Isle Of Wight festival in August of that year, which seemed to feature every possible style of artist to be sold under the label "rock," and which underscored the difference between '60s and '70s rock trends. They then set about creating a showcase of what they felt was their best material yet.

*Highway*, the fourth album, only man-

aged #190 in the U.S. charts. The single called for issue, "The Stealer," stalled at #49 after its release in November 1970. Battles between Fraser and Rodgers resulted, as the band's most melodic and polished effort failed to find projected sales and attention.

"The Highway Song" starts off with a typical Free lode, working on a laid-back interaction between instruments, including Fraser's piano, before Kossoff sinks his teeth into a brief solo. With "The Stealer," things get down to business, with the "balls-rock" of Bad Company fully in evidence, Fraser's almost fretless slides driving Kossoff's Hendrix-like attack. The country-rock of "On My Way" offers expanded textures, with added organ and Kossoff multi-tracking warbly guitar sounds.

The solemn "Be My Friend" marks the maturity of the band's ballad style, with the focus on Andy Fraser's piano and Mellotron, and Rodgers' soul-styled emoting.

On the second side, "Sunny Day" offered evidence of a band that was mel-





Kirke

lowing out. Though the band never presented its harder side as a gratuity, but as a manifestation of a particular feeling, the type of audience that didn't discern the difference was already becoming important, and ignoring Free's music. On "Sunny Day," as well as "On My Way," Kossoff was using the doppler-shifted guitar textures made popular by Eric Clapton and George Harrison, who plugged the instrument into a Leslie organ speaker.

Production had improved immeasurably over the work of even eight months earlier. But even the comparative simplicity of Free's music was, now more than ever, not something a trio-with-vocalist could reproduce on stage. The next number, "Riding On A Pony," with Fraser handling bass and piano, and Kossoff doubling the bass line with guitar while simultaneously dealing country-rock licks, was further proof of this.

Stevie Wonder's vocal stylings would seem to be in evidence on "Love You So," though a cowboy song by-any-other-name. The Mellotron widens out the sound of what once had been a blues band. With "Bodie," the pop side of the band comes through in fine form. Fraser and Kirke do their fine punctuation work against Kossoff's acoustic guitar and electric slide, as Rodgers sings a tale in the vein of James Taylor.

"Soon I Will Be Gone" was the final departing reiterated often in Rodgers' work. The parting here would not be painless. Like the James Gang in America, Free was an instrumental trip expanding itself in the studio as it saw fit, and branching into more melodic material that could be presented on stage with the same textures as on record only by expansion of the lineup. Free had run into the wall all such bands encounter.

By May 1971, the members went their separate ways. By that time, a new single, "My Brother Jake," was climbing to #4 on the British charts. *Free Live!*, out in June, also reached the same position. Kossoff took command of increased space with some powerful guitar work. But he was not

altogether happy with the lack of a backing instrument.

Discouraged by the band's dismemberment, Kossoff turned to consumption of pills, especially soporifics, which he used while hanging out with friend Gary Thain, bassist with Keef Hartley who would later join Uriah Heep. Thain would die, February 1976, of a heroin overdose.

Koss and Thain together had played on the Martha Velez LP, *Fiends And Angels*, in 1969. Koss also guested on the Mike Vernon album, *Bring It Back Home*, in 1971. Vernon had introduced the band to Fraser back in 1968.

Upon leaving Free, Fraser formed a three-piece band called Peace. Both bands folded shortly thereafter, at a time when "All Right Now" was still fresh in the public memory.

Simon Kirke persuaded Kossoff to organize a recording group with Japanese bassist Tetsu Yamauchi and keyboardist John "Rabbit" Bundrick. The resulting album, *Kossoff, Kirke, Tetsu And Rabbit*, contained the future Bad Company track "Anna," written by Simon Kirke. Following this, Kossoff guested on Jim Capaldi's album, *Oh How We Danced*.

