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Todd Rundgren, the Producer With Multiple Personalities

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Todd Rundgren's new album *State* came out this week; it's been a while since he's shown up on American charts, but he's been somewhere between a cult item and a star for something like 45 years now. [Rundgren](#)'s always been interested in new technologies, and he got on the music video bandwagon quickly enough that some of his videos — both for his solo records and with his band Utopia (like the gloriously silly “Feet Don't Fail Me Now,” below) — were staples of MTV's

early years.

But Rundgren's arguably been even more successful as a producer than as a frontman; he's famously fast, chameleonic and full of smart arrangement ideas, and he's been producing records for other artists since he was still "the former guitarist from the Nazz" in 1969. One of his earliest notable productions was the L.A. band Halfnelson's 1971 debut album. They subsequently changed their name to Sparks, and reissued the album under the name *Sparks*, as well. Here's a TV performance of the Rundgren-produced single "Wonder Girl" from that era.

Later that year, after [George Harrison](#) abandoned work on the British power-pop band [Badfinger](#)'s album *Straight Up*, Rundgren came in to finish it. One of his

production contributions was the band's final American hit single, "Baby Blue."

Rundgren also effectively got in on the birth of punk rock, producing [the New York Dolls'](#) debut album in 1973 (and playing some keyboards on it, too). He returned to produce the reunited [Dolls'](#) *Cause I Sez So* album in 2009. Here's a live performance of "Personality Crisis" from the Dolls on German TV in 1973.

On his own records in the '70s, Rundgren was an ironist and a trickster, prone to undercutting his more commercial moments with bizarre interludes. When he produced other bands, though, he was happy to midwife great big rock. It didn't get much bigger than [Grand Funk's](#) 1973 hit "We're An American Band," whose promotional video was footage of them recording it (although Rundgren isn't

pictured).

The same year, Rundgren produced [Fanny](#)'s album *Mother's Pride* – [see this column's discussion of Fanny a few weeks ago](#). Here's the excellent Nickey Barclay-sung track "I'm Satisfied" from that record.

Rundgren set another record for rock hugeness in 1977, when he produced [Meat Loaf](#)'s *Bat Out of Hell* album (and, reportedly, came up with a lot of its arrangements). The title track featured a guitar solo by Rundgren, as well as keyboards by Rundgren, his [Utopia](#) bandmate [Roger Powell](#), songwriter [Jim Steinman](#) (whose even more ridiculous album *Bad for Good* Rundgren subsequently produced) and [the E Street Band](#)'s Roy Bittan.

In 1979, Rundgren produced the [Patti Smith Group](#)'s *Wave* – he and [Smith](#) had been friends since the early '70s. The album included one of Smith's best-loved songs, "Dancing Barefoot." Smith later noted that, for that song in particular, Rundgren "had a strong input, influencing the sounds of the guitars and Richard Sohl's keyboard line. Todd also wrote and played the bass line."

The next year, fading teen idol [Shaun Cassidy](#) commissioned Rundgren to recast him as a new wave artist. The resulting album *Wasp*, didn't sell particularly well, although it did give the world an enduring, deeply bizarre document of the former star of *The Hardy Boys Mysteries* singing a cover of Talking Heads' "The Book I Read."

Another early MTV staple, [the Psychedelic Furs](#)' 1982 single "Love My Way" (from their *Forever Now* album), featured another classic Rundgren gesture: That's him playing the marimba part that provides the song's signature hook.

Even while he was producing scores of other artists — some still well-remembered, some forgotten — Rundgren kept making records of his own. 1985's *A Cappella* album was made entirely with altered samples of his own voice; its single was the ridiculously catchy "Something to Fall Back On."

Rundgren's mid-'80s production triumph, though, is arguably XTC's *Skylarking* album. He famously clashed with the band over the recording, but by a decade or so later, XTC's members looked back on it as a particularly great piece of work. Its best-known track is "Dear God," but it's full of gorgeous songs, including Colin Moulding's "Grass," below.

Moe Berg of the Canadian band [The Pursuit of Happiness](#) had clearly studied the Rundgren songbook, as you can hear in their video for "She's So Young." It appeared on their debut album, 1988's *Love Junk*, which Rundgren produced.

Since 1990 or so, Rundgren's been doing a lot less work with other artists — let's just forget about [the New Cars](#), okay? — but he did make an unexpected appearance in 2000 as the producer of [Bad Religion](#)'s *The New America*. Its single “I Love My Computer” went nicely with his technophilia, in any case.

Rundgren's most recent album before this week's *State* was 2011's *(re)Production*— a set of revamped covers of songs whose original incarnations he'd produced. One of them was, naturally, the New York Dolls' “Personality Crisis.”