



Todd Rundgren
in full glam
mode, 1973

PERFORMER

TODD RUNDGREN

A MUSICAL POLYMATH, HE HAS NEVER STOOD STILL
DURING HIS FIFTY-YEAR CREATIVE ADVENTURE.

BY CAMERON CROWE

It was 1974 and my first night in New York City. I'd flown all the way from San Diego and met up with my best friend, the photographer Neal Preston. Immediately we went out on the town. I went to the Bottom Line, where I met my editor from *Circus* magazine. I mentioned that he'd misspelled my last byline. He drunkenly berated me for bringing it up and had me thrown out for being underage. We then went to Max's Kansas City, where Laurel Delp introduced me to Lou Reed. I asked him a question about Jackson Browne. He swore at me and left the table. Bruce Springsteen was playing upstairs, but the bouncer wouldn't let me in. We then went to Nathan's for a hot dog. A homeless man with blood-red eyes warned us that the Middle East was going to blow up that weekend. In other words, it was the greatest night ever.

The next afternoon, I knocked on the door of Todd Rundgren's Horatio Street brownstone and began the glorious task of interviewing him for *Rolling Stone*. Todd was an early musical hero of mine. His aching early songs of love and longing had come to mean a lot to me. When I'd finally and boldly asked my secret school crush to go to the prom with me, she laughed and ran off. I didn't understand why it felt this bad and this good at the same time, but Todd did. Here was a rock star who didn't write about the lofty life of luxury in the south of France; he wrote about people like me.

A Philadelphia native, Todd Rundgren (b. June 22, 1948) first made his mark with Nazz, a local hard-rock outfit with a pleasingly disruptive psychedelic soul. Guitar was his obsession. When the band fell apart in the late sixties, Rundgren designed the lights for a New York dance club. Good fortune soon fell his way when Albert Grossman, attempting to branch into the record label business, pegged Rundgren as a young upstart engineer who might freshen up some of the artists on the mana-

gerial roster: At 21, Todd produced *Great Speckled Bird*, instantly rendering the folk duo Ian and Sylvia relevant and at the forefront of the country-rock movement. Todd next made his early rep helping craft the Band's *Stage Fright* album. His profile rose remarkably, and as a precocious vanity project, he released an album, *Runt* (1970), on which he played most of the instruments. With it came his first real hit, the heartfelt anthem with a surprise twist, "We Got to Get You a Woman."

Todd Rundgren had arrived as a solo artist with a kind of geeky audacity. "Go ahead," announced one of the first ads for his release of the seminal double album *Something/Anything?* (1972), "ignore me." He was pictured holding a fistful of dynamite. The cover of his earlier *Runt* was as sarcastic as the music was sincere. The shot was crafted by Milton Glazer, the graphic designer behind *Esquire's* explosive pop-culture covers. Rundgren was pictured at a piano with a noose around his neck. For the rest of his career, Rundgren would function with the same kind of playful ridicule of tradition and conformity. It's one of his greatest assets – the ability to both chide and confide in his audience at the same time.

In our first interview on Horatio Street, Rundgren described his early pop instincts succinctly. "I started out wanting to be the Who," he said, "and then I heard Laura Nyro. And then I wanted to write like her." *Something/Anything?* had been an immediate critical hit and even produced his biggest hit single, "Hello It's Me." But Rundgren soon chafed at being heralded as a sensitive singer-songwriter.

Rundgren's next album was a near complete departure, awash with craft and sound, a harbinger of a coming era rife with tape loops, samples, and reinvention. That kind of pivot would become the hallmark of his career. *A Wizard, a True Star* (1973) was an album pitched



to a future that was still decades away. The album was mostly reviled in its day.

“I was pilloried by the label as well as the critics for not following up on the success of *Something/Anything?*” said Rundgren, “but . . . I was a successful record producer, so I didn’t have to fret about the success of my own records. And . . . I started to see music as something different than what I had previously assumed. I was writing what everyone else was writing. I had plumbed a broken relationship that I had in high school for three whole albums and suddenly realized I didn’t care about this girl anymore.

