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Todd Rundgren's Current 'State' of Mind (Interview)

Wizard/Star Talks About Songwriting, Producing and His New Album & Tour

April 2013 by [Paul Gleason](#)



The title of Todd Rundgren's 1973 masterpiece *A Wizard, a True Star* doesn't lie – Rundgren is a wizard and true star of American music:

Rundgren can play any instrument you put in front of him. He's written songs as infectious as *Hello It's Me*, *We Got to Get You a Woman*, and *I Saw the Light* and sings them to perfection. In addition to releasing 24 solo albums, he fronted the successful bands Nazz (3 albums) and Utopia (9 albums). He produces and

arranges his own music, and did the same for classic albums like Badfinger's *Straight Up*, Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell*, New York Dolls' *New York Dolls*, XTC's *Skylarking*, and Patti Smith's *Wave*, among countless others.

Rock Cellar Magazine caught up with the prolific, energetic Rundgren to discuss his excellent and surprising new record, [State](#), as well as his [upcoming tour of the US, Europe, and Australia](#).

Along the way, Rundgren talks about The Beatles, The Beach Boys, Patti Smith, his songwriting and production methods, some surprising musical influences.



Photo: Mark Walton/Rock Cellar Magazine

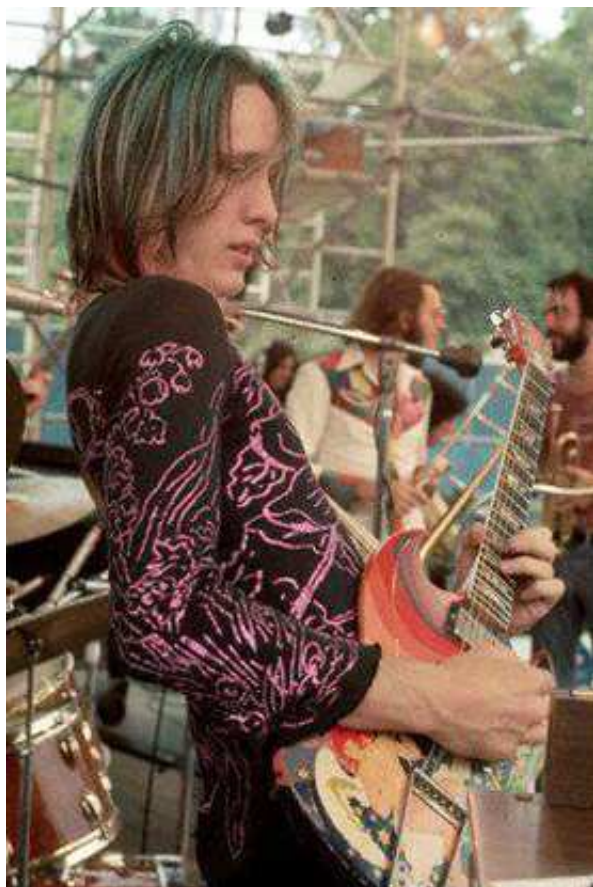
Rock Cellar Magazine: Marshall Ward of our magazine interviewed you just before you toured with Ringo Starr & His All-Starr Band last year. My editor wanted to thank you again for [the interview](#), and for discussing your favorite Beatles records – *Roll Over Beethoven* and *Please Please Me*.

Todd Rundgren: Yeah, those were the ones that originally got me turned on to the band. *Please Please Me* – I think – was the first Beatles song that I ever heard on the radio. There was something different going on. And I just liked the sound of *Roll Over Beethoven* because early on, I was never aware of what was happening in other parts of the band. I was so hung up on the guitar that - (*laughs*) - I would sort of ignore everything else! And when you listen to that record, you become really aware of the bass drum and the bass pattern at the bottom of the arrangement. That was an eye-opener for me because I really didn't think that

much about those other instruments.

RCM: Did you have a similar discovery moment with The Beach Boys?

