By mid 1977 the Four Seasons were still hopeful of being launched as ‘The NEW Four Seasons’ with Frankie Valli pursuing a solo career. The group’s ‘Helicon’ album was being used to generate singles as Valli’s new solo album was developing. June 15th found ‘Down The Hall’ issued in the USA but it struggled to make an impact on the Billboard charts. In the UK however it reached #34 in July. The UK record buyers liked the sound of the group without Frankie. But clouds were gathering and nobody realized it would be the last original ‘Four Seasons’ track to be issued for 4 years. By the end of the year we would wonder what was going on?

On 30th June, ‘Second Thoughts’ PVT111 (a Paul Anka song) came out in the UK from the ‘Lady Put The Light Out’ album. The Frankie Valli solo album was not released in the UK (only the USA) although around 200 copies ‘escaped’ on to the collector’s circuit. The single failed to have any chart impact. Frankie wanted Larry Uttal to release ‘Native New Yorker’ but he refused. As a result Sandy Linzer who had also worked the track with ‘Odyssey’ (with Charlie Calello) had it released on RCA. It shot into the US disco charts at #20 and rose to #3 on 26th November for two weeks. On Billboard’s chart it reached #21 in February 1978. (#5 in
the UK BBC Charts). Although Odyssey’s version was superior to Frankie’s it was another opportunity lost by Private Stock who instead issued ‘I Need You/ I’m Gonna Love You’ PVT124(45169 in the USA) in October.

The final positions of the last years Four Seasons output from the USA charts was....“All This And World War II” Album chart #48 (9 weeks on the chart)
‘Down The Hall’ – Single chart #65 (6 weeks on the chart)
‘Helicon’ – Album chart #168 (5 weeks on the chart)

‘Helicon’ was clearly a failure on the US charts but it wasn’t the first time a critically acceptable album by the group hadn’t sold well. Remember ‘Genuine Imitation Life Gazette’ and ‘Chameleon’. Both, where vehicles for Bob Gaudio’s creative output, under the banner of The Four Seasons. Bob wrote ‘Helicon’ in an attempt to allow the group to take the lead with their career...but with a more *rock* style: moving on from the concept of ‘Who Loves You’....which had a mix of light melodies and funky dance material. That album had created a whole new style and sound. One that had moved from the historical sound of the group....but still retaining strong harmonies on tracks like ‘Storybook Lovers’ and ‘Harmony, Perfect Harmony’. All of the fans could relate to these songs and the new style. So why did ‘Helicon’ miss ‘the spot’? The fans felt at the time that Bob had un-necessarily abandoned the ‘blue-eyed soul’ sound that made ‘Who Loves You’ such a good album. The group had no choice. Once again Bob wasn’t learning from the past and mentors like Crewe and Calello, he was simply writing from where he was ‘creatively’ at the time. The group were brought the tracks as Bob’s concept and they did their creative best with them..

The key problem with the style of ‘Helicon’ was that (unlike the ‘Who Loves You’ album) it didn’t build on the successful style of their ‘platinum’ album. There were no horns on any of the tracks to sweeten the songs and give it the ‘soul’ feel. It was different concept.......a synth and piano driven ‘rock’ sound. The album was a whole new direction that was Bob’s idea. Such a gamble is amazing in retrospect. Bob Crewe always knew that the next hit record needed the ‘hit sound’ during the 60s when he was writing with Bob Gaudio. Gaudio on ‘Helicon’ didn’t consider this or didn’t focus sufficiently on what had given them their biggest
ever hit. Warner Curb apparently sent Bob Gaudio back to write 'Down The Hall' because they 'couldn't hear a single' and this together with 'Rhapsody' are the closest to the joy and ambition of the 'Who Loves You' album. The problem was also with Warner Curb with their choice of singles and the songs selected for the stage act.

Songs like.....'If We Should Lose Our Love' were solid ‘rock’ based songs with little ‘soul’. The abrupt beat made the song somewhat intense, although brilliantly played. Such songs don’t linger in the mind or heart!! Something about simple melodies being best comes to mind…..usually Bob Gaudio’s forte!

' Lets Get It Right' is one of the better tracks and the playing and singing in the tour performances was superb. (particularly John Paiva’s solo.) The problem was the songs......not their interpretation. Don intimates in an interview that the group were not entirely happy with these songs when he says in a 1981 interview... “The beginning of my decision to leave was not so much my having been seduced by having some jingles on the air, as it was..... than after we had success with “Who Loves You”, Bob Gaudio went in and wrote some songs that resembled FM underground hits of who knows how long ago. He insisted on recording them and we put out an album called 'Helicon'. “

Of course some of Helicon was very solid like 'Long Ago' which was one song Gaudio kept in the nostalgic / wistful sound reminiscent of the 'Who Loves You' LP...and 'Long Ago', 'Down The Hall', 'Put A Little Away' and ‘New York Street Song’...all give the album a ‘core harmony’ strength, but Warner Curb couldn’t hear the strength amongst these for single release. But the lack of a dance styled track was the big weakness of this album. ‘Rhapsody’ somehow didn’t capture the fans as did ‘Who Loves You’. When you have had your 2 biggest hits in a decade with 2 dance beat driven singles then at least keeping the style going was surely good marketing.