Free manager John Glover organized the reformation of the band in January 1972. In part, the move was to try to revive Kossoff's morale, and to make up for the commercial failure of solo projects. A new album was recorded, amid still-lingering personal clashes.

*Free At Last*, released May 1972, reached #9 in the U.K. and "Little Bit Of Love," which itself made #3 in the British charts. Kossoff lets loose some fine solo work on "Travelling Man." The album reached #69 in the American charts. The ensuing tour had Fraser and Rodgers clashing again, with Kossoff's problems forcing cancellation of some shows.

In July 1972, Andy Fraser quit and made his final exit from Free. Kossoff was incapable of going on a Japanese tour, due to his drug addiction. He was being treated with experimental neuro-electric therapy, later used on Eric Clapton.

Kirke and Rodgers, acquiring the services of Tetsu and Rabbit to replace the bass and keyboard chores and Andy Fraser, persevered, with Rodgers taking on guitar chores as he did in Peace. Kossoff then returned for a British tour, but had an accident backstage. Then he completed the tour and started on the final album Free would manage to create, *Heartbreaker*.

"Heartbreaker," the track, was cited as the inspiration for Deep Purple song "Mistreated," on 1974's *Burn*. Rodgers had briefly considered joining Deep Purple, but his often subtle and bluesy style was inappropriate for the band's needs.

*Heartbreaker*, the album, was released January 1973. The single, "Wishing Well," went to #7 in England. Kossoff had played on all but three cuts. He then started the next tour, but fell out again, this time for good.

Osibisa guitarist Wendell Richardson joined in October 1972, and remained until the band's demise next July. In that time frame, the band went on an American tour opening for Traffic.

After the breakup, Richardson rejoined Osibisa. Kirke and Rodgers sought new compatriots to carry on with. Tetsu Yamauchi achieved greater visibility by replacing Ronnie Lane in the Faces. But ex-member Andy Fraser was to have trouble gaining recognition as a solo artist.

After leaving Free, Fraser joined British guitar ace Chris Spedding in Sharks, releasing *First Water* in 1973, giving way to future Talking Heads auxiliary Busta Jones on his departure. He then formed a band with singer Frankie Miller which was rearranged into the Andy Fraser Band, in which Fraser handled lead lines with his bass and sang in Rodgers' fashion. He later guested on Brian Eno's *Before And After Science* in 1977, and on Robert Palmer's *Clues* in 1980.

Kossoff launched his solo career with the *Back Street Crawler* album, in November 1973. It featured all the members of Free, among others. His reputation for restraint was inverted on this work. In 1974, he appeared on Blondel's album *Mulgrave Street*, and in February 1975, he guested with John Martyn's tour entourage.

Free's manager, John Glover, then helped him gather together a band with Terry Wilson-Slesser on vocals, and three American players. The band was named Back Street Crawler after Kossoff's breakthrough album. Kossoff was provided police protection against drug suppliers by his manager, but was able to elude the watchdogs and procure pills from friends and his doctor, who loaded him up with Mandrax and Quaaludes. In spite of this, the band brought forth a powerful debut, *The Band Plays On*, released on October 1975.

On August 23, however, Kossoff was hospitalized, his heart having stopped for over half an hour, according to reports. He made a speedy recovery and in November, he was able to play three shows.

In January 1976, Back Street Crawler began working on the second album, *Second Street*. Kossoff went straight back to his pill intake. On the plane from Los Angeles to New York, on March 19, 1976, he died of heart failure, at age 25.

Paul Rodgers and Simon Kirke formed the blockbuster band Bad Company, recording their first album at the end of 1973. By the following summer, their debut was released on Led Zeppelin's Swan Song label and shot up to #1 in the American charts. Mick Ralphs, ex-guitarist with Mott The Hoople, and former King Crimson bassist Boz Burrell rounded out this supergroup.

Please see FREE page 161



which conquered FM airplay with a polished variation of Free's archetype.