TR: Well, The Beach Boys insinuated their way into your consciousness in a different manner. The Beatles were kind of phenomenal; The Beach Boys were always around.



And The Beach Boys evolved from this kind of surf music that I didn't identify with, coming from Philadelphia; surfing was not a big thing for us (*laughs*). I used to like the sound of The Beach Boys, but it wasn't until they began to compete with The Beatles that I felt that what they were doing was really interesting – like around *Pet Sounds* and *Good Vibrations*. That was when they started to shed that whole surf music kind of burden and start to branch out into something that was a little more universal.

RCM: You included *Good Vibrations* on your 1975 album [Faithful](#). It must've had a pretty big impact?

TR: That whole side of covers was a tribute to the milieu that I was living in before I became somewhat successful in the music business; before I got my first serious gig. It was a time when there was no formatting in radio, so you would hear all of this music jumbled up against other music – it made the scene that much more exciting. There was music every place – we'd go into a deli or a boutique, and everybody would be playing the radio and everybody would be interested in what the next big thing was, especially coming out of England. It was sort of that unformatted nature that made it so exciting, so sort of addictive in a way.

[Click above to play Todd Rundgren's version of *Good Vibrations*]

RCM: Your version is beautiful, and indeed rather “faithful” to the original, no?

TR: I wanted to reproduce that era, so I just took a handful of songs at random that were all hits on the

radio and that you were likely to hear wherever you went. I tried to do them as literally as I could because in the intervening 10 years, radio had changed so much. Radio had become so formatted and so structured that that whole experience was already gone.

RCM: Your new album – *State*. It's a bit of a hodgepodge of styles – rock, R&B, electronica, and soul – sort of like the unformatted radio you just talked about. Was that always the plan?

TR: Because of the phenomenon particularly of YouTube, music has become more “hodgepodge-y” (*laughs*) – which makes it more fun, in my estimation. And the great thing about cruising around on YouTube is the sidebar of things. You find some place, and then there's a whole lot of places where you could go from there – and you wind up a few clicks later in a completely other realm.



And that's a lot of how I did the research for the music. I would start somewhere and start clicking away and realize that there were a lot of different and very interesting ideas – some of them kind of evolutionary, if not revolutionary – in taking things that had been very conventional, and hearing them in new ways. So it was sort of part of my research. But it also became characteristic of the texture of the record: I wanted to try to sound modern – at least – throughout.

RCM: As your 24th solo record, would you say that *State* is a departure for you?

TR: Well, I'm known for essentially changing directions..!

RCM: For being all over the map–?

TR: Yes (*laughs*). So it's hard to say what a “departure” would be. I really don't know by the time I get to the next record where I'm going with it.

RCM: On first listen, I thought, “Todd's made a dance record!”

TR: Well, there's supposed to be a certain element of dance-ability in it because I'm harkening back to an earlier era in my evolution. Back in the early-'90s, I got this idea of doing a one-man improvised show using

computers and samples and things like that, and that was called [No World Order](#). It was an incredibly technically complex and challenging thing to pull off.



In the intervening time, everything had evolved to the point where all those tools that I had to kind of build myself are now off the rack! All the software tools, the hardware tools you can go to Sweetwater Sound and buy (*laughs*). So I realized that now is probably a good time for me to revive – in a certain sense – that approach to how the music gets performed. And so I had to write music that would be amenable to that kind of alteration when I could eventually get to perform it.

That's why a lot of it has that incessant beat to it – because that's what you build your performance around. It's a foundational thing. You start with the beat, and then you add color to it, and eventually you come up with melody and lyrics. And then you start to mess around with those elements – work for sounds and alter the arrangement on the fly and that sort of thing.