Of course although fan clubs had been established in the USA and UK...no-one consulted the fans....a somewhat arrogant approach that the Partnership has always taken......but maybe communications weren’t so easy back then. With 'Down The Hall' reaching #34 in the UK charts and the album selling fairly well the group without Valli clearly had a following.

Lee Shapiro accepted the reality of their position...”Although we were all glad to be creating more adventurous and intricate music, on ‘Helicon’ the lyric content wasn’t Bob’s best (in my opinion). That said, if ‘Helicon’ had been a big hit, we would have all been "trail blazers". In hindsight, we all commented that we would have liked to have followed up the style of "Dec. 63". But, we (as employees…my words ..ed) bore no risk, creatively or financially. Who wouldn't have followed Bob's lead?”
Regarded as a musical genius Bob commanded respect and he got that from this group and for this album.

John Paiva recollections of the album and of the group show this with some reservations....

“I would love to say something intelligent and insightful, but frankly, I totally enjoyed working in the studio, and fully accepted what ever songs Bob presented. After all, when all was said and done, he called all the shots and I felt that he was certain of himself and all his decisions. It was years later when I came to realize that he like most humans, had his doubts.

On the other hand, I do not believe (John’s emphasis) he was interested in my opinion, or input. I did believe that he respected me as the guitarist and pulled the best out of me when my time came for the solos and overdubs. I particularly enjoyed when we worked alone with Steve Maslow in the studio on most of my stuff. Steve gave his full attention and I felt he did his best to get my best.

The one time, when Bob Gaudio edited my solo was when we had recorded with a couple of the Seasons in the booth, and they were enthusiastic about something I played. I felt that he resented comment and simply chose another direction based on the fact that he was the boss. Perhaps I misread that, but everyone has their opinion, and that is mine.

Generally speaking I really loved the Helicon album. Gerry sang so well on ‘NYC Street Song’ which is one of my favourites. The other unappreciated guitarist was Tim Breen. This guy was a genius musician who brought tremendous energy into the studio. Sad to say Tim passed away years ago although he was only a young man. I feel rather obligated to his memory as his presence in the studio kept me at my best. He was also extraordinarily supportive and wonderful to work with. I personally considered him a fifth Season.”

The album however really needed at least 3 better songs to tie the good album tracks together....but the lack of a really strong hit single seems to have blown Warner Curb’s commitment and they wouldn’t commission another album with the group especially without Valli. His contribution although slight is still superb on ‘Put A Little Away’, ‘New York Street Song’ and ‘I Believe In You’. The group’s performance on the album is totally professional and compe-
tent….and although the songs lack the spark of before this was still a good album…just not a great one.

Looked at today the album is a much stronger collection and was probably ahead of its time. It has taken a long time for it to become available to the world wide fan base on CD. (and it still sounds better on vinyl…ed)

With the lack of positive response in the USA to solo performances by the group and the poor showing of ‘Helicon’ Bob and Frankie were beginning to think the launch of the group on their own could be a financial disaster. However the success in Europe and Australia of the group seemed lost in the ‘ether’. The ‘harmony’ the fans believe existed between the group and Gaudio and Valli was only a PR image it is now clear.

By August things were still not settled and UK fan club chairman John Riley discussed the situation with Bob Gaudio on a UK visit to reveal indecision about the way forward. He hinted at the problem for Frankie. …“I think a lot of people will have great difficulty in identifying with the 4 Seasons without Frankie”, said John. Bob replied….”Yes they will. But this is one of the things that we will be taking into consideration. I have a feeling though that Frankie will always be somewhere around the 4 Seasons. It’s in his blood.”

Poor record sales put the future of the group, in the economic climate at the time, at risk. In the UK in 1977 unemployment had risen to over 1.1 million, the highest since 1940 and inflation was standing at 24 percent. New York was nearly declared bankrupt and the economic climate was not good. Surprising given that the music industry had been booming in the previous 2 years and the LP was in it’s zenith. Travis Elborough in The Long-player Goodbye captures this…..“Whatever the underlying economic current, the music industry had, by now, become a global business dominated by multinationals. Just two years earlier, ‘Time’ had reported that sales of records and tapes had spiked to nearly $2 billion, and $3.3 Billion worldwide, making music ‘the most popular form of entertainment in America’. ‘With such sales’, the book continues, ‘no wonder the conglomerates are conglomering in the record business. …everyone was trying to buy up a label and go from wax to riches’. At the end of that year, seven majors (CBS, Capitol, MCA, Warners, Polygram, RCA, and A&M) …had consolidated their grip on the industry. Two giants, CBS and Warner, by then accounted for nearly 40% of all the records produced in the US. Similarly, by 1975 six multi-nationals (EMI, CBS, Polygram, Warners, RCA and Decca) were bagging over two thirds of the British Record market”

These companies thought big …and sales where big. Elton John’s ‘Captain Fantastic and