

WHITE LIGHT: A FATEFUL JOURNEY

Once Upon a Time in the Delta

It was an early evening in 1967, and a group of us stood amid the pale glow of a streetlight at an intersection in the Lakeview section of New Orleans. We had agreed on the word **LIGHT** as part of our new band's name, borrowed in part from a Los Angeles psychedelic group called *Clear Light* that we thought was cool. But the name was incomplete. Just then the word **WHITE** popped into our collective minds. To this day, none of us are really sure how the word made it into the band's name. But it was at that moment that **WHITE LIGHT** was born and a fateful journey began.

The original White Light, all teenagers, was a five-piece cover band in the 1960s based in **New Orleans**, "the place where American music was born," as local legend *Cyril Neville* once said. We played at uptown bars, frat parties, a club called *Der Rathskeller*, once cruising down the Mississippi River on a riverboat named the *Mark Twain*, and even at the Tulane Young Republicans Victory Celebration for then-presidential candidate *Richard M. Nixon* on election night (1968). We ran through our entire songbook. But as the evening wore on, the Republicans became so giddy at the imminent ascendancy of their candidate to the Throne of America, they didn't even notice we'd played multiple renditions of the classics *Louie, Louie, Gloria*, and *Born to Be Wild*.



The first White Light, from left to right: Jayce Tohline, Tracy Pfisterer, Mike Hobren, Dennis Saucier, and Rob Haeuser.

Eventually, the first White Light broke up, as so many teenage bands do. Singer **Jayce Tohline** left the group to attend seminary school. Lead guitarist **Mike Hobren** joined a nine-piece, horn-driven group called *Circus* that modeled itself after *Blood, Sweat & Tears*. Bassist **Rob Haeuser** formed a group with local notables Joe Sunseri and Clark Vreeland, as well as keyboardist Timmy Youngblood, called *Dog Day Summer*. Drummer **Tracy Pfisterer** continued to play around the New Orleans area. Rhythm guitarist **Dennis Saucier** hung up his guitar and moved on to pursue other interests.

Fate Lends a Helping Hand

Fast-forward to 1973. Rob had relocated to **Austin, Texas**, the capital city of Texas and a burgeoning music town set in the central Texas hill country. This would be the first of many fortuitous twists of fate that would point our group in a whole new direction.

About this time, drummer **Rusty Haeuser** and Mike were playing with the New Orleans cover group *Shepherd's Bush*. That group would later relocate to Long Island, New York, change its name to **Zebra**, and establish itself with its chart single *Who's Behind the Door?* But Mike and Rusty had left the group before then, choosing instead to remain in New Orleans. Once again, fate had stepped in at a crucial turning point on White Light's path.

In September 1974, Mike and Rusty joined up with Rob, who was living in an old farmhouse on the Texas prairie. The idea for a resurrected **White Light** had been brewing in our heads for some time. Packing all of their belongings into a rented van, Mike and Rusty aimed their sights westward, crossed the Mississippi River, and left New Orleans in the rear-view mirror – there would be no going back from this point.

The impetus for the Texas move was twofold: the music scene in New Orleans at the time was moving toward the Disco sound, and many of the formerly live-music venues found it cheaper to hire a single DJ to spin *Bee Gees* and *Donna Sommers* records rather than live bands to entertain their patrons. Also, Austin's growing reputation as a music mecca was beginning to take hold, offering Mike and Rusty an opportunity to leave New Orleans.

A Leap of Faith

It was a leap of faith for the reunited White Light that was now a trio comprised of Mike on guitars (*Gibson SG double-cutaway and gold-top Les Paul electrics, and Epiphone 12-string acoustic*), vocals, and manuscripts; Rob on bass and synthesizers (*Dan Armstrong Ampeg acrylic bass, Roland SH-1000 synthesizer, and RMI 368 electric piano/harpsichord*); and Rusty on drums (*Gretsch*), percussion, and flute.