By 1983, Rodgers had left, leaving Kirke as the band's last tie to the Free legacy. The rough-riding compositions of Rodgers had given way to a sometimes tolerably banal, sometimes downright saccharine collection of corporate-rock ditties, though even in the early '80s Bad Company had held out against this formulaic sound long after others had given up the ghost.

Rodgers' unification with Jimmy Page in the Firm also attempted to rise above the tedium of corporate-rock in the mid-'80s, though that project now lies dormant against the still-active specter of early Bad Company and Led Zeppelin.

Rodgers' 1983 album, *Cut Loose*, received critical panning; on it he showcased his work on the guitar, bass and drums on what was obviously not a major-league presentation. A subsequent group, the Law, was interrupted by a stint in the Armenian Life-Aid project, a benefit for earthquake victims featuring a who's who cast of British hard-rockers.

That banality of Foreigner and its descendants in the field of corporate-rock have been blamed by rock pundits on the prototype of Bad Company and its hard-rock/soft-ballad formula. But depicting Free as the ultimate ancestor of this vein of pop music denies the fact that no element of corporate-rock shows up in its

work. In an age of comparatively basic rock productions, it could not have.

In the 1980s, the banner of "hard rock/heavy metal" was raised, no longer as necessarily a descriptive term, but as an all-encompassing bucket in which to fit by-products of the original hard-rock archetypes of the early '70s. With everything from "pop-metal" burlesque acts to living cartoon characters plying an extensive line of products for pre-teen S&M fans, the category now even includes smarmy "alternative" groups who claim they are embracing their former anathema in order to be "ironic."

In spite of the complexity and variation in quality among the denizens of this supposedly singular category of rock, many of its members claim Free as a musical prototype. To varying degrees, they are inevitably correct. But in terms of lack of superficiality and lack of self-consciousness, they either never got the message from Free and other bands of their ilk, or they don't believe that message to be an element necessary to entertain a crowd raised on music videos. In this sense, Free's legacy has been generally betrayed, except when it is self-consciously "resurrected." That fact proves that, in general, something has gone terribly wrong.

Then perhaps the elements that make up Free's roots are also the truest manifestation of their legacy still extant. Their "heavy load" is now to be borne by those with an uncompromising attitude toward well-written songs and blues-based rock.

## Complete U.S. Free Albums Discography

label	record#	title	year
A&M	SP 4198	Tones Of Sobs	1969
A&M	SP 4204	Free	1969
A&M	SP 4268	Fire and Water	1970
A&M	SP 3126	(reissue of above)	
A&M	SP 4287	Highway	1970
A&M	SP 4306	Free Live!	1971
A&M	SP 4349	Free At Last	1972
Island	9324	Heartbreaker	1973
A&M	SP 3663	Best Of Free	1975

### Selected U.K. Andy Fraser Albums Discography

CBS	80731	Andy Fraser Band	1975
CBS	81027	In Your Eyes	1975

### Selected U.S. Andy Fraser Albums Sessionography

<b>Sharks</b>			
MCA	351	First Water	1973

<b>Brian Eno</b>			
Island	9478	Before & After Science	1977

<b>Alexis Korner</b>			
Warner Bros.	1966	Bootleg Him	1972

<b>Robert Palmer</b>			
Island	9595	Clues	1980

### Selected U.S. Paul Kossoff Discography

Island	9264	Back Street Crawler	1973
DJM	300	Koss (compilation)	1977

<b>Back Street Crawler</b>			
Aico	36-125	The Band Plays On	1975

### Selected U.S. Paul Kossoff Sessionography

<b>Champion Jack Dupree</b>			
CBS	7702	When You Feel The Feeling	1968

<b>Martha Velez</b>			
Sire	97008	Fiends & Angels	1969

### Selected U.S. Simon Kirke Sessionography

<b>Claire Hamill</b>			
Island	9316	One House Left Standing	1971