

Danny Holien

"Colorado" and "Hick"

(DANNY HOLIEN)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM DANNY HOLIEN (TWS 102, 1971).

Dewey Terry

"Sweet As Spring" and

"Do On My Feet (What I Did In The Street)"

(DEWEY TERRY)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM CHIEF (TWS 104, 1972).

Robb Kunkel

"Turn Of The Century" and "Abyss"

(ROBB KUNKEL)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM ABYSS (TWS 111, 1973).

Arthur Gee-Whizz Band

"Sunday Sherry"

(RICHARD ARTHUR GEE)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM CITY COWBOY (TWS 107, 1973).

Arthur Gee

"Plain Talk"

(RICHARD ARTHUR GEE)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM ARTHUR GEE (TWS 101, 1971).

Michael Stanley

"Rosewood Bitters"

(MICHAEL STANLEY)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM MICHAEL STANLEY (TWS 106, 1973).

Pete McCabe

"Late Letter"

(PETE MCCABE)

TAKEN FROM THE ALBUM THE MAN WHO ATE THE PLANT (TWS 105, 1973).

ALL MUSIC COURTESY OF TUMBLEWEED MUSIC INC.

Original cover painting by E.L. Bortlenortz (circa 1972) depicting an epic journey to a magical land for a Dewey Terry concert (the venue is in the Dewey-shaped statue).

Originally commissioned by Tumbleweed as album cover art for Dewey's Chief LP but was not used. Subsequently printed as a promotional poster for the Chief LP. Photographed by David Black, Los Angeles, 2016.

Gatefold photo: On the steps of the Tumbleweed house in Denver.

Top row, left to right: Allan Blazek, unknown, Aaron Schumaker, Robb Kunkel, Bob Ruttenberg, and Mitch Kampf.

Bottom row, left to right: Donna Rabatt, Willie Seltzer, Bill Szymczyk, Larry Ray, and Bonnie McEvoy.

PRODUCED FOR RELEASE BY PATRICK McCARTHY and MATT SULLIVAN
 EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: MATT SULLIVAN and JOSH WRIGHT
 PROJECT MANAGER: PATRICK McCARTHY
 PROJECT ASSISTANCE: JACKIE ALLEN, CHLOE GILINKSY, LYDIA HYSLOP,
 YOSUKE KITAZAWA, CASSIE MIGGINS, JACK SILLS, HILARY STAFF, and PAT THOMAS
 PROOFREADING: LYDIA HYSLOP and PATRICK McCARTHY
 LINER NOTES ESSAY: SARAH SWEENEY
 TRANSFERS & REMASTERING: JOHN BALDWIN,
 ASSISTED BY SHELLY ANDERSON, JOHNBALDWINMASTERING.COM
 DESIGN: HENRY OWINGS, CHUNKLET GRAPHIC CONTROL
 HAND-DRAWN TYPE: TERRENCE WHITE
 COVER PAINTING: E.L. BORTLENORTZ
 ARCHIVAL MATERIAL COURTESY OF JEANNE DAMERST, DANIEL MAINZER,
 PETE MCCABE, MITCH KAMPF, LARRY RAY, PATRICK McCARTHY, and BILL SZYMCZYK

WITHOUT WHOM: ALBERT COLLINS, ARTHUR "RIKKI" GEE, DANNY HOLIEN,
 ROBB KUNKEL, PETE MCCABE, RUDY ROMERO, MICHAEL STANLEY and DEWEY TERRY

SPECIAL THANKS: ALLAN BLAZEK, JEANNE DAMERST, CHRIS DAMERST, JEANNINE HAYNES,
 DANIEL MAINZER, BONNIE MCEVOY, MITCH KAMPF, LEE KEIFER, DONNA RABATT,
 LARRY RAY, BOB RUTTENBERG, WILLIE SELTZER, AARON SCHUMAKER and BILL SZYMCZYK

THANKS: DAVID BLACK, PETER GIANAKOPOULOS, ABBY GOLDSMITH, ROSANNE HODGE, BARRY KORKIN,
 HUNTER LEA, JORDAN LOCK, KATIE MARTIN, MIKE McDONALD, BRIAN McPHERSON,
 LARRY MILLS, GRANT OLSEN, RONALD ROMERO, ROB SANTOS, DAN STUBBS, LEE THELEN,
 BRYAN THOMAS, BRAD TILBE, JON TRENEFF, SETH WARREN, and DONNA WOOLEY

© 2017 LIGHT IN THE ATTIC RECORDS & DISTRIBUTION, LLC., P.O. BOX 31970, SEATTLE, WA 98103, USA. LIGHTINTHEATTIC.NET



**Tumbleweed
 Records Inc.
 1971 - 1973**

Tumbleweed Family



Larry Ray

Label co-founder, money wrangler, and native Coloradan, Ray began his career songwriting with two high school chums, Dean Kay and Hank Jones. Together, they penned more than 50 songs published by Robbins, Feist, and Miller, resulting in ASCAP sponsorship from Johnny Mercer. Ray managed bands in the Bay Area before learning the ropes in production, marketing, and distribution at Chatton Records and Kapp Records, working his way up to Elektra, A&M, and ABC-Dunhill. In 2011, Ray published a novel entitled *Musical Dreams*.



Bill Szymczyk

Deathly afraid of earthquakes, producer and label co-founder Szymczyk got his start with B.B. King; he is regarded today for his long-running history with Joe Walsh and The Eagles.



Allan Blazek

A childhood friend of Schumaker and Kunkel, Blazek apprenticed under Szymczyk.



Daniel Mainzer

Served as Tumbleweed's contracted photographer, "the flea on the tail of the dog."



Mitch Kampf

A California native, Kampf managed a radio station where he met Ray and later became Ray's assistant.