Apart from our instrumental setup, we also used an arsenal of Electronica: Echoplex echo chamber, phase shifter, Wah-Wah and volume-control pedals, reverberation, envelope modifier, fuzz box, and special effects on Rob's synthesizer to layer texture within the overall sound. Mike sometimes used a cello bow on his guitar to obtain either a droning or fluttering effect. (Listen to the opening of the *Stargazer* track.) Our setup gave us a much larger sound than just three players, and enabled us to develop a unique, signature style.

The approach was a radical departure from what the Austin groups were then doing. The pervasive Austin sound at the time was *Outlaw Country* music, transplanted to the city by former Nashville artists Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, and others. However, despite the heavy emphasis on country music, Austin (a university town) was also a touring magnet for numerous progressive groups of the day such as YES, Pink Floyd, Genesis, Gentle Giant, Jethro Tull, Weather Report, and many others.

Another driving force that was defining an alternative Austin sound at the time was indie music producer **Bill Josey Sr.** who – via both his live, remote sessions at bands' gigs or at his Blue Hole Sounds recording studio located northwest of Austin – recorded and promoted new, undiscovered local groups. (*More about Bill Josey later.*)

So we bet the old farmhouse (*figuratively*) that we could bring a new, progressive sound to Austin, and we determined to go head-to-head with the steel guitars and fiddles that were dominating the local airwaves and live venues. With all three of us now moved into the farmhouse, we began jamming constantly with Rob recording our sessions on an Akai reel-to-reel tape recorder. From these early sessions emerged an eclectic mix of patterns, themes, and rhythms that would eventually form the nexus of the White Light Sound.

But our plan of attack was just unfolding. We made two key decisions: (1) that we would only play original music, no more covers; and (2) that we would not play any coming-out local gigs until our sound was clean and well-defined, ready for public consumption. (We really had no interest in playing the club scene but instead wanted to spread our sound to a much bigger geography.) Most all of our rehearsals occurred during the evening hours, since we all worked day jobs to support ourselves. Working 8-to-5 jobs all day long, and then

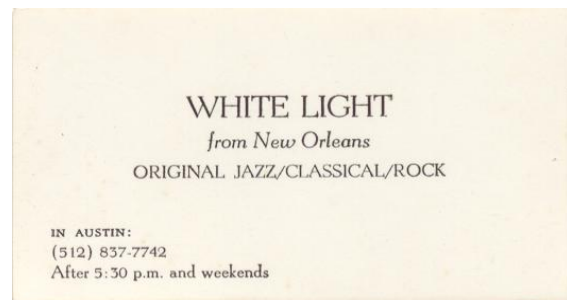
coming home to practice our music in the evenings, made for long days and nights. But each of us knew that these were the dues we had to pay if we had any hope of making it.

The Silence of the Hams

Eventually, the aging farmhouse had fallen into disrepair and we were forced to relocate to a trailer in Garfield, Texas, southeast of Austin. The trailer would become one of three such dwellings that we would use as both living quarters and a rehearsal hall. The idea of moving to trailers situated in the Texas countryside, far from any neighborhoods, enabled us to rehearse for long hours into the night, and to ramp-up our amps to max volume levels. Indeed, while we could weave ethereal, even spell-binding pieces (*Oceans* and *Song for Leo* tracks), we were also capable of producing a high-octane progressive-rock/jazz-fusion sound that could blow the aluminum siding off the trailer (*Pacemaker* track).

Our commitment to our music was beyond measure really. For a time, we applied for and lived off federal Food Stamps just to keep us going. Mike traded in his personal vehicle for a used postal service truck to transport the band's equipment. Much of our equipment was purchased on credit from *Ray Hennig's Heart of Texas Music* store in Austin, a place where we spent many long hours...and a lot of money. We became familiar faces to *Steve Hennig*, Ray's son who helped run his dad's store, and a fine country-guitar picker in his own right who contributed a track on *Eric Johnson's* third album, *Ah Via Musicom*.

