

Thirteenth Floor Elevators

One of the first psychedelic rock bands to reach national prominence during the 1960s. Members included Tommy Hall (b. September 21, 1943), founding member, electric-jug player, 1965-1969; Stacy Sutherland (b. Kerrville d. August 24, 1978, Houston, TX), founding member, lead guitarist 1965-1969; Benny Thurman (b. Austin), founding member, bassist, 1965-1966; John Ike Walton (b. Kerrville), founding member, drummer, 1965-1966; Roger Kynard “Roky” Erickson (b. July 15, 1967 in Dallas; son of Evelyn Erickson, an opera singer), founding member, lead singer and rhythm guitarist, 1965-1969; Ronnie Leatherman (b. Texas), bassist, 1966-1967; Danny Thomas (b. South Carolina), drummer, 1966-1969; Dan Galindo (b. Texas), bassist, 1967-1969.

The Elevators originated in 1965 in Central Texas with Tommy Hall, a part-time student at the University of Texas at Austin, who was studying philosophy, psychology, and chemical engineering. The band, which included three members from the Kerrville, Texas-based bluegrass group, the Lingsmen, began with Stacy Sutherland on lead guitar, Benny Thurman on bass (who also had played violin in the Lingsmen), and John Ike Walton on drums. Although not originally a musician himself, Tommy Hall performed on an amplified jug. Seventeen-year-old Roger Kynard “Roky” Erickson, the lead singer and rhythm guitarist for an Austin band named the Spades, completed the group on vocals.

Hall’s wife reportedly suggested the name the Thirteen Floor Elevators. Since most buildings do not have a thirteenth floor, the appellation seemed to imply that the band had the ability to travel to other dimensions and levels of consciousness. Others have suggested that the name refers to the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, ‘m,’ which stood for marijuana.

In November 1965, Hall declared that the band had a “psychedelic” sound after reading the word in a book written by Timothy Leary, noted advocate of hallucinogenic drugs. Hall believed the garage rock band’s mixture of rock and roll, folk, and R&B, coupled with Erickson’s screaming vocals and drug-induced lyrics, was best described as “psychedelic.” The Elevators claim to have drawn much of their musical inspiration from marijuana and LSD, both of which they used openly.

In December 1965, the Elevators began writing songs. They soon signed with Contact, a small record label, and performed their first live shows together in Austin. Hall’s electric jug, along with Erickson’s dynamic vocals and stage presence, quickly set the group apart from other local acts and earned the Elevators a devoted following. Erickson’s previous band, the Spades, had recorded the song “You’re Gonna Miss Me” with the Austin-based label, Zero Records. The Elevators re-recorded the song with a harder sound, patterned more after their idols, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones.

In 1966, the Elevators released “You’re Gonna Miss Me” b/w “Tried to Hide” with Contact Records. This single proved to be the group’s most successful recording, climbing to Number 56 on the *Billboard* charts. Local media began to take notice of the band, and it began touring outside of the Austin area. Later that same year, the Elevators signed with a Houston-based label, Artists International (AI), managed by Leland Rogers, brother of pop/country singer Kenny Rogers. AI re-released the Elevators’s first single nationally in mid-1966. The label followed with the group’s debut album, *Psychedelic Sounds of the 13th Floor Elevators*, which has been praised by some critics as one of the greatest psychedelic albums ever released.

As the band’s popularity grew, it traveled to San Francisco to begin a West Coast tour. Thurman, the band’s bassist, chose to remain in Texas, so he was replaced by Ronnie Leatherman. Shortly after *Psychedelic Sounds* hit stores, Walton, the drummer, and Leatherman, the new bass player, also left the group. They were replaced by Dan Galindo and Danny Thomas.

In late August 1966, the band started its California tour and was especially well-received in the San Francisco Bay area, where it played the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore Auditorium, as well as several smaller venues. The Elevators appeared with such popular bands as the Byrds, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane. During one performance with Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Elevators reportedly invited fellow Texan and lead singer, Janis Joplin, to join them. Although she declined the offer, Joplin acknowledged the Elevators’s influence on her music. The Elevators’s growing popularity also earned them appearances on television programs, including *American Bandstand* and *Where the Action Is*.

The Elevators’s reputation for endorsing and openly using illegal drugs drew the attention of law enforcement officials, including the Texas Rangers. Once back in Texas in 1966, the Elevators were arrested for possession of marijuana. Due to a technicality, Walton and Erickson’s charges were dropped, and Sutherland and Hall received suspended sentences. All of the attention connected to illegal drug use convinced many Top 40 radio stations to ban the Elevators. However, as the group’s popularity grew, most stations relented to public pressure and lifted the bans.

In 1967, the band released its second album, *Easter Everywhere*, which many consider to be another masterpiece of psychedelic music. The Elevators cancelled several out-of-state tour dates, and touring was mainly limited to in Texas 1966-1967, due to personal problems and additional drug busts. Nevertheless, the band did begin working on a new album. Released in January 1969, the Elevator’s third album, *Bull of the Woods*, was a critical and commercial disappointment, in part, because it was recorded without the input of lead vocalist Roky Erickson. Houston record label IA also released a “live” album in 1968, which was made from studio out-takes with a dubbed “audience.” This fourth album, *13th Floor Elevators Live*, also was a commercial failure and seemed to foreshadow the Elevators’s demise.

The end of the Elevators coincided with Erickson's arrest for marijuana possession in October 1969. Since this was not his first offense, Erickson faced a substantial prison term. To avoid this, he claimed that he was a Martian and, instead, was sentenced to three years in The Rusk State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. While there, he underwent several psychiatric treatments. Following his release, the eccentric Erickson began calling himself Reverend Roger Roky Ky-nard Erickson. He also maintained that he was a Martian and insisted that the hospital was still administering shock treatments via overhead power lines.

After the group disbanded in 1969, Hall moved back to San Francisco, while most of the remaining members stayed in Texas. In 1972, Erickson tried to get the group back together with Sutherland, Walton, and Leatherman, but it never fully materialized. Erickson went on to complete some solo albums and two books of poetry. He also worked with several bands, including Bleib Alian, the Explosives, and the Resurrectionists. In 1978, lead guitarist, Sutherland's career was ended when his wife murdered him. In 1984, Erickson, Leatherman, and Walton played a reunion show in Houston.

The Elevators's legacy continues through the numerous bands they have influenced. In 1999, ZZ Top, R.E.M., the Butthole Surfers, Primal Scream, and several other popular groups, released a tribute album honoring the Elevators. Other prominent musicians who have acknowledged the group's contributions to rock music include Led Zeppelin lead singer Robert Plant, Sonic Youth, Henry Rollins, and the White Stripes. The Elevators also had a major impact on the hippie counter-culture scene in Texas during the late 1960s, as well as Austin's punk rock scene during the 1970s and 1980s.

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