Bob Ruttenberg

While overseeing national promotions at Tumbleweed, Ruttenberg made headlines for an airport drug bust in Seattle. Artist Danny Holien recalled that he was known for his work ethic; he "was always on the phone. I don't know if he did anything else."



Aaron Schumaker

Fresh out of college, Schumaker diverted from his original plan of moving to Los Angeles to jump in at Tumbleweed. His designs for Dewey Terry's *Chief* garnered a Grammy nomination.



Willie Seltzer

Managed Tumbleweed's college promotions.



Donna Rabbitt & Bonnie McEvoy

Tumbleweed's secretaries/administrative assistants. "Whatever the creative people needed, it was our job to take it from there to see that it happened before or after their creative efforts," said Rabbitt.



Albert Collins

Noted guitarist and bluesman, known as the "Master of the Telecaster"; died from cancer in 1993.



Pete McCabe

This "one-man Beatles" was a Denver native whom Kunkel discovered at a talent night.



Arthur Gee

Gee's album was the first Tumbleweed release, and he was the only artist to put out a second record on the label.



Rudy Romero

A San Diego native, Romero was one of the chief songwriters in the band The Hard Times before Tumbleweed released his solo effort, *To The World*. He died in a car accident in the '80s.



Danny Holien

This modest Minnesotan might've shied from the spotlight, but Holien's single "Colorado" and self-titled release became the label's most successful output.



Michael Stanley

Szymczyk discovered Cleveland-born Stanley's first band; his solo Tumbleweed release featured the track "Rosewood Bitters" and would launch his long-running career.



Robb Kunkel

An ABC promo guy turned unofficial Tumbleweed staffer turned artist, Kunkel released the last album on the label before it folded. Kunkel died in August 2015 at the age of 64.



Dewey Terry

One half of the rock duo Don & Dewey, Terry penned "I'm Leaving It (All) Up To You" in the '50s. He died from cancer in 2003.



Tumbleweed's arrival in Colorado, as announced with a full page Billboard advertisement. Colorful, familial, and fleeting.

Rocky Mountain Highs, And Lows

Before its untimely demise, Denver's Tumbleweed Records strived to do what few labels dared.

Bill Szymczyk woke up on the floor. That's how this story starts.

Only it wasn't some act of debauchery that put him there, no all-night drug binge or sinister Dionysian evening common for the era and for humming Los Angeles, where this story begins and ever so

briefly lingers, because as soon as Szymczyk's wits returned and he got himself off the ground, he knew what he had to do.

He phoned Larry Ray and changed his mind, agreeing to Ray's plan after all.

Ray grinned, satisfied.

It would take the 6.6-magnitude Sylmar earthquake—hammering up from the San Fernando fault line, killing 64 people, and tossing Szymczyk from his bed—into spurring the record engineer/producer to flee LA for the heartland, and Denver.

"February 9, 1971, 6:01 a.m.," Szymczyk still recalls. "Burned into my memory."

Ray thought he'd lured Szymczyk into moving to Denver once before, but Szymczyk—married with a three-year-old daughter and a son on the way—got cold feet. The two had met and bonded at ABC-Dunhill, where Ray landed as general manager after directing national promotions at Elektra, working with The Doors and Love prior to serving as director of album product at A&M alongside Cat Stevens and Joe Cocker.

Szymczyk breezed in from New York, where, in the mid-'60s, he'd incrementally worked his way up from sweeping floors in a studio to repairing recording gear, learning how to be an engineer. "The label thought I was smart enough to sign a band of my own," he recalled, "and I went out and signed The James Gang."

In 1970, when ABC shifted operations to the West Coast, they fired everyone but brought along Szymczyk, fresh off his first real hit with B.B. King's "The Thrill Is Gone."

Having experienced what it takes to make a record and then take it to the marketplace, Ray had dreamed of starting a label from the ground up and knew he needed an engineer/producer as talented, as versatile, as Szymczyk.

"He's got these long fingers, big hands, and he would just be working on those dials," said Ray. "I knew enough about engineering to know that Bill was the best I'd ever been around."

After a decade in Los Angeles, Ray was finished. Hard drugs had infiltrated the music scene, but, more than that, Ray believed the industry had gotten too corrupt and too unoriginal in the process. "I said to Bill, 'Los Angeles is getting less creative by the minute. Let's go somewhere where we'll be the only game in town,'" remembered Ray.

In Denver, he and Szymczyk could be their own bosses, new sheriffs in a town big enough to support a start-up record label but small enough to feel unblemished. "It would provide the freedom to excel with our creativity," said Ray.

It would also be a homecoming for Ray, who'd spent his youth in Colorado. Born into a farming and ranching family, Ray knew dusty, hot afternoons and hard work. He'd attended military school in Denver, his love of music passed down from his mother, who played ukulele and who towed her son to belt Al Jolson songs at local orphanages and hospitals. Early in his career, Ray had found songwriting success, even penning tracks for Elvis' *Girl Happy* and dozens of songs with Dean Kay and Hank Jones, but "always knew I wanted to have my own label," he said. "Even as a kid."

But Ray was a kid no more. "The saying around town was after you're 30, you're over the hill, you might as well be dead," said Ray. "Nobody knows anything after 30." But Ray had seen firsthand how the business side of music increasingly meant bullying and ripping off artists, and he'd grown more concerned by the day. He wanted to reverse all that.

He was 31, and Szymczyk would turn 28 on February 13. Three days later—a total of eight days since the Sylmar quake—one over-the-hill label man and a burgeoning engineer/producer touched down in Denver, both jobless but not for long.

How The West Was Won

In the '60s, Ray had sought to learn everything about the recording industry there was to learn, and he assumed responsibility for heading up the label's management.