While our music was developing in style and quantity, Garfield wasn't without its weirdness. The most unshakeable memory for us all was awaking one Sunday morning to the shrieks of a sizeable sow that our country neighbors were slaughtering for a scrumptious supper later that day. Being city boys, we had never witnessed such a gory thing before, but no words were necessary: it was time for us to leave Garfield and seek out quieter pastures.



White Light's Austin, Texas business card

Our New Pastime: Relocating

It was a bitter winter in late 1974 when we moved to another trailer northwest of Austin, in an area so remote that we were certain that our problem of finding THE perfect living/rehearsal site was at last resolved. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Our second trailer was located between Leander and Liberty Hill, Texas and owned by an absentee landlord who lived in California. As it turned out, her niece had rented us the trailer under false pretenses and then quickly fled the area, taking with her our very last cent. It was a Saturday morning, two weeks later, when a tow truck rolled up on the property to haul off the trailer due to unpaid bills by the previous inhabitants. However, we successfully convinced the driver to give us a few days to locate another place and move out.

We were now penniless, homeless, and in dire straits. We were forced to sell a propane gas tank – the only thing left on the property – so we'd have some living money. We quickly found another trailer just across the road from us and moved right in. However, we didn't hit it off with our new landlord, whom we soon realized had no great love for longhairs like us or music like ours. So after a few months we moved yet again, this time to an apartment

complex within the city limits of Austin in the east side of town. A two-bedroom, cracker-box apartment with paper-thin walls was hardly a good rehearsal hall, and our sessions were tightly restricted to a single bedroom. Somehow it was Rusty's turn to get a bedroom, so Mike and Rob bunked in the living room.

Although our neighbors never complained that our music was shaking the pictures off their walls, the setup was far from ideal. We only lived at the apartment complex for several months and then made what would be our final move to a huge house on the edge of north Austin on *Pollyanna Avenue*. It was closer to the city than we would have liked, but it was big and provided us ample rehearsal space...and this time each of us got a bedroom!

Fate Steps in Again

But despite all of the moving distractions, fate hadn't abandoned White Light. One afternoon, while we were still living in the trailer in Leander/Liberty Hill, we were driving down a country road and eyed a sign off to the side of the road: **Blue Hole Sounds** studio. To say our curiosity was piqued would be an understatement. Here we were, a group of longhair progressive-rock/jazz-fusion musicians from New Orleans living far out in the Texas countryside, when a recording studio pops up in the middle of nowhere.

Blue Hole Sounds was situated on a piece of fenced-off property with a trailer on the site and a sizeable building that was constructed from native quarry stone. As we later found out, the building also doubled as a Gospel church that the occupant had converted into a recording studio. During the next few weeks, after several reconnaissance drives past the little off-road studio, we pulled over to the side of the road one day to introduce ourselves.

Bill Josey Sr. came out of his trailer to greet us. Bill was an elderly man, or so he seemed to us twentysomethings at the time. (He was actually only 55 years old.) He wore worn work overalls that we'll always associate with his casual, unassuming style. Bill invited us to come inside. At that moment, we could hardly know *whom* it was we were about to meet, the impact he would have on our lives, and the path that we were about to walk together.



Producer Bill Josey Sr. at his Blue Hole Sounds studio

Bill Josey Sr. and Sonobeat

In 1967 (the same year that the first White Light had formed in New Orleans), Bill, along with his son, had co-founded *Sonobeat Recording Company* and *Sonosong Music Publishing Company* in Austin. In those early days, Bill had led the vanguard of the music revolution that was redefining the Austin sound. Bill had brought artists such as albino blues guitarist *Johnny Winter*, guitarist *Eric Johnson*, *Rusty Wier*, *Janis Joplin* and countless other Texas acts into the alternative spotlight.

