

# Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

## In Review



### **Glass Harp**

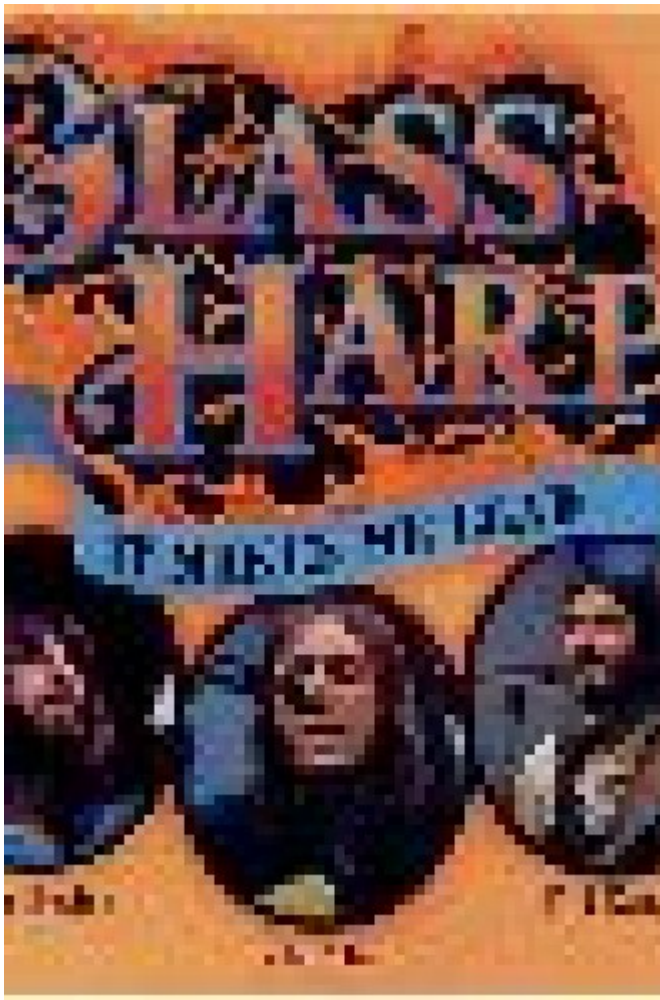
Glass Harp  
Music Mill



## **Synergy**

Glass Harp

Music Mill



## **It Makes Me Glad**

Glass Harp

Music Mill



## **Under the Covers (Vol. 1)**

Matthew Sweet, Susanna Hoffs  
Shout! Factory



## **Rabbit Fur Coat**

Jenny Lewis, with the Watson Twins  
Team Love



## **Jammed!**

Phil Keagy

Phil Keagy Music/Tag Distribution



## **Nobody's Got It All Together**

Jill Phillips

Square Peg Alliance





## **Voice of the Spirit: The Gospel of the South**

various artists

Dualtone

These days the Youngstown, Ohio, band Glass Harp is known only to a small group of classic rock scholars and acolytes, but during its 1970s heyday the group opened for the likes of Alice Cooper, Traffic and the Kinks. It is said that Jimi Hendrix, when asked how it felt to be the best rock guitarist alive, replied, "I don't know. Ask Phil Keaggy." Keaggy, now a Christian music veteran, was then Glass Harp's lead guitarist, and not long out of high school.

The reissue of three Glass Harp discs, Glass Harp, Synergy and It Makes Me Glad (Music Mill Entertainment), originally released on Decca Records between 1970 and '72, shows that the band was far ahead of its time on many fronts: as a power trio, a precursor to today's jam bands (half of the songs on their debut clock in at more



than five minutes) and a forerunner of the Christian rock movement.

As Glass Harp ascended the ladder of fame, Keaggy began to explore his nascent Christian beliefs in song and lyric with the support of bandmates John Sferra (drums) and Dan Pecchio (bass). To hear these songs in pristine CD audio is bittersweet. Glass Harp's mix of Beatlesque harmonies, bouncy guitar workouts and psychedelic atmospherics made them stand out among their rock peers. What's baffling is how they avoided wider notice and subsequent rock pantheon status.

