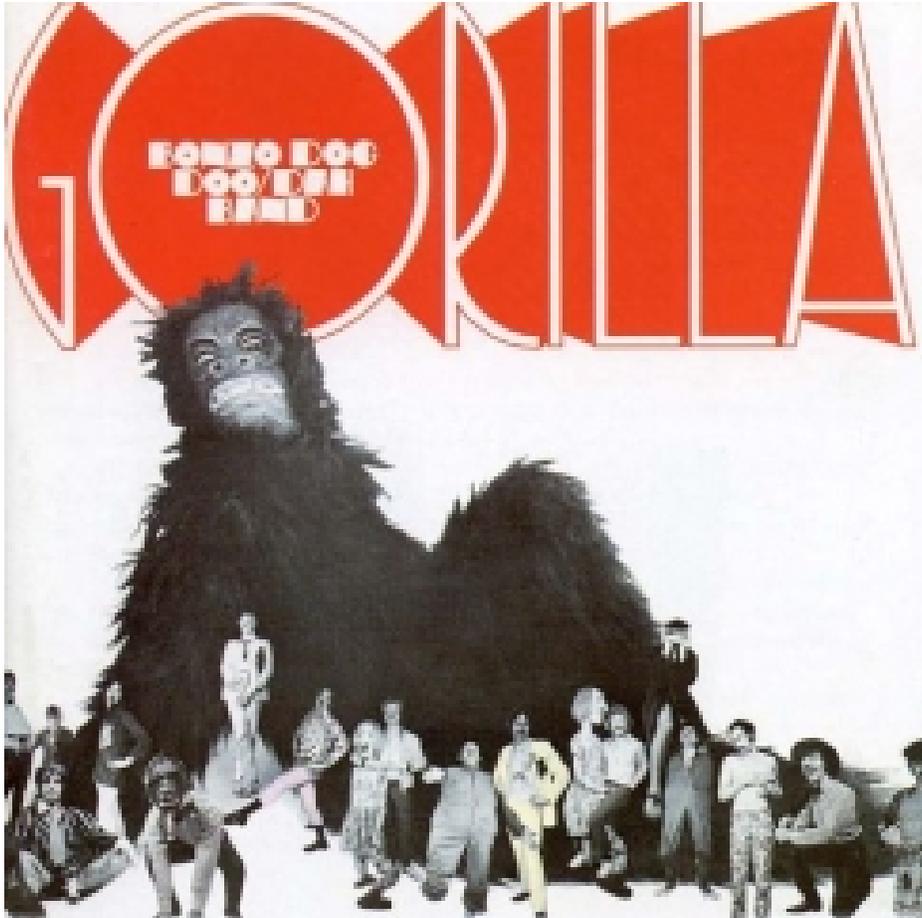


Rediscover: Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band: Gorilla

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To understand British rock in the '60s, it's crucial to remember it developed in a totally different environment than American rock. Sure, kids like John Lennon snuck a listen to Larry Williams whenever possible, but the English had already found a hundred ways to mess with American music. If not for the Beatles and the Invasion they led, would anyone outside of the British Isles still give a shit about trad jazz, the corruption of Dixieland that was the bees' knees right before the Beatles blew up? How about skiffle, which played telephone with American folk and blues?

This helps explain why the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, a bunch of gangly art-school Brits who would be barely of drinking age in the States, were able to sound so goddamn accomplished on their debut album *Gorilla* despite taking their music about as seriously as a pile of rubber dog doo. These guys started in trad jazz, where they learned to toot and fart and oompah with the best of them. And then the dog slipped out. At their best, the Bonzos made some of the weirdest, funniest and most inscrutable music of their time, the humor often lurking just off-mic.

Take "Jollity Farm." It's a barnyard singalong, a little like what we see Andy Kaufman doing at the beginning of *Man in the Moon*. We wonder the same thing with both: why the fuck is this funny? Andy Kaufman will forever remain a human question mark. With the Bonzos, it's simple

but no less subtle. We hear about a farm called Misery. But the Bonzos don't care about that. They care about Jollity Farm, with cows that moo and pigs that oink. And yet the knowledge there's a Misery Farm bubbles beneath it all, and the singalong feels pervasively unwholesome.

Or "Ali Baba." No man should love his camel that much. And beneath it all are precise and prim arrangements. *Gorilla* brims with the unlimited possibilities of a bunch of mischievous kids with formidable chops and no respect for them. No wonder the Beatles loved them and hitched them to the *Magical Mystery Tour* movie ("Death Cab for Cutie"—that's them). The Fabs, Paul in particular, were masters of seeming to disregard their talents entirely, employing them for silly, capricious and airheaded music. To quote a viral, taken-out-of-context *Spider-Man* panel the Bonzos might appreciate: they could cure cancer, but they're turning people into dinosaurs.

Gorilla is funny about as frequently as it is unsettling. "The Equestrian Statue" is a great pop song, whimsical until you realize it's about a statue that comes to life and terrorizes people. "Mickey's Son and Daughter" is a delightful song as long as you've never seen a baby mouse. There's a track where they introduce the band, facetiously ("*Adolf Hitler on vibraphones!*"), and even though most of them are obscure British celebrities, Yanks can still delight at the few names they recognize (that really is Eric Clapton on ukulele, by the way). Less funny is "Big Shot," a noir parody whose odd descriptions of a woman's body are more unsettling than droll.

Gorilla is dated—and not just because they use the word "gay" to mean "happy." "Look Out, There's A Monster Coming," sung in a horrific mock-Japanese accent, isn't quite as bad as the video; they prance in blackface and frizzy wigs, banging on bongos. Yes, this was a long time ago, and a lot of the most popular comedy today is hardly more enlightened. But the problem with using "dated" as an excuse for racism is that it was no less egregious then than now. They just didn't have anyone to tell them otherwise, certainly not Eric "Keep Britain White" Clapton. This is an album that could have been made nowhere but '60s Britain, for better and for worse.