Ray wasn't your typical sleazy, fast-talking label guy, but as a businessman, by necessity he could be cocksure, shrewd, and he'd already made a name for himself espousing his as-yet unformed label's ethos.

"I said, 'We're going to have one set of books, and we're going to pay our artists due royalties,'" Ray remembered telling Fantasy Records head Saul Zaentz, who'd later go on to be embroiled in decades-long money disputes with John Fogerty. "And he stood up and said, 'You're naive, you're crazy, it'll never work!' And when we got to Denver, we had no idea who was going fund or distribute us. We had no idea because I'd turned off everyone because I said it was going to be an artist-oriented label, and I meant that, I truly meant that."

In those initial days, they had nothing and no income "for quite a while," said Ray. "We hadn't signed artists, hadn't even incorporated yet. We were just in Colorado."

"And while Larry was in the process of hustling money, I had to get a job, any kind of job," recalled Szymczyk.

He found himself filing records at KFML-FM, an underground free-form radio station where he could also fill in on weekend air shifts. "It was like \$70 a week but big fun," he said.

That first 4th of July in Denver, working a nightshift by himself, Szymczyk draped two mics from the station windows, overlaying the sounds of fireworks against Jefferson Starship's "Have You Seen The Stars Tonite?" and "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Ray was making progress in the meanwhile. With the help of Bob Krasnow, formerly of Decca and a co-creator of Blue Thumb Records, Ray nabbed an appointment with David Judelson, president of Gulf + Western, then the parent company of Paramount, Famous Music, and a host of other subsidiaries. "We didn't know who Judelson or Gulf + Western was," recalled Ray. "But we did know it was not the oil company and that it was a very large, multinational conglomerate."

And with that, the boys headed to New York.

By and large, they should've blown it. They almost blew it. Krasnow phoned Ray on the morning of the meeting with Judelson to scold them for being late. They showered and raced to the meeting only to have Judelson saunter in not five minutes later and none the wiser. "He said, 'You have 45 minutes to make your case,'" said Ray. "Six hours later, we were signing a deal for \$5 million, over a period of time."

It seemed unlikely that Gulf + Western—then the fourth largest conglomerate in the world—would agree to such extravagance with two young men who had only a plan to create a record label, but Ray could be quite discerning. "I knew how to promote the best engineer in the business," he said, touting the deal he inked with Atlantic Records president Ahmet Ertegun for Szymczyk to produce Judy Roderick's 60,000,000 Buffalo album, *Nevada Jukebox*, on Atlantic. That, and he had an answer for every one of Judelson's questions.

"Not only did we receive a better salary than what we were paid at ABC-Dunhill, but I also negotiated a recording studio in the mountains for Bill. We promised to produce two albums a year, and we topped that many times over," he said.

The next afternoon, feeling elated, Ray—an intense-looking fellow with a full red beard, thick-rimmed eyeglasses, and Tony Lama cowboy boots—headed to a meeting with other Gulf + Western executives. Entering the conference room, he found a circle of chairs, and inside those, one chair for Ray.

“We’d just agreed to this deal for all this money, but I’d been in military school, I’d been on a farm,” said Ray. “And I’d been raised not to be afraid of anything.”

Ray abided, for a short while, sitting inside the circle and fielding their questions before picking up his chair and joining the outer circle. “I said, ‘You know, when I talk to someone, I like to look them in the eyes,’” he recalled. “The guys walked out, and I thought it was the end of everything.”

It was only the beginning, of course.

‘A Bitchin’ Disco Time’

With Ray and Szymczyk eager and well-connected, Gulf + Western saw an opportunity to capitalize on the counterculture movement the ‘60s had brought about with the hopes that this new label might score the next Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix. They bankrolled the boys through Famous Music, and back home in balsam-scented Denver, Ray and Szymczyk settled on the name Tumbleweed Records.

“We wanted something that was indicative of the West and Colorado in particular,” said Szymczyk. “Right down to the end, it was a tie between Timberline and Tumbleweed.”

They’d taken up with Robb Kunkel, who, after hitchhiking his way across North America, ducked out of Chicago’s Columbia College and planted himself in Denver, working in a record store before an ABC rep hired him to handle regional promotions.

Kunkel was 20 years old when he got involved with Tumbleweed, first helping secure offices in an old, antebellum house at 1368 Gilpin Street.

Cars were purchased, equipment assembled, the basement transformed into a graphic arts studio, papers finalized. “There was no trepidation,” according to Szymczyk. “We were like kids in a candy store, and we had a bitchin’ disco time spending that money.”

“From day one, those in New York felt we had too much control—something I’d negotiated with Judelson and something I’d fight to maintain,” said Ray.

Tumbleweed next needed staff. Secretaries Donna Rabbitt and Bonnie McEvoy were hired. Ray knew Mitch Kampf from the California radio circuit and brought him on board to work as an assistant; Willie Seltzer settled into college promotions alongside Bob Ruttenberg, who oversaw national promotions. Later, a photographer named Daniel Mainzer was added, and Kunkel’s childhood friend, Aaron Schumaker, freshly graduated from Purdue University, named art director. Allan Blazek, another childhood friend of Kunkel’s and Schumaker’s, aspired to be an engineer, and Szymczyk took him under his wing. A former Army cook, Blazek whipped up label lunches most afternoons.

Kampf and Ruttenberg shared an office draped with black flocked wallpaper. Office furniture, Kampf recalled, was hand-hewn with a Mexican print and purchased at Pier 1 Imports.

Tumbleweed’s domestic enclave helped foster a family vibe, everyone agreed, including Arthur Gee, who’d become the label’s first release. Gee, a Canadian and self-described “good hippie,” did his share of LSD, and “my prolific writing periods were fueled

by that kind of influence,” he said. Prior recordings of his introspective acid rock landed at Tumbleweed through a friend; Szymczyk remixed the tracks, and the label re-released them.