On the self-titled first disc, "Can You See Me" combines strings and flute over a steady A-minor guitar figure, while reverb-drenched vocals set a mood that suggests a mix of Spirit, the Moody Blues and Van Morrison (the album was produced by Morrison helmsman Lewis Merenstein). Other highlights are the frisky blues rock of "Village Queen" and Keaggy's home demo "Voice of God Cry Out." Imagine a lost Paul McCartney composition from the Beatles' White Album and you'll get an idea of the song's filigreed beauty.

*Synergy* shows Glass Harp continuing its ambitious trajectory, with the Keaggy-penned "Mountains" gilding gorgeous, slipstream harmonies onto a countrified backbeat that would have done the Band or the Grateful Dead proud. Keaggy tenderly evangelizes in the song "Answer": "The answer / You don't have to be alone anymore / The answer / Is Jesus, believe me, He'll open the door."

*It Makes Me Glad* kicks off with the lilting "See Saw," with acoustic guitar, multitracked flute and dabs of cymbal. It's a precursor of what's to come, as this album oscillates between gentle, organic textures and electrified grooves that sweetly subdue rather than overpower the listener. The funky version of "Do Lord" may sound dated in a flower-power kind of way, but it's still a treat thanks to the wizardry of Keaggy's soloing and its loose-and-groovy handclaps.

*It Makes Me Glad* marked a peak moment for Glass Harp. Keaggy's soul and muse were aching to explore Christianity more deeply. He parted amicably with the band, though Sferra still shows up as a drummer on much of Keaggy's solo material, including on *Jammed!* (see review below). Meanwhile, these reissued discs stand as a testament to how innovative Glass Harp was in making music and expressing faith.

Some other notable CDs:

In the expert hands of Hoffs (the Bangles) and Sweet, these 15 songs represent the sonic equivalent of a paisley suitcase packed for a desert-island vacation. Tackling artists from the Beach Boys (“The Warmth of the Sun”) and the Beatles (“And Your Bird Can Sing”) to Neil Young (“Cinnamon Girl”) and the Left Banke (“She May Call You Up Tonight”), the album stays faithful to the key signatures, tempos and upbeat feel of the ’60s originals. What’s more, the results reflect a sparkling DIY vibe, courtesy of Sweet’s home studio—and make one wish for not just a sequel but also a collaboration between the two on their own material.

Avoiding the clunky clichés of country pop and the ham-fisted Bible thump of Christian rock, John Carter Cash—son of Johnny Cash—assembles a collection as splendid as a mystery hymnal found on the pew of an abandoned dirt-road church. On “Unclouded Day,” Cash sings with gnarled weariness. In a similar acoustic vein, Mavis Staples teams with Nashville talent Marty Stuart to render a version of “Twelve Gates to the City” that stitches bluesy, melancholy chord changes with gospel righteousness. And see if you can tell Connie Smith from Patsy Cline on “Over the Next Hill We’ll Be Home,” which rolls with delightful piano-and-mandolin rhythm.

Lewis, a former child actress, hits the jackpot with an album of understated songs, many of which grapple with themes of faith. In “Rise Up With Fists!!!” Watson proclaims, “You can’t change things, we’re all stuck in our ways,” only to declare in the refrain: “There but for the grace of God go I.” Whether she’s casting a skeptical eye on the afterlife or pondering the futility of materialism, Lewis’s observations are often sharp. And with backing from the Watson Twins, the album glimmers with sublime gospel. The only misstep is a cover of the Traveling Wilburys’ “Handle with Care” that plays like a stiff attempt at open-mic spontaneity.

Those who love the blues-tinged guitar stylings of Jeff Beck, Eric Johnson or Joe Satriani but secretly wish for far more of a soul underpinning will find this disc delightful. Tracks run the gamut from sublime blues to ridiculous rock. Consider this album evidence that Keagy is a bona fide electric guitar virtuoso—and perhaps one of the most unsung talents playing today.

The telltale moment on this fine acoustic-pop disc—reminiscent of Shawn Colvin and the Indigo Girls—comes when Phillips sings on “Square Peg”: “I can’t seem to fit their mold / And make my way past the entrance / I have had my turn to play / But never understood their game.” Phillips was once a budding Christian music star, but now finds herself an independent artist. She is aided and abetted by a host of like-minded musicians, including husband-guitarist-cowriter Andy Gullahorn. There’s a

touch of world-weariness in Phillips's voice, but no sense of lost hope.