Arts and Leisure: Rock 'n' roll singer still slick in other areas

by David Coddon

Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit never knew what hit him.

Not only was that cute little bunny turned inside out, but so was Wonderland itself when Grace Slick wrote a song called "White Rabbit" back in 1966 for her band, the Great Society.

Slick's song, which became a musical icon of the psychedelic era and a hit for her subsequent band, the Jefferson Airplane, was more about Alice than about the rabbit she follows down a hole. Actually, it was more about "feeding your head" than anything Carroll wrote.

Forty-one years after she composed "White Rabbit," and 18 since she officially retired from rock 'n' roll, Grace Slick is still infatuated with Alice, Wonderland and its colorful inhabitants. Instead of singing about it now, she's painting it:

- Alice on the White Rabbit's knee.

- Alice napping in the White Rabbit's arms.

- Alice in pursuit of the White Rabbit, with Timothy Leary as the Mad Hatter and Ram Dass as the Caterpillar nearby.

- The White Rabbit riding a tricycle on San Francisco's China Beach in the shadow of the Golden Gate

Bridge.

"I have lived her (Alice's) story, and I admired it as a little girl," says Slick, who now resides in Malibu, Calif. "She's alone. The rest of the little girls in fairy stories are delicate, and they get saved by some prince. Nobody ever saves her.

"I believe the White Rabbit represents her curiosity. She has no idea how that chase is going to turn out. I admire that - when people have the guts to follow their hearts, their curiosity .... Thinking that somebody's going to save you is just ridiculous."

GRACE SLICK, ARTIST - Many remember Grace Slick as a born rock 'n' roll singer, but the '60s rock icon is also an accomplished artist whose work has been on display in several galleries. CNS Photo courtesy of Joel Lipton.

WHITE RABBIT - Forty-one years after she composed 'White Rabbit,' Grace Slick is still infatuated with Alice, Wonderland and its colorful inhabitants. This rendering she has titled 'Trust.' CNS Photo courtesy of Area Arts.

Slick, who's been through the Looking Glass and back again, surviving the Airplane, Altamont, Woodstock, Haight-Ashbury, the '60s in general and a near-fatal bout of diverticulitis in particular, understands not only Alice, but the point of view of the Mad Hatter as well.

"He's literally nuts, and I lived with a guy who's nuts," she says. "My brother is nuts; rock 'n' roll is basically nuts."

So nuts that Slick gave it up in 1989. She was 49.

"I felt like a dork on stage, even when I was in my 40s," Slick recalls, her voice still robust and husky, her anti-establishment candor just as brash. "I'm not comfortable being a rock 'n' roll singer and being an 'old guy.' You can be an old guy and do jazz, or blues, but I'm a born rock 'n' roll singer. You look sappy when you're old."

"Sappy" doesn't come to mind when you think "Grace Slick," the dark-eyed, dark-haired (she's now white-haired) firebrand who belted out "Volunteers," "Somebody to Love" and "Crown of Creation." But she sings only in her house these days, and says of her own, much-celebrated voice: "I had limited range - about four notes, and all of them are loud.

"I don't do cute little songs because, for whatever reason, I can't sing softly. So I never could sing lullabies to my daughter when she was born. I would've broken her eardrums."

Back to that house on 2 acres in Malibu. It's not only where Slick, who lives alone, sings to please no one but herself, but it's also where she paints: portraits of her rock 'n' roll peers, some of them now gone, like Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and Jerry Garcia; intense self-portraits; and all those visions of Wonderland and its fantastic (perhaps, as a nod to the Airplane's repertoire, one might say plastic fantastic) inhabitants.

Her workshop is "a big family room, right off the kitchen. It gets a lot of light, this house. I lived in Laurel Canyon for a while, and that's like living underground. Living here, I don't need a studio."

Painting isn't just a hobby for Slick. Her works sell for $1,000 up to $75,000 for originals.

That said, Slick would be the last one to glorify her new career. Half of what she paints she does as commissions from clients, including rock-star portraits, which are arranged through her agent.

"It's like rock 'n' roll," she says. "It's not jazz. You're not in it to suffer. Anything anybody wants me to do ... I do."

Slick cultivated her artistic muse while a sophomore at the University of Miami. She likens her works today to "somewhere between Walt Disney and (Jan) Vermeer. I admire both of those arenas (and) the blunt, 21st century look of the cartoon - in your face, very rock 'n' roll."

Her buyers, whom she says range from "burned out hippies to just regular people who were going to the concerts and who will buy originals," have been known to ask for written dedications on the back of the paintings themselves, which Slick will do (though she's not permitted to sign rock memorabilia). Some of her buyers are kids of her old fans.

If Slick is nostalgic about her past, it's in stiff competition with the feistiness in her 67-year-old voice.

"I've had a good life," she says. "I've been really lucky to be able to do what I want and be what I've been. The only person who's ever jerked me around is me.

"It's spooky being old," she adds, "because you never know when you're going to drop dead, and that pisses me off."

Arts and Leisure: Rock 'n' roll singer still slick in other areas by David Coddon