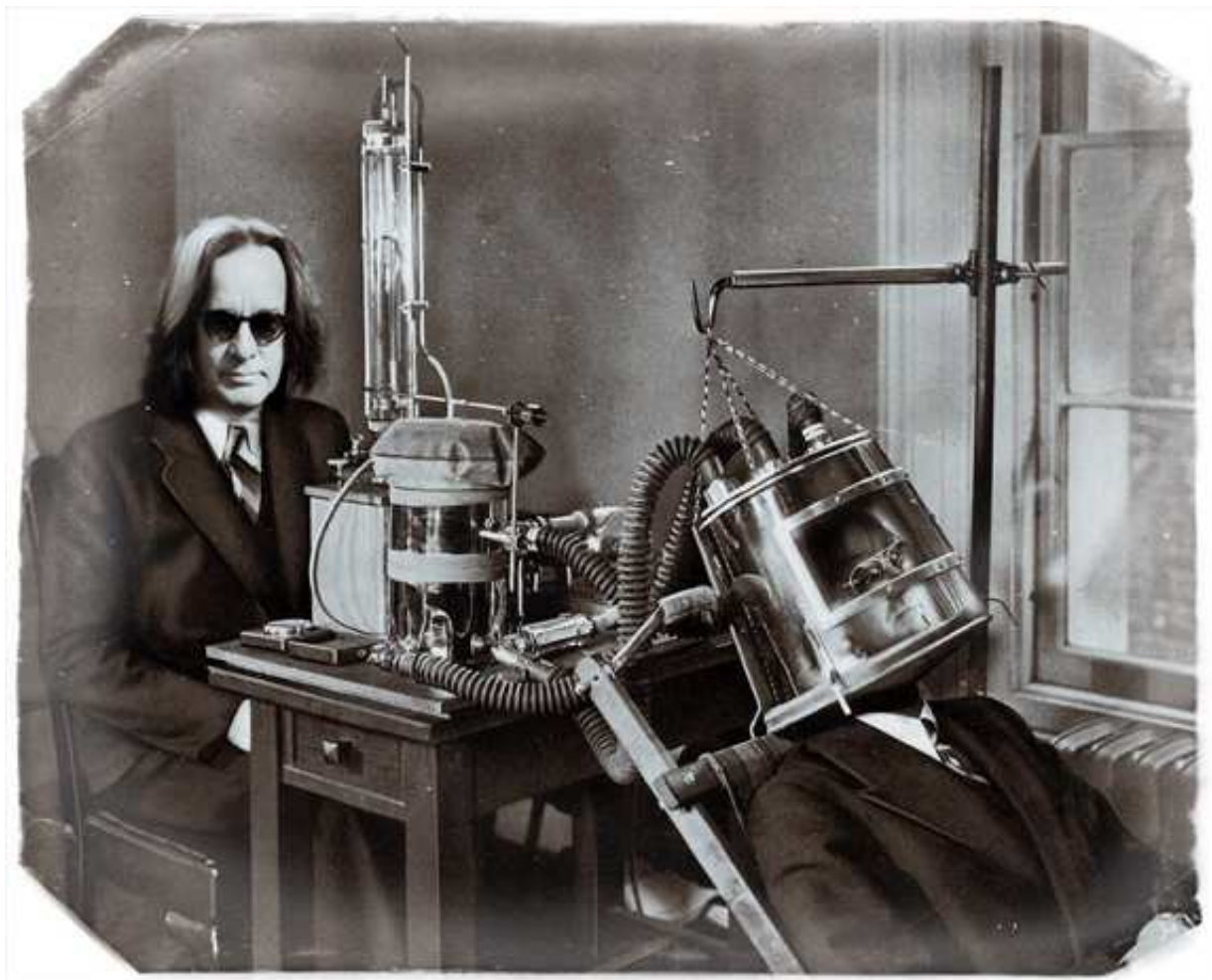
RCM: Was *State* recorded on your own – like [Something/Anything](#) – or did you bring in outside musicians?