Bill had recorded Johnny Winter's first album, *The Progressive Blues Experiment*, which would later put the slide-guitar wielding Winter in the international spotlight. The album would go on to net a multi-million-dollar contract for Winter with Columbia Records, which wasted no time rushing Winter and his three-man group into its Nashville studio to record even more of the bluesman's music. Sometime later, the rights to *The Progressive Blues Experiment* passed to United Artists and the Johnny Winter Group's career took off with meteoric speed. Bill Josey had made a lot of music-industry contacts from that deal and others, and soon became a much-sought-after, independent Texas music producer.

Our First Gig: *Joshua Ives Celebration in Search of the Spirit*

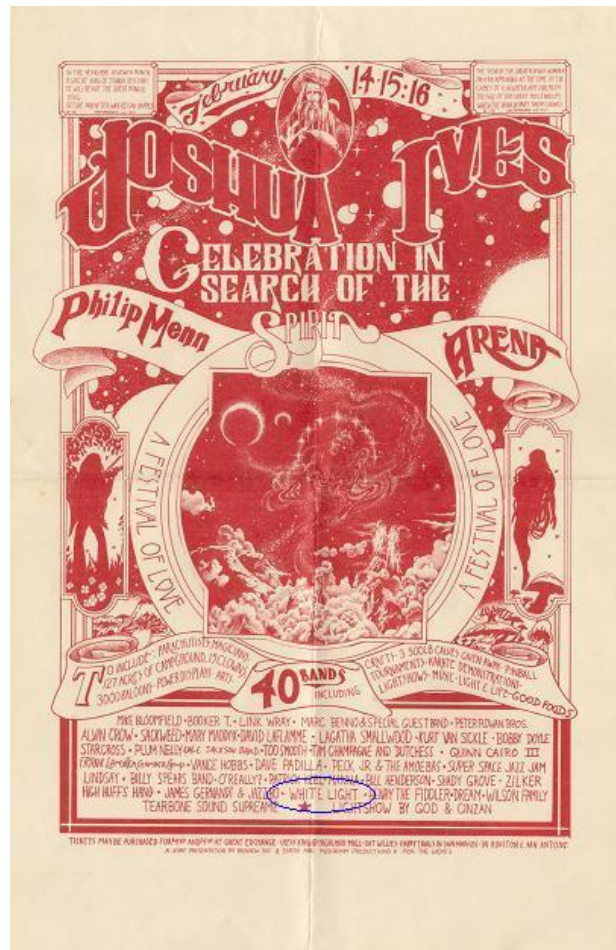
By now fate was knocking White Light around like a rubber ball on a raceway. Although we had never really set a firm coming-out date for when we would play our first live gig (other than *when we felt we were ready*),

Joshua Ives came to town. Like a travelling carnival, electric violinist Ives and his troupe of musicians arrived in Austin for a music festival the weekend of February 14-16, 1975 at the Philip Menn Arena. The Philip Menn Arena was a huge metal structure with a dirt floor that looked as if it had been built for rodeos, which it probably was. The Joshua Ives festival arrived in Austin with little fanfare: a few Austin radio stations (at least the non-country ones) gave it some air time, and a psychedelic handbill crammed from corner to corner with cryptic text and artwork had been distributed around town.

Despite the way the mysterious road show had slipped into Austin, the lineup of scheduled performers was impressive, and included such notables as violinist

David LaFlamme (of *It's a Beautiful Day*) and blues guitarist **Mike**

Bloomfield (formerly of the *Paul Butterfield Blues Band*). Also featured was '50s guitar legend **Link (Lincoln) Wray**, who would later be named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as one of the top 100 guitarists of the century. Dozens of acts were slated to play that weekend, and with a lineup like that we *had* to get in on the action. So after a bit of maneuvering with Joshua Ives' road management, White Light was added to the festival as a last-minute write-in on the freaky handbill.



Joshua Ives Festival handbill (note White Light at the bottom)

One of our fondest memories of the event was meeting guitarist **Link Wray** after we'd finished playing our set, who complimented us on our sound. This was a great boost to us at a time when we most needed it, and convinced us that we were heading in the right direction.