“We wanted to do a lot of homegrown artists,” said Szymczyk. “About half of the people we signed were from the Colorado area or visited often.”

Kunkel, who had an in on the Denver music scene, hit the ground running, scouting talent for Tumbleweed. He brought in Danny Holien, a square-jawed Minnesotan with corn-fed looks who’d initially arrived to Colorado because a good friend had told him it was the place to be.

“I sat down with Bill and my acoustic, played him a song,” recalled Holien. “Bill slapped his knee and said, ‘Hot damn! Let’s make a record!’”

Holien was 22 and naive, he recalled, and taken aback by the odd glamour of it all. Tumbleweed sought to hire studio musicians for the album, but Holien had uprooted for Denver with his band in tow, and he insisted on utilizing them. “I’m a loyal guy,” he said, admitting a twinge of embarrassment by his album’s elaborate packaging. “I wanted to do well, but I didn’t really like the limelight.”

Still, Holien’s self-titled release would prove to be the label’s most successful effort, with his breakthrough single, “Colorado,” reaching No. 66 on the Billboard charts in 1972.

Tumbleweed next churned out *There’s Gotta Be A Change* by the well-established bluesman Albert Collins, then *Chief* by Dewey Terry (known for his work in Don and Dewey with Don “Sugarcane” Harris)—another Kunkel acquaintance and acquisition for Tumbleweed. *Chief* garnered Schumaker a Grammy nomination for Best Recording Package in 1973, and the label flew him out to Los Angeles for the ceremony. He ultimately didn’t win.

Kunkel attended a talent night at the Denver Folklore Center, and that’s how he stumbled upon Denver native Pete McCabe. “I spent the next week calling every McCabe in the phone book,” said Kunkel. “I finally found his dad, who said ‘Yeah, I have a son, he’s about 19,’ and I said, ‘That’s him!’”

The introverted McCabe was suspicious of Kunkel from the start. “He thought I was going to steal his songs or do something evil to him,” laughed Kunkel, who dubbed McCabe “a one-man Beatles.” “Musically, the stuff I was doing was just so weird,” McCabe agreed. “Tumbleweed took a chance with some far-off stuff at the time.”

The Man Who Ate The Plant was mostly recorded in two sessions at The Record Plant in LA with parts done at The Hit Factory in New York with Szymczyk and Blazek, who, McCabe recalled, were mooning pedestrians from their hotel room one night.

“I was really scared in a way—I’d never been out of Colorado. I was playing with all these hotshots. I was kind of afraid to talk to them,” said McCabe.

Szymczyk called McCabe the oddest songwriter in the world. “Brilliant songs but extremely odd,” he said. “I’m really proud of that album, but it was so uncommercial, almost like a Broadway show.”

When the album went to press, “What is a McCabe?” was etched into the vinyl.



LEFT: The Tumbleweed Records house at 1368 Gilpin Street, Denver, CO.

RIGHT: The basement in the Tumbleweed house served as the graphic design studio and jam space.

Next, Tumbleweed went a more mainstream route with Michael Stanley, a heartland rocker whose band, Silk, Szymczyk had discovered during the same weekend he’d signed The James Gang to ABC.

“It was kind of like a bad movie,” recalled Stanley, who hails from and still resides in Cleveland. Silk was playing at a club called D’Poo’s, and “at one of the breaks, Szymczyk came up and introduced himself and said ‘Hi, I’m a record producer from New York,’ gave us his card, and said, ‘I like what you guys are doing, I’d like to talk to you about making a record.’”

Szymczyk followed up a few weeks later, and they went into the studio. Silk disbanded soon after, but Szymczyk recognized talent in Stanley, the group’s songwriter; so much so that he later recruited him for a solo record which would launch Stanley’s career. That self-titled album contained “Rosewood Bitters,” one of Stanley’s best-known tracks, featuring Todd Rundgren on keys.

“When you start a band in high school, your whole goal is to make a record, and not many people did,” said Stanley. “So by the time I was 21, I had two records, and that was pretty amazing to me. I could’ve died a happy person at that point.”

Tumbleweed released three more albums: Gee’s *City Cowboy*, Rudy Romero’s *To The World*, with an uncredited George Harrison rumored on guitar, and a Kunkel album titled *Abyss*, the making of which he called “the most ecstatic thing that could ever happen to a young man.”

Produced by jazzman Ed Michel, *Abyss* featured a host of jazz players as well as the LA Symphony, though the album is ostensibly

a mélange of moody pop and sweeping piano ballads with a handful of snappy jazz moments.

“I knew I was no Elton John, but I knew this was my shot, and I was lucky to have it,” Kunkel said.