“I also realized there were a whole lot more things in my head, musically, from my experience; my dad hated rock & roll. So he would never have it played in the house, but I would get to hear Ravel and . . . Bernstein. And . . . Gilbert

and Sullivan, a broad range of stuff that . . . stuck in me. And I never realized it until that point, that that was a significant part of my musical makeup and that I was writing like a hypocrite. And so I made this crazy record, *A Wizard, a True Star*, in which I threw out all the rules of record making and decided that I would try to imprint as much as possible, the chaos in my head, right onto a record without trying to clean it up for everyone else’s benefit. The end result was I immediately lost half my audience.”

The ones who stuck around are loyal to this day. *Wizard*’s brazen act of technical bravado formed the basis of Rundgren’s famously passionate fan base, a base also populated with artists from Trent Reznor to Prince to Tame Impala to Kanye West and Jack Antonoff. All have benefited musically and philosophically from Rundgren’s special taste for path-blazing and genre-mutating.



PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP: Nazzy, ca. 1967:
Carson Van Osten, Robert
"Stewkey" Antoni, Rundgren, and
Thom Mooney (from left);
with Freddie Mercury, 1976;
with David Johansen, 1973.
THIS PAGE: In midflight, 1975.



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"I have a special pride," Rundgren said, "for what was essentially my act of tyranny. The irony was that I never learned anything in high school, but when I got out of high school, I learned to learn, and ever since then I have absorbed anything that can be put in front of me that is of interest. And so I've learned not only how to expand the range of my musical expression, but I've also learned things like computer programming and video production."

Indeed, by the time he was 22, Rundgren had learned how to use the entire studio as his instrument. The motto of his lucrative producing career: "If you know what you want, I'll get it for you. If you don't know what you want, I'll do it for you." He produced career-defining hits for Grand Funk Railroad ("We're an American Band"), completed the abandoned album *Straight Up* for Badfinger ("Day After Day," "Baby Blue"), and later Meat Loaf's *Bat Out of Hell*. Along the way, he also helmed the New York Dolls' debut album, Patti Smith's *Wave*, and XTC's *Skylarking*. With the pressure off to create hit singles for himself, Rundgren's own career continued with signature innovation on albums like *Todd*, into which was tucked another signature gem, "A Dream Goes On Forever."

Progressive rock was next on the docket. Beginning in 1973, Rundgren's side-sometimes-main-project was the adventuresome quartet known as Todd Rundgren's Utopia, later simply Utopia. (I traveled with the band for a stretch of concerts the next year. Somewhere around



SELECTED
DISCOGRAPHY



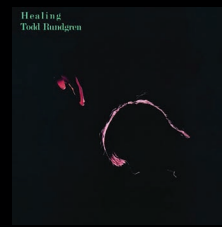
Something/Anything?
1972
(Bearsville)



A Wizard, a True Star
1973
(Bearsville)



Hermit of Mink Hollow
1978
(Bearsville)



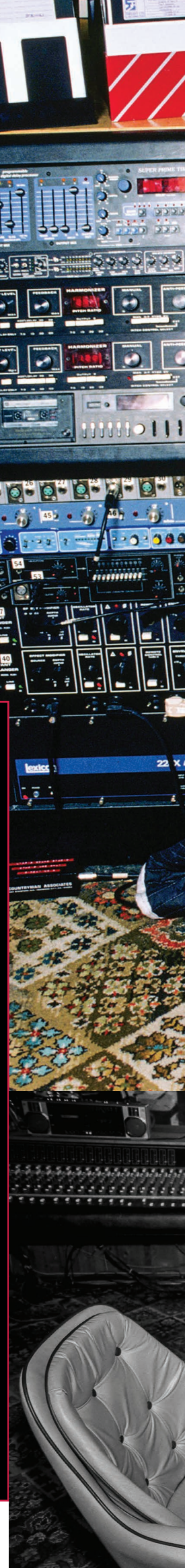
Healing
1981
(Bearsville)



Nearly Human
1989
(Warner Bros.)



Utopia/Benefit for Moogy Klingman
2020 (Purple Pyramid)





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Mad scientist mode,
Lake Hill, New York, 1984;
riding the video wave,
1983; at the board in
Bearsville, 1983.