Among the festival's highlights was Joshua Ives himself, who finally appeared on the stage one night to try and ramp things up. Ives danced around like the minstrel of madness with his blonde hair flying wildly, and sawing on his violin as if he was taking out some avowed revenge on the instrument. He then leapt from the stage into the crowd and ran around the arena, trying to inject some spirit into a rather subdued *Celebration in Search of the Spirit*.

After the Sunday evening show the tour left Austin as quickly and as mysteriously as it had arrived. None of us had ever heard of Joshua Ives back then, and to this day we've never been able to find out anything about him despite numerous Internet searches.

Our guess is that *Joshua Ives* was probably just a stage name. Still, it was the new White Light's very first gig, where we had the chance to meet some real names in the industry, and had even garnered high praise from one of the festival's top headliners, Link Wray. At last we were on our way!

The Gigs Start Rolling In

After the Joshua Ives festival White Light began playing gigs around Austin, but the going wasn't easy. There was still a stranglehold on the Austin music scene by the *Outlaw Country* movement, and clubs that welcomed our brand of music were hard to come by. Still, we managed to book the group into a few alternative-music hot spots, including *Sunshine's Party*, the *Castle Creek Club*, and even a biker bar called the *One Knite* where some of our equipment was



Rob Haeuser on stage at Liberty Lunch



Mike Hobren playing at Liberty Lunch

stolen from our truck while we were inside the club, breaking down the set at the end of the gig. But the most renowned venue we played was *Liberty Lunch*.

Liberty Lunch became a legend over the years. When White Light played *Liberty Lunch* in July 1976, the place was then little more than an outdoor stage with an overhang, some aging wooden tables setup down front, and an outdoor bar that made the place look more like a Florida beach bar than a Texas saloon. Once a lumberyard, the place was rumored to have been

called *Liberty Lunch* in the 1940s to underscore the World War II Liberty Bonds effort and the patriotic sentiment of the times.

The lineup of groups that would play *Liberty Lunch* in its heyday (from the mid-1970s to the 1990s) was impressive: the Neville Brothers, Nirvana, Foo Fighters, k.d. Lang, Smashing Pumpkins, Hootie and the Blowfish, Dolly Parton, Red Hot Chile Peppers, Joan Jett and the

Blackhearts, Iron Butterfly, and famed local bluesman Stevie Ray Vaughn just to name a few. (Today the *Liberty Lunch* site has been rezoned and developed for commercial use.)

During the months after we lived in the trailers in Leander/Liberty Hill, we kept in close touch with producer Bill Josey. In October 1975 Bill recorded three of our tracks at his studio for us to use as a demo for the rock-bottom price of \$50. Then, in early November, Bill contacted us at the Pollyanna house and asked us if we'd like to record a full-length album. This was the break that we'd been waiting for: not a string of one-nighters, playing the local club scene, but a chance to get our original music in front of an actual record label. Needless to say, we happily accepted Bill's offer.

From December 1975 to February 21, 1976 (the official end date of our recording sessions), we worked closely with Bill and his assistant, *Tom Penick*, at the Blue Hole Sounds studio. Bill first provided us with a handwritten, 10-point proposal to produce a work tape of eight tracks, totaling between 38-42 minutes in length (the threshold of LP vinyl records in those days), that would ultimately be sent to his contacts at United Artists, Columbia Records, and Arista Records. Bill would be the producer of the album and have the final say-so on what was sent to the record companies. Perhaps best of all, Bill indicated in the proposal that there would be no cost to us for recording the work tape. We liked the price.

NOVEMBER 3, 1975

TO: "WHITE LIGHT"

FROM: BILL JOSEY (SONOBEAT RECORDING CO.)

SUBJECT: RECORDING A WORK-TAPE OF AN ALBUM.