On- and Off-Track

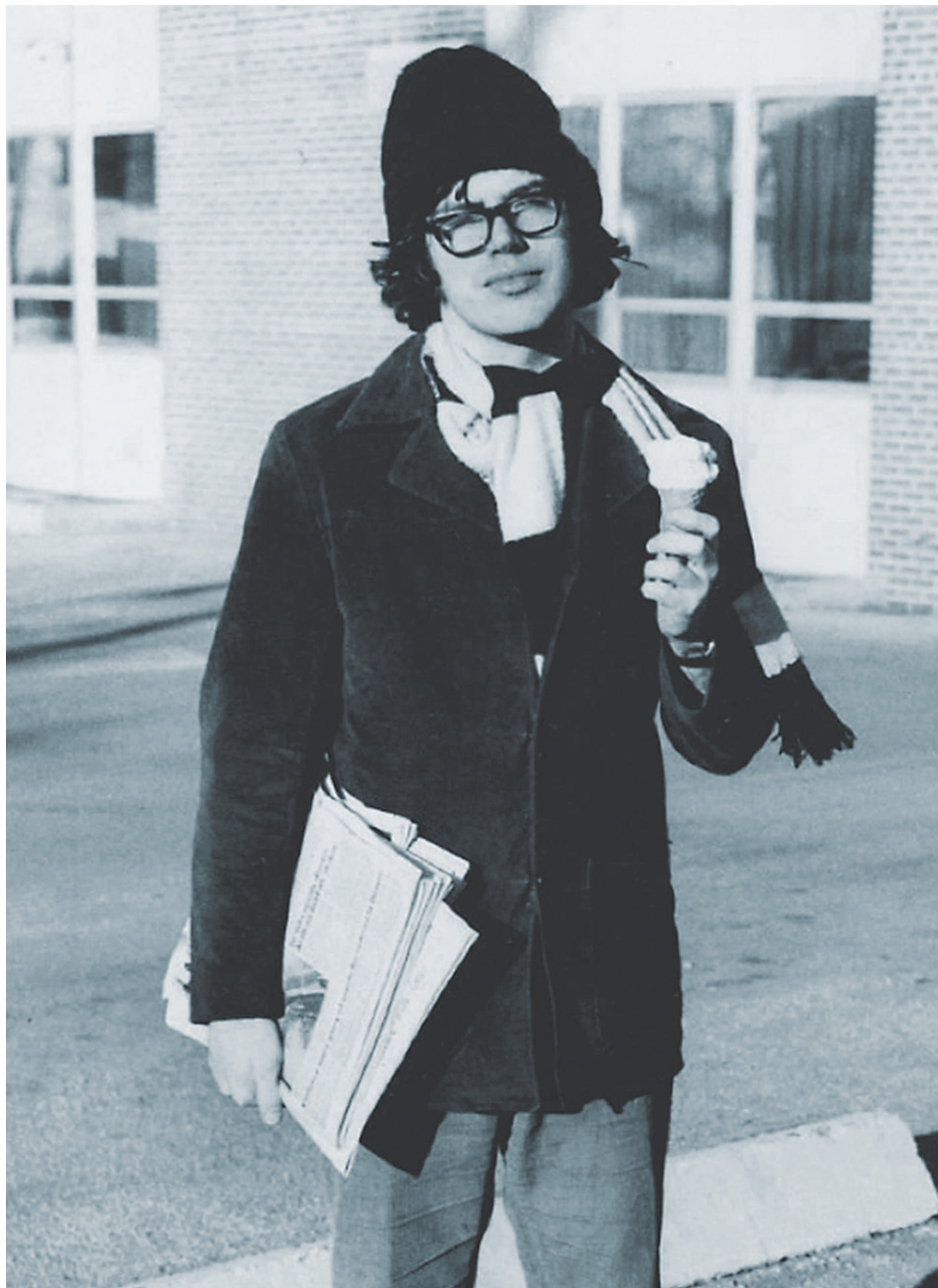
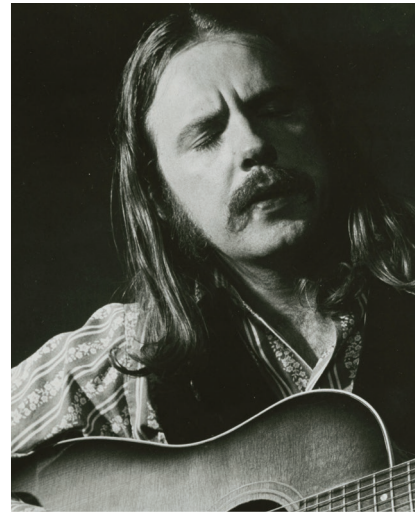
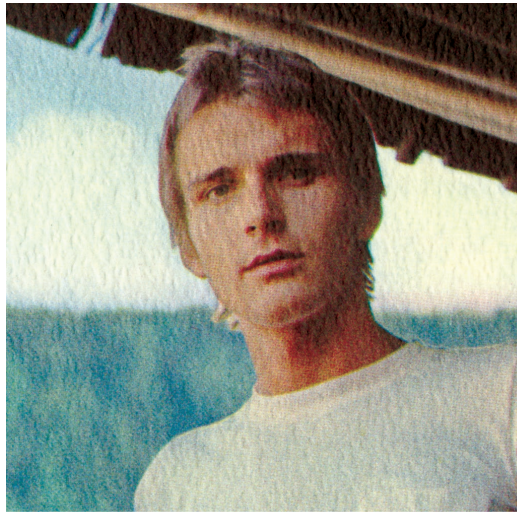
Stanley recalled lazing on the porch of Tumbleweed headquarters one afternoon when a man approached. “Just your normal-looking hippie dude,” he said.

Not an uncommon sight. “There was always people wandering in and out. Some of them wearing shoes, some of them not wearing shoes.”

The two got to chatting, and the man inquired whether Stanley was at all interested in investing \$5,000 into a new business venture. “I’m looking at this guy thinking, ‘This is the last guy in the world to start a company,’” said Stanley, who’d later learn that this unlikely businessman was one of Celestial Seasonings’ co-founders.

That a man on the street soliciting passersby for start-up capital could launch a tea empire was not only a sign of the quirky, freewheeling era but presented a perplexing contrast to the corporate-funded Tumbleweed, which, from day one, had all the resources to succeed but was bogged with problems from early on, as well.

When it came to operations, Tumbleweed was less business and “really about the music,” said Kampf. “It was a family and not a lot of hierarchy in terms of ‘you report to that person’... Everyone was also into having fun.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Danny Holien, Arthur Gee, Dewey Terry and Robb Kunkel, The Rocky Mountain Rhythm Kings (Danny Holien, Allan Blazek, Robb Kunkel, Steve Swenson, Gaga and Bill Szymczyk), Michael Stanley and Pete McCabe.