Santa Fe, I realized that mushrooms were part of their creative formula.) Fans coming to hear “Hello It’s Me” heard something far different. Utopia, along with Rundgren’s longtime collaborator Kasim Sulton, provided a special brew of prog and hard rock, with an occasional whiff of pop. Utopia’s albums would stretch into a multitude of genres, often favoring instrumental panoramas, and even a Rutles-like soundscape tribute to the Beatles, *Deface the Music* (1980). Rundgren presided over all with a kind of brat-savant sensibility. Thanks to his day job as a producer, he answered only to one artist.

Meanwhile, Rundgren’s solo work often rewarded fans with gorgeous throwbacks to his early records. *Faithful* (1976) was a bounty of covers on one side, and on the other a handful of sparkling originals like “Love of the Common Man” and “The Verb ‘To Love.’” In 1978, Rundgren released *Hermit of Mink Hollow*, an immediate bittersweet classic. Fueled by his breakup with partner Bebe Buell, *Mink Hollow* was a much-loved harkening to his early heart-on-his-sleeve persona, flecked now with the wisdom of wisened adulthood. “Can We Still Be Friends” was his first hit single in years.

The advent of music-video culture had Todd Rundgren’s fingerprints all over it. Rundgren and his manager Eric Gardner had attempted to rent a SATCOM satellite on which to broadcast Warner Bros. music videos in 1980. The satellite was delayed, but when the early plans for MTV materialized a year later, Rundgren was ready. His hypnotic new album, *Healing*, was finished and he already had a self-financed video for “Time Heals,” one of the very first to air on the channel. Rundgren also developed the “video painting” technology that swept the emerging form, as well as one of the first computer screensaver programs, Flowfazer.

Todd Rundgren’s irreverent marriage of the intimate and the technical is exactly what makes him essential. The brainy beauty of his body of work is what keeps his fans listening, debating, and filling social media with theories and hosannahs. While Rundgren is forever out-running attempts to classify him, the tight bond with his following is often forged in the passionate surprises he sends their way. His well-known ambivalence about being inducted into the Hall of Fame is right on brand. For any enterprising young artist interested in producing,

recording, and presenting themselves with integrity and unflinching prowess, all roads lead to Todd Rundgren.

When many artists were bemoaning the lack of a live audience in the worst months of our recent lockdown, Rundgren once again went to work conjuring a novel workaround. Taking a fond look back on an earlier album filled with a richly emotional R&B spirit, *Nearly Human* (1989), Rundgren built a new stage show that he would perform and “tour” virtually. It was the closest to a live-show experience of any other pandemic-era venture in 2020, and it was an island of inspiration for fans and fellow artists who’d longed for the visceral experience of a real-time show. Rundgren sunk his own money into the idea of a near-nightly show “playing” to twenty-five cities, complete with local context and flavor – all from a private location in Chicago. The result was a rousing success. He’s currently assembling a documentary about the show and its unique moment in entertainment history.

Todd Rundgren has never had a Number One single or album; a Grammy nomination has never come his way. But consider this: While the field is littered with those who scored a glittery success and faded into quick obscurity, Rundgren has never let up in a five-decades-long creative adventure. There are nuggets to discover and treasure in every nook and cranny of his career, a parlor game of discovery that his fans relish. Rundgren has famously dedicated this year’s induction into the Hall of Fame to them, many of whom he and his musical and life partner Michelle Rundgren now know personally. Todd’s well-known reluctance to embrace career awards comes from a distaste for the “tombstoning” of a career. On the night of his induction, he said, he’ll be on the road, playing a new show in another city. The restless need to move forward was even on his mind in our earliest interview, with all his adventures still ahead of him. “Any real musician,” he said, “you just want to play until you die.”

Rundgren’s current advice for younger artists is simple: Move forward and innovate. And so it is for this fearless member of the Rock Hall’s Class of 2021. With his creative beacon still shining ever-brightly, and this year’s much-deserved distinction resting in his back pocket, one thing is more than obvious. This is no curtain call. Todd Rundgren’s future-forward dream will most definitely go on forever.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Onstage with Utopia, 1980.
THIS PAGE: Still a wizard,
still a true star, 2020.

