

A Whiter Shade of Pale

Written by bluesever

Friday, 11 January 2013 21:32 -

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If any one song sums up the sense of limitless possibilities that suffused English pop music in the mid-60s, when its exponents felt joyously free to decorate their creations with borrowings from the ancient past and an imagined future, it is “**A Whiter Shade of Pale.**” Coming out of nowhere, the first release by an unknown band, it skipped across centuries with its infallibly seductive Bach-goes-to-Muscle Shoals organ lead and chord progression and a wonderfully dippy lyric which could be taken to mean anything or nothing, seemingly constructed (by Keith Reid, Procol's non-playing lyricist) from acid visions and snatches of misheard party conversations.

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Keith Reid got the idea for the title when it came to him at a party, which gave him a starting point for the song. Says Reid: *"I feel with songs that you're given a piece of the puzzle, the inspiration or whatever. In this case, I had that title, 'Whiter Shade of Pale,' and I thought, There's a song here. And it's making up the puzzle that fits the piece you've got. You fill out the picture, you find the rest of the picture that that piece fits into."*



Keith Reid

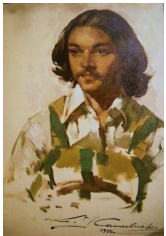
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Gary Brooker recalled the writing of the music in an interview with Uncut magazine February 2008:

"I'd been listening to a lot of Classical music, and Jazz. Having played Rock and R&B for years, my vistas had opened up. When I met Keith, seeing his words, I thought, 'I'd like to write something to that.' They weren't obvious, but that doesn't matter. You don't have to know what he means, as long as you communicate an atmosphere. 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' seemed to be about two people, a relationship even. It's a memory. There was a leaving, and a sadness about it. To get the soul of those lyrics across vocally, to make people feel that, was quite an accomplishment."



Gary Brooker

The main organ melody appears at the beginning and after each verse/chorus. But it is also heard throughout, playing variations of its theme and counterpointing the vocal line. The vocal and organ accompaniment reach a crescendo at the beginning of the chorus *"And so it was, and later ..."*;

where the organist rapidly runs his finger down and up the entire keyboard. The final instrumental fades out to silence - a common device in pop music of the time.



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Gary Brooker & Keith Reid

The Hammond organ line of "A Whiter Shade of Pale" came from Johann Sebastian Bach's **"Sine Nomine"**

and

"Air on the G String"

- both of which use a similar stepwise bass motion. The vocal verses are yet more loosely based on that melody, though the lyrics are extremely obscure for a pop song. Obviously influenced by the free-association imagery of Bob Dylan, it did not necessarily but could have been impressions of a drug experience, and not a particularly good one, despite the soothing melody.



Procol Harum, 1967

The song was performed and recorded at Olympic Studios in London, England with Gary Brooker providing the vocals and piano, Matthew Fisher on a Hammond M-102 organ, David Knights on bass and Ray Royer on guitar. Drums were by session drummer Bill Eyden.

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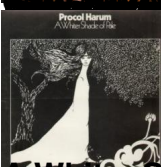
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A Whiter Shade of Pale, album