"And what was so wrong with that?" wondered Ray. With the fruitless Vietnam War still raging overseas, everyone was searching for his or her own slice of utopia.

"The record business back then was the Wild Wild West—people were making it up as they went along," said Stanley. "And Tumbleweed obviously had a sensibility prevalent at that time. They weren't a big corporate machine. It was five people in a big house in Denver, smoking pot and making records, and I was like, 'This is great! This is the way it should be!'"

While in Seattle for business, Ruttenberg became the first person in the record industry to be busted in a metal detector with six ounces of marijuana. The incident made *Rolling Stone* magazine's "Random Notes" that year. But drugs weren't just party fuel; they were bargaining chips. "It was very important to have the right amount of pot and the decent pot to turn the DJs on to what we were doing," said Ruttenberg.

As a contracted photographer, Mainzer said he often felt like "the flea on the tail of the dog," but he was privy to the label's laissez-faire framework. "Those guys were party animals! I don't know how they got anything done," he said. "We interacted like random molecules."

Kunkel remembered long days of lounging in Ray's office, reading poetry. "Baudelaire," he said. "Larry was very interested in religion. We read a lot of books on religion, philosophy... We listened to a lot of music—everything from Ravel to Cat Stevens. I'd wake up in the morning, have a cup of coffee, smoke a joint. I'd start fires in all the fireplaces in the house—we had cords of wood in the back. It was a party from day one."

That's not to say Tumbleweed, for all its idiosyncrasy, couldn't work. "My perception was that we were on the right track, and we were going to be successful," said Kampf.

But things weren't going as well as Ray had dreamed. Gulf + Western pulled the plug on the studio they'd promised Szymczyk in their contract, and that's when Ray perceived trouble. Relationships with the executives had grown fraught—Ray was constantly at odds with Paramount over distribution.

"Ruttenberg was fantastic—we had radio play," said Ray. "Then we'd go into stores and there wouldn't be a single Tumbleweed record."

A shame, really, because the label's marketing and promotions materials were unparalleled. To announce their arrival in Colorado, Ray and Szymczyk placed a full-page ad in *Billboard*, a black and white portrait boasting the two men and their families against a mountainous backdrop and a road sign proclaiming "Welcome to Colorful Colorado." Collaged brochures similarly announcing the label and its upcoming releases accompanied Gee's first album, and a psychedelic jigsaw puzzle was drawn up to promote his follow-up, *City Cowboy*. For *Chief*, Tumbleweed commissioned a giant painting, which nearly became the cover. Meanwhile in the accessories department, Tumbleweed stone-engraved roach clips.

The label's packaging was likewise luxurious, covetable; the Holien package featured a die-cut jacket and 16-page songbook. Schumaker's Grammy-nominated designs for *Chief* played off the eponymous dime store notebooks of the 1950s: the Big Chief Tablet.

"We put it together to look like a tablet, so the hinge was on the top of the album, so it opened up like a tablet would and was printed like one," said Schumaker. The inside notes were hand-let-tered by Terry's son.

At Elektra, Ray had spent a lot of time researching what else, besides airplay, sold records. "And graphics had a lot to do with it," he said. "So we put every bit as much effort into the graphics at Tumbleweed as we did the music. Also, as a songwriter, the one who mostly wrote the lyrics, I wanted the buyer to be able to read the lyrics to each song as well as listen to the music."

That meant spending money, of course. "The big labels didn't want to do that," said Schumaker. "They wanted to cut corners, save money. The philosophy at Tumbleweed was the opposite."

"But we couldn't get sales, and that's a death knell," said Szymczyk. Before his departure, Schumaker recalled that the New York executives "were starting to come in and poke around and try to save money."

But Ray had a reputation for being unmovable when it came to standing up for Tumbleweed and its artists, and his attempts at negotiations fell flat. Those early meetings with Gulf + Western had branded Ray a loose cannon, an uncompromising John Wayne type who, if provoked, could fly off the handle.

Further disagreements with Gulf + Western halted production on Stanley's record, which was pushed back a year, and then there was a six-month hiatus where nothing happened. Through all this, Ray continued flying to New York for contentious meetings, landing in Denver again only to take off in his BMW Bavarian for peace of mind, driving as far as Utah's Zion National Park before turning around.

"By the time I got back to Denver, I was ready to go back to New York and play their game," he said. "And it got to be really difficult. The distributor was incompetent, and secondly, they didn't like me. I've thought about it a lot over the years. I antagonized them. I know I did that. I showed them what they did wrong, and you don't do that to these guys who are making millions of dollars a year."

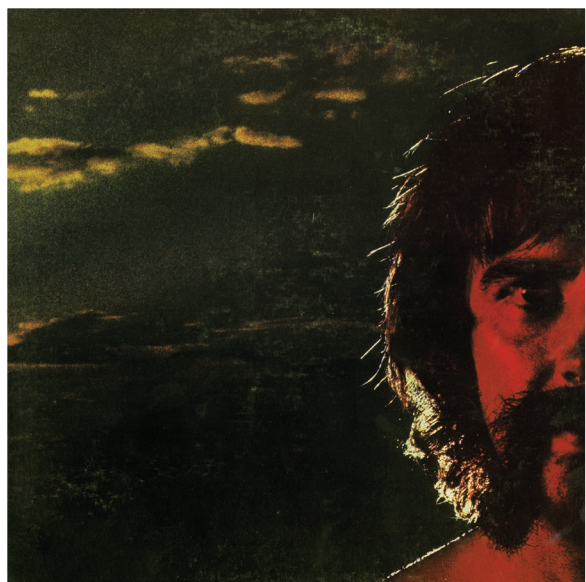
Szymczyk was busy producing most, but not all, of Tumbleweed's albums while working independently with the newly solo Joe Walsh and Boston's J. Geils Band. He officially left Tumbleweed Records in 1972 but remained involved with Tumbleweed Productions, the company Ray and his attorney put together for Szymczyk. He remained involved with Tumbleweed Records as an engineer/producer.