TR: The only outside person who performed was Rachel Haden, who sang a vocal part that I just didn't feel comfortable singing, and I thought that it would sound better with her.

Regardless of what my music may sound like, that's pretty much always how it gets made. It's a solitary effort for the most part because the recording and the composition are almost inseparable processes. I don't write the lyrics until the very last minute – until right before I sing them – literally.

In a record like this – and more and more as time goes on – the biggest problem you have is repeating yourself – going back and rewriting a song you already wrote; the whole process of that terrifies me. So I'm trying in some way to dig deeper and deeper into my subconscious for source material. What that means is not necessarily having a totally clear idea of what the songs mean (*laughs*). I want to be as spontaneous as

possible, so I push it off to the very end – and it comes out in a big burst of subconscious automatic writing. Almost. *(laughs)*.



RCM: Would you admit to other music that influences you, or that may have inspired *State*?

TR: Well there are a lot of influences that went into this. I could name some names – some are familiar and hot and popular and some are less so. As I said, a lot of research went into it: cruising around the internet and that sort of thing. But my process is, essentially... if I hear something that really piques my interest musically, I have to immediately stop listening to it because I will start to literally mimic it. It's a problem with having an ear that enables you to do literal versions of *Good Vibrations*: my first and natural inclination is to start disassembling it and trying to figure out how everything gets done and trying to reproduce it nearly literally. And that's not necessarily being original.

So as soon as I hear something that I think may be a potential influence, I have to stop listening to it and essentially refer to it only in my memory. Only in the first impression that I had of it.

RCM: OK, now you really have to name one of those artists...!

TR: The first time I listened to Bon Iver, I said, "There are a lot of interesting things going in here with the percussion and with the vocals and things like that – but I can't listen to this anymore!" I have to stop *(laughs)* listening right now and just let the ephemeral impression of it linger in my brain somewhere. And maybe it will find its way on to the record, but hopefully in a way that's not specifically referential to Bon Iver.

RCM: I'm sure Bon Iver would actually be flattered to hear that.

TR: It's the same thing with Skrillex or any of the other artists who are just aggressively pushing the envelope

in terms of using particular instruments, or the way that the sounds are put together, or the fact that the emphasis has gone off of the vocals in a certain way and heavily on some instrumental aspect.



Todd Rundgren cannot listen to Bon Iver. (Much.)

All of these things are general points that are in there somewhere, but I can't specifically cite what comes from what because I've tried to avoid listening to that. As a matter of fact, I didn't listen to Bon Iver again until I finished this record – then I was able to enjoy Bon Iver! I was also able (*laughs*) to get over it as well.

RCM: The lyrics on *State* – Some are very sad, some are esoteric, some are playful. You came up with those lyrics right before you sang them?

TR: Yeah! (*laughs*) Sometimes I'm not absolutely sure about what I'm doing until I get a chance to step back and try to be objective. That usually happens after I've delivered the record, and I can't change anything anymore!

I realized essentially that the lyrics are mainly cautionary tales. You think they're about one thing, but they're really about the opposite thing. A song like *Something From Nothing* – incessant harping on faith and stuff like that – people may take it to think that "Oh, there, there. Have faith and everything will turn out all right." I'm saying the *exact opposite* of that!

The whole thing is that if all you have is faith, nothing is ever going to change. Every once in a while, you need to have real knowledge of something. Every once in a while, you have to actually act – and sometimes throw faith out the window and apply yourself to something.

TM (cont.): A lot of the songs are kind of like that. A song like *Imagination* is actually about lack of imagination – that's what the song is about (*laughs*): a paucity of imagination. So, in that sense, they're cautionary tales. It's almost like saying this thing that you seem to think I'm promoting, I'm actually saying beware of this.



RCM: What's amazing is that you are creating these deep and sometimes thought-provoking lyrics right there on the spot.