- ① LENGTH OF ALBUM - BETWEEN 38 TO 42 MINUTES.
- ② SONG MATERIAL - ALL ORIGINAL.
- ③ NUMBER OF SONGS - ABOUT EIGHT - FOUR/SIDE
- ④ BASIC MUSIC TO BE RECORDED IN STEREO. WILL OVERDUB ALL VOCALS PLUS FLUTE, ETC.
- ⑤ WE WILL THEN ATTEMPT TO PLACE THE IDEA WITH:
(A) UNITED ARTISTS
(B) COLUMBIA
(C) ARISTA
- ⑥ IF IT IS ACCEPTED, WE WILL THEN RECORD THE MASTER TAPE IN SONOBEAT STUDIOS.
- ⑦ THERE WILL BE NO RECORDING COST TO YOU, FOR EITHER WORK-TAPE OR MASTER TAPE.
- ⑧ I WILL BE REGARDED AS YOUR PRODUCER FOR YOUR FIRST ALBUM.
- ⑨ IF IT ALL GOES WELL, YOU THREE WILL MAKE YOUR OWN DEAL WITH THE RECORD CO.
- ⑩ AS PRODUCER I HAVE THE FINAL ACCEPTANCE OF SONG MATERIAL.

Bill.

10-point work tape proposal, written by Bill Josey

It was a bitter winter outside, but inside the old stone church/recording studio there was always a warm magic when we were recording. Bill, the old country gentleman whom we'd first met in his worn work overalls, was now all business when it came to recording. There were two words that Bill used often: "Acceptable" or "Unacceptable." Bill knew the record industry and what they wanted, what they'd be willing to listen to. After all, it was his reputation, and our budding one, that were on the line.

If we played a track all the way through, but a beat was missed or a note or chord sounded sour in Bill's headset, at the end of the song after he switched off the recorders, Bill would say "Unacceptable" and we would do another take. At first we evoked more UNs than ACCs until we finally got in a zone where we started giving Bill what he was after. Once we attained acceptable first takes of all eight tracks, then the overdubbing began.

Without a doubt, this was more daunting than recording the unvarnished primary tracks. Because White Light viewed itself as a three-man orchestra and used so many instruments and special effects, we overdubbed extensively on the album. Electric and acoustic guitars were recorded using offsetting counterpoint techniques, and percussion instruments were

overdubbed repeatedly until Bill once again began saying, "Acceptable." It's amazing the power that a single word can have.



Mike and Rob recording at the Blue Hole Sounds studio

All overdubbing work, and thus the recording of the album, was technically completed in one final, nine-hour session on February 21. Bill and Tom then went to work on the final mixing of all the tracks for the album, which they completed on **March 1**. With the work tape now mixed and dubbed to cassettes, it was time to call on some record labels. First up, United Artists.

A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall *(Bob Dylan)*

Rejection is a hard pill to swallow. Despite all of our hopes and efforts, Bill called in mid-March to inform us that United Artists had passed on the work tape; the reason cited was "limited

market potential." Arista Records then contacted Bill in mid-May. They also rejected the demo tape for essentially the same reason. We never heard from Columbia Records. Things were looking grim for us at that point, but then something unexpected happened. Bill telephoned us in April to tell us that there had been some sort of management shakeup at United Artists and that the label wanted to hear our work tape again. This was a cause of great excitement for us, in that someone at UA had apparently heard something that they'd liked and wanted to hear the tape a second time.

Bill appeared unannounced at the front door of the Pollyanna house near the end of June. There was no news yet from United Artists but we visited with Bill for a while. He looked down, not his usual upbeat and energetic self. We didn't know then that this would be the last time we would see Bill Josey. Bill had served in the U.S. Navy and was on his way to a Veterans Administration hospital in nearby Temple, Texas. He never mentioned he was ill during his visit to the Pollyanna house, or at any time during our recording sessions. Then, in September 1976, Bill died from cancer at the VA hospital.