Shortly after Kunkel's album release in 1973, Tumbleweed dissolved almost literally overnight.

"I know my staff, artists, and even Bill never knew how difficult the fight with Famous was," said Ray. "I fought to protect our artists—giving them what we'd promised—and fought to save the livelihood of my staff, the very survival of Tumbleweed, and so much more."

In their final meeting, Judelson instructed Ray to fire his staff and keep the remaining money for himself. Gulf + Western chieftain Charles Bluhdorn planned on dissolving the music division, Judelson informed Ray, never mind the contract they'd signed. A futile name-calling match ensued between the two, and a broken Ray departed Gulf + Western for good.

"I was so sad that I almost couldn't believe it," said Ray. "I gave Mitch the keys and said, 'Close her down, I'm out of here.'"



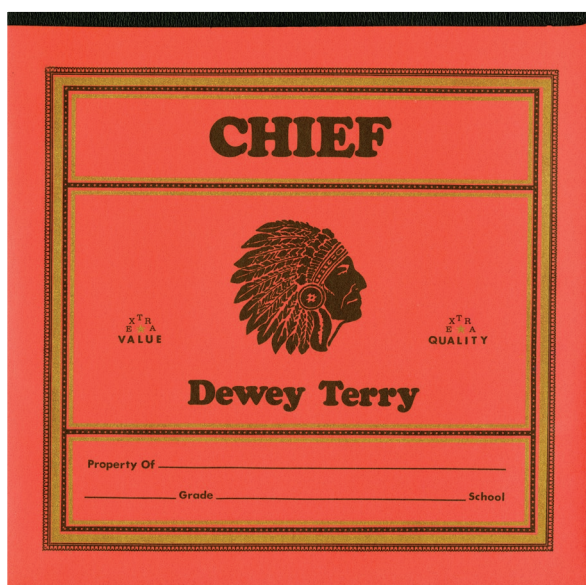
Arthur Gee *Arthur Gee* (TWS 101, 1971)



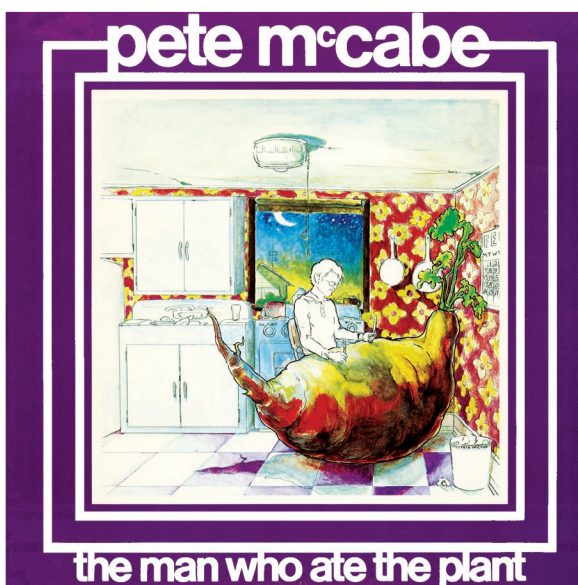
Danny Holien *Danny Holien* (TWS 102, 1971)



Albert Collins *There's Gotta Be A Change* (TWS 103, 1971)



Dewey Terry *Chief* (TWS 104, 1972)



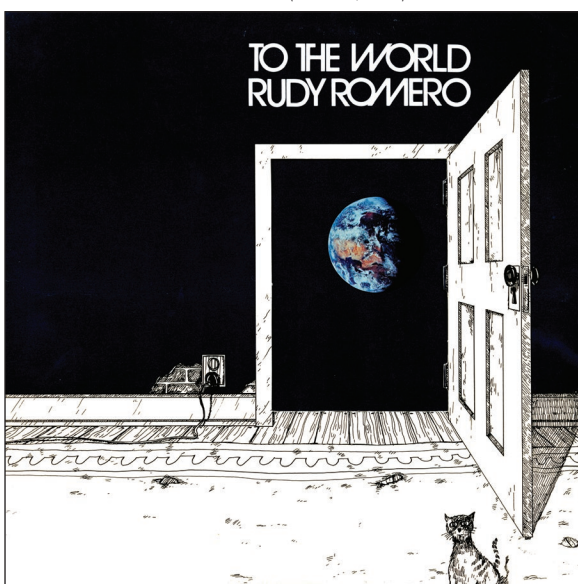
Pete McCabe *The Man Who Ate The Plant* (TWS 105, 1973)



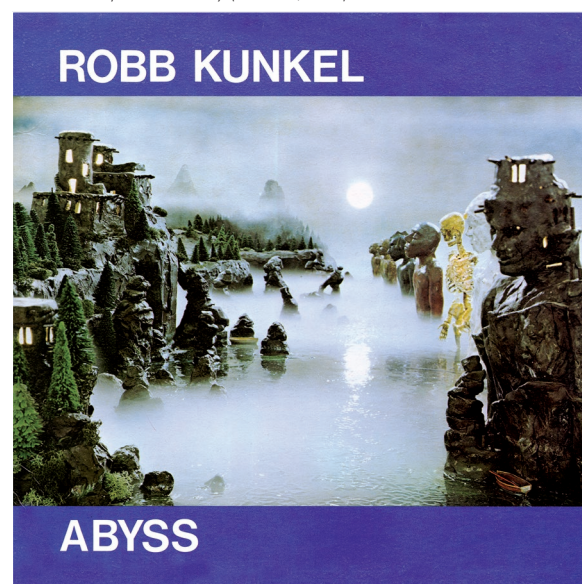
Michael Stanley *Michael Stanley* (TWS 106, 1973)