TR: Yeah, I've discovered that I do have the capability of writing on demand. Lyrics are always going to be difficult, but in terms of music, when I did work for television, I developed the capacity to be able to write a piece of music of a certain size to fit a certain mood and do it within a certain amount of time. And... I also discovered that I don't enjoy doing that! *(laughs)* While I have the capacity to do it, it isn't the most pleasant kind of music-making. You almost have to turn some creative element off in your head because if you get too attached to music, you're just going to be disappointed. You're not the one who makes the ultimate decision of where and whether it gets used at all.

I've had instances where I've written what I thought was the most perfectly appropriate and beautiful cues for a particular scene for a TV show or something and they never got used. So what are you going to do? Mope about it? That's not your job. You just get the spotting notes for the next episode and start writing again.



So for me there's always some element of faith in music. There's the possibility and the dread that you're going to dry up at some point, or that you will ultimately have writer's block. A more realistic dread for me, as I said, is that I'll start writing stuff that I've already written – and I start rewriting my catalogue. At which point, I'm thinking, "What's the point?" Then I might as well go out and sing *Hello It's Me* for the rest of my days.

RCM: *Imagination* starts off with an electronic dance groove, and then you come in with a metal guitar. What was the thought process there?

TR: I don't necessarily think about the thought process. I work on the song, and then I think, "Let's put this in and see what it sounds like. Oh, that sounds fine. Let's leave it there." (*laughs*) A lot of it gets to be less and less out of a sense of rules or design or something like that and, ideally, more and more about delving into your subconscious.



Process, as I say, is highly dependent in my particular instance on *solitude* – on me being able to get away from all the day-to-day distractions, so that I can actually hear what’s going on in my head. I have to get somewhere where no one’s going to call me on the phone like right in the middle of something. I don’t necessarily guarantee that when I get alone, I’ll come up with something right away... but I can guarantee that if I’m being distracted all the time, I’m *not* going to come up with anything (*laughs*).

RCM: There’s a track on *State* called *Angry Bird*. Did you actually include sound effects from the game?

TR: I’m just faking it! I wanted a song that kind of sounded like a video game. And *Angry Birds* being the phenomenon that it is, I put it together with the whole Republican war on women (*laughs*) – that was the lyrical idea for it. Essentially, I wanted to create something that kind of sounded like a video game.



RCM: Let's talk about the *State* tour. You'll be [touring extensively in the United States and Europe](#) through May, June, and July.

TR: Yeah, I will also have gotten to Australia – I haven't really toured there enough. As a matter of fact, I'm so ignorant of the market that when I went with Ringo recently I completely blanked on the fact that I hadn't had a hit record there since *Can We Still Be Friends*, in the late-70s, I think. I believe I was doing my Robert Johnson tribute tour – and it was the only song on which I played piano. We had a piano delivered just so I could play that one song (*laughs*)! And I had forgotten that when we got to the Ringo rehearsal.

So I'm doing press for Ringo, and the guys who were interviewing me were going, "You're going to do *Can We Still Be Friends*, of course, right?" And I knocked myself on the head and said, "You know, we never even learned the song!" If I'm remembered for anything in Australia, it's for *that* song, but I keep forgetting to perform it when I go! So I do have to remember to do *Can We Still Be Friends*. For Australia I need to make sure to do all of those songs that the hardcore fans want to hear.

RCM: As well as the songs from *State* will you be mining much from past records?

TR: I'll be doing some updated versions of the older material just so the promoters can say I'm doing it. *Hello It's Me*, *Can We Still Be Friends*, and *I Saw the Light* – that's the Big 3.



RCM: For a lot of fans, there's a Big 4. What about *Bang the Drum All Day*?

TR: I'm not sure if we'll get to that one! But the advantage there is that most people don't even know it's my song! They think of it as the Carnival Cruise Line theme!

RCM: Are you happy that they don't know it's yours?