We were all stunned. We had worked many long, hard hours with Bill at his studio and had become great friends. He was probably dragging then, even while he worked on our album, but he never showed it. He just kept pushing himself to do as much for us as he could in the time he had left. He even seemed a bit apologetic that day when we last saw him, as if he had let us down somehow. Of course nothing could have been further from the truth. Bill had given us our dream shot, more than we ever could have hoped for. In fact, the Sonobeat tribute website lists White Light as the last progressive-rock group that Bill Josey recorded.

As far as the second submission of the work tape to United Artists was concerned, we never heard anything more about it. To this day, we don't know if anyone at UA had ever tried to follow up with Bill about resubmitting the tape. Fate had dealt us the hardest of all cards indeed. It was a sad time for our group, not just for us, but for all of the musicians that Bill had helped over the years, and the Austin alternative music scene.

The End of an Era

And so almost two full years after its resurrection, White Light II played its last live gig on August 22, 1976 at the *Castle Creek Club* in Austin. The Sonobeat tribute website to Bill Josey Sr., that his sons would later create to honor their father, chronicled our breakup this way: "White Light demonstrated that the Austin music scene in the mid-'70s was still diverse and dynamic even in the face of the 'outlaw' country movement that had a firm grip on Central Texas live music venues. Eventually, frustrated by the major labels' rejection of their album, the stranglehold progressive country had taken on most of Austin's live music venues, and producer Bill Josey's death in September '76 (leaving the status of United Artists' renewed interest in the album in limbo), White Light disbanded. It's truly disappointing that Sonobeat never had an opportunity to release White Light's quite original album that, in retrospect, was considerably ahead of its time."

The three of us all went about our separate lives after that. We never received a copy of the full album that Bill had sent to the record labels, only a few raw tracks from the tape that Bill had recorded for us in October 1975. Rob remained in Austin, Rusty returned to New Orleans, and Mike moved to Florida. We would not hear from each other again for nearly 30 years...but fate wasn't finished with us yet!

Lost Tape Found

For reasons that we can only speculate about now, Mike was compelled to contact Bill's son, Jack Josey, in Austin to ask him about the demo tape that we had once recorded with his father. This was in March 2005. Fortunately, Jack had transferred all of our music from the 30-year-old, oxidizing analog tape to CD format to preserve our entire, original work tape. Miraculously, the tape was still in somewhat useable condition, even though it had been stored in a parked car for several months after Bill passed away, and then sat in a closet for decades. According to Jack, the tape was "peeling like a Crayola" on the tape heads, and unfortunately, the right channel was seriously degraded. Jack sent a copy of the CD to Mike, who in turn sent a copy to Rob in Austin. The two former bandmates had not seen each other or even spoken in all those years, but the old White Light friendship was at once rekindled. The Lost Tape (or at least a CD copy of it) had surfaced, and fate had gifted us with at least some memento of all the work that we had accomplished.

Rob did considerable audio enhancement to the CD, using software that wasn't available in the 1970s. Many discussions and ideas were exchanged between the former bandmates: editing tweaks and refinements of the CD, as well as possible avenues for releasing a newly remastered version of the album. Various marketing schemes were discussed, such as getting the CD, or just select tracks from it, played on local alternative radio stations. Rob wrote a brief history of White Light and posted it on the Internet, along with some tracks from the album. At this juncture we were just glad that the album had surfaced and that our history had been documented and posted for posterity's sake.



"Time is too slow for those who wait." (David LaFlamme)

Fate Returns Once More

As the album was approaching its 40th anniversary, music scout and collector *Enrique Rivas* heard tracks from the album that Rob had posted on the Internet and contacted Rob for more information. Eventually, Enrique put Rob and Mike in touch with German music producer **Thomas Hartlage** of the **Shadoks Music** label. Not long after, the re-discovered, remastered album was packaged in LP vinyl and CD formats and readied for worldwide distribution.

So, after all the cards that fate had dealt our group over the years – good and bad, funny and sad, joyous and defeated – the *light* continues to shine on for those teenagers from New Orleans who, even now, still aren't too sure why they called themselves. . .