Arthur Gee-Whizz Band *City Cowboy* (TWS 107, 1973)



Rudy Romero *To The World* (TWS 108, 1973)



Robb Kunkel *Abyss* (TWS 111, 1973)

A Tumbleweed In The Wind

No good deed goes unpunished, goes the saying, and with the purest of intentions, Ray and Szymczyk had unwittingly commandeered a sinking ship. They'd spent more than they'd sold, and whether personal vendettas against Ray factored in or not, distribution was key—and nonexistent.

"Everything we accomplished, we did on our own without a whole lot of help from the distributor," said Szymczyk.

And in the end, Gulf + Western likely used Tumbleweed's inability to generate income as a tax write-off.

"I've got plenty of regrets," said Ray. "But the thing that came out of all this is Bill. Bill was like a gem, he was a diamond in the rough. And Tumbleweed really helped soothe off a lot of those rough edges, and he became a fantastic engineer and producer."

Szymczyk had partnered with Walsh since the James Gang days and continued his involvement into Walsh's solo career, starting with the *Barnstorm* album, recorded alongside Joe Vitale and Kenny Passarelli—all of whom Szymczyk had used in the Tumbleweed house band.

"I would consider that whole Denver period as a time of learning and growth," said Szymczyk. "A lot of experimentation with various types of music where I was really learning my craft. When I left Denver, I thought, 'OK, that's it, I graduated.'"

And he graduated into The Eagles. Szymczyk is heralded for veering The Eagles into a harder rock sound, first producing 1974's *On The Border*, while also credited for bringing in Walsh for The Eagles' 1976 eponymous *Hotel California* and subsequent albums.

He also continued collaborating with Stanley, who achieved decent successes into the MTV years and who still maintains a sizable following in Cleveland, where he works as a classic rock DJ, gigging and touring on the weekends. When Tumbleweed folded, Stanley thought, "That was fun, and now I'll go on with the rest of my life."

The rest of the Tumbleweed crew scattered.

McCabe moved to LA but never quite got his music off the ground. He worked as a graphic artist and now teaches.

"An album like *The Man Who Ate The Plant* would certainly never be financed by a label today," he said. "The kind of free and adventurous spirit of Tumbleweed and the '70s was not to return to the corporate music scene. So much of music today seems bland by comparison."

A self-described lifer, Gee recorded more albums and made his career playing in various bands throughout the years. He retired to Canada and said it's difficult to put a label on his Tumbleweed experience: "It was totally magical, totally crazy, totally not understandable."

Kampf works in consumer electronics; Holien dropped out of the business and moved back to Minnesota "on a farm in the country, with some acreage, where I can drive a tractor once in a while." Schumaker retired from an advertising career in Florida. Ruttenberg headed to Costa Rica, where he and his wife run a wellness retreat. Since the late '80s, Mainzer has owned and operated his own photography studio in Ohio, where he lives.

Kunkel, who began his career with a nomadic voyage across Canada, Mexico, and the United States before settling in Colorado, drifted and played music throughout his life, most notably as guitarist in the jazz fusion ensemble, Pataphysics. When his wife died, he rounded up their savings and traveled around the world—mourning and searching throughout Mexico, Ireland, the Canary Islands. "I was completely lost," he said.

Kunkel died in California in the late summer of 2015, joining Romero, Collins, and Terry, who'd also passed away over the years. But the period with Tumbleweed remained the cornerstone of his life: "It was an absolutely breathtakingly exciting ride as a young man," he revealed just a month shy of his death. "I was so pleased that they were ever in existence, and that we were part of it, that when it folded, it didn't matter."

Tumbleweed's legend is not to be dwarfed by its tragedies, though today, it's mostly relegated to thrift-store bin obscurity. But in its brief lifespan, Tumbleweed made the music industry seem almost virtuous, at least attainable, by offering open platforms and unheard-of resources to its employees and musicians—including a shy, local teen like McCabe.

"I gave some of our artists a new Martin D28. I gave Pete one, and it wasn't long before he walked into my office asking for another because he'd lost his or someone had stolen it," recalled Ray. "I loved that kid. *The Man Who Ate The Plant* gave those in New York all the more fuel to fight us. They didn't have a clue how to market the album no matter how much airplay Ruttenberg got us."

Ray went on to various opportunities; among them, reactivating Tumbleweed in Nashville in the mid-'80s, producing five country albums alongside Bill Halverson. He taught, co-authored a child-rearing book, and finished a novel about the business of music titled *Musical Dreams*.

"I went a whole different direction in my life, spiritually and every which way," he said.

But he never told Szymczyk that following the label's dissolution, he feared for his life. Judelson had promised to have the duo "taken care of," he recalled. "And I had to live with that."

He purchased a farm in rural Washington and moved his family there. Then, like in a vignette from an old film, an elongated black Cadillac appeared in the yard one afternoon. Strange, Ray thought, since he lived down an inconspicuous dirt road. He quickly instructed his wife to take the kids and head down to the neighbor's. "A guy got out, and he handed me his card, and he was a real estate agent," said Ray.

It was Tumbleweed's anticlimactic denouement, the closing scene of this story. Surrounded by nature, the sounds of wilderness, all of it as tranquil as the Coloradan landscape, Ray went back inside the house.

SARAH SWEENEY
BOSTON, MA | 2015