TR: I actually like it. It's like you wrote *Happy Birthday* or something like that! It's a song that everybody knows but few people know where they heard it the first time or who actually composed it. It doesn't really matter; it's found its way into the collective consciousness in a way that a sort of normal hit record doesn't. That, to me, seems like a much more rare phenomenon.

RCM: What musicians will be joining you on the tour?

TR: The band for *State* is going to be fairly small; I'm going to be creating most of the sounds. I'm bringing Prairie Prince and Jesse Gress, so we'll have drums and guitar to keep it sort of live-y and not too pre-programmed.

When we go to Australia and I do my more typical show, we'll be taking Kasim Sultan on bass and John Ferenzik, my keyboard player. So we will have all of our background vocals and stuff in order.

RCM: Why do you want to have such a stripped down show for *State*?

TR: Because there's going to be so much improvisation in it – and the show will be different every night. The larger the group of musicians you're trying to keep organized, the harder it is to have that freedom to change things. In other words - the smaller the band, the fewer the things that can go wrong! (*laughs*).



RCM: Let's take you *way* back for our final question. You produced Patti Smith's album *Wave*, but way before that Patti Smith reviewed your early work. Can you talk about that, and about meeting her?

TR: Patti and I were, and are good friends. We just don't see each other because I live out here and she lives in New York. But we were good friends for a long time – even before she got seriously into her own musical thing. We met by chance at some party – a coming out party for Johnny Winter, I think it was. We just kind of ran into each other, had a common sensibility, and just became real good friends.

She had an opportunity to make a little bit of money writing some verbiage about me. I thought, "That's great!" She was working at a bookstore and didn't have a career yet.

And it was all coming out of a scene. There was an underground: the Trouser Press. *Rolling Stone* was the big gorilla, and then there were all these other up-and-coming little rock journals. Patti used to do a lot of work with them. So our friendship dovetailed well – and the fact that she was a great writer!

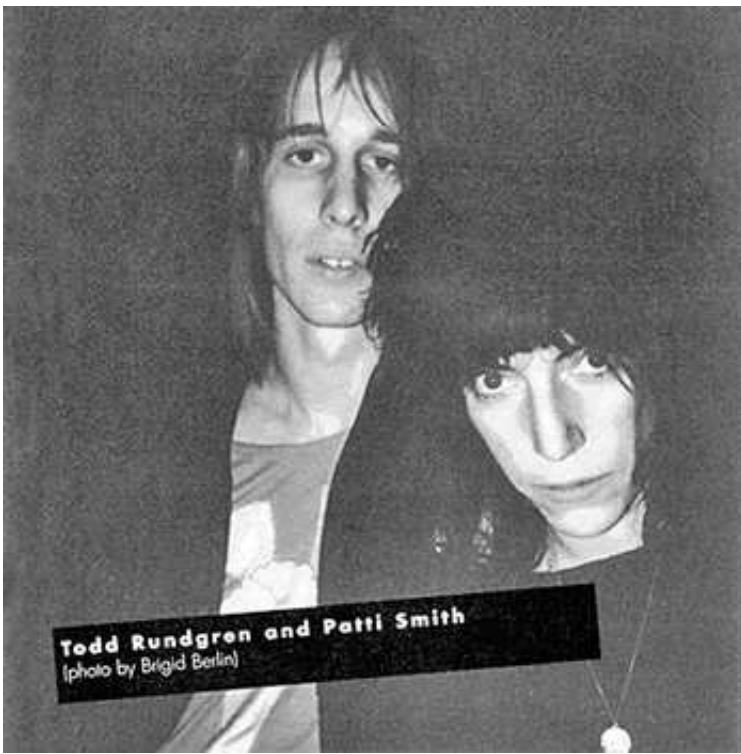


Photo credit: Brigid Berlin

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Upon its release on April 9th, Todd Rundgren's new album *State* will be available in the Rock Cellar store [HERE](#).

Todd Rundgren *State* tour dates are listed [HERE](#).


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