

Todd Rundgren sparks imagination with 'State'

CD REVIEW | APRIL 19, 2013 | BY: PETER ROCHE |



Todd Rundgren State
Credits: MVD Audio

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The Philadelphia-bred songsmith pioneered garage rock in the semi-psychedelic group The Naz in the late '60s before blossoming into a consummate pop-rock balladeer in the early '70s. For better or worse, albums like *Runt*, *Something / Anything?* and *Todd* yielded most of the AM/FM staples for which Rundgren would be known, including "I Saw the Light," "We Gotta Get You a Woman," "Can We Still Be Friends."

But the man wasn't so easily pigeonholed. Rundgren lent his production skills to albu such diverse acts as Laura Nyro, Badfinger, New York Dolls and Meat Loaf while spr his wings (sometimes literally) in the progressive-leaning, costume-wearing [Utopia](http://www.examiner.com/topic/utopia/articles) (<http://www.examiner.com/topic/utopia/articles>). He thwarted label expectations by reinterpreting The Beach Boys, Beatles, and Dylan for the covers LP *Faithful* in '76. Nearly a quarter-century on he remade tracks by some of the groups he worked with, naming the project (re)Production. Todd also tweaked his own songs, issuing a collection of umbrella drink re-imaginings of his biggest hits in 1997 and touring them with a tiki bar band.

Above all else, Rundgren remains an innovator—a boundary-pushing, genre-jumping chameleon who was always willing to embrace technology to forward his creative vision. He was one of the first major artists to craft an album composed entirely of sampled sounds—in this case his own voice—with 1985's *A Cappella*, a suite derived from pre-recorded passages triggered by the E-mu Emulator. Eight years later he unleashed the interactive disc *No World Order*, a computer-assisted collage that allowed listeners at home to shuffle the selections, change their tempos, and adjust their "moods."

Todd returned his rock roots in the 2000's, recording some of his best material yet with long-time friends Kasim Sulton (bass), Prairie Prince (drums), and Cars keyboardist Greg Hawkes. But Rundgren's 24th studio effort has the Hawaiian hermit looking to modern machinery once more to arrange music that—strange as it may seem—dives even deeper into human consciousness. Working with Propellerhead compositional software on an Apple laptop, Todd wrote and performed all the sounds on *State*, committing their digital essences to hard drive via a Sonoma Wire Works recording program.

Ah, but don't fear, true believers—the new album boasts some of Rundgren's tastiest guitar work in years, captured and mixed into the synthetic brew with a Line 6 Toneport input.

Rundgren returns to Ohio May 14th for a gig at The Kent Stage. Die-hard fans with a few extra bucks can venture to New Orleans in late July for "Toddstock II v. 6.5," a Rundgren-centric celebration culminating with big shows by the man himself. Then Northeast Ohioans

[imagination-with-state](#)

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RATING FOR TODD RUNDGREN'S "STATE"



efforts to legislate their bodies.

"She's mad as a soaking chicken," reports his dancehall CNN anchor. "Some pig is trying to control her eggs."

Snarling guitars swerve beneath pulsating bass as electronic squawks flit between left and right channels, creating a deranged Doppler effect in what might be considered the musical equivalent of a fox raiding a henhouse.

A love-struck (but socially inept) suitor throws himself at the mercy of a prospective partner on bubbly bossa nova number "In My Mouth." But instead of just kissing the girl, he proclaims he's got something in his mouth for her. The poor sod can't summons the words or behavior to express himself because he misunderstands true intimacy; he considers his desire an affliction. Here again we have Rundgren exploring a human construct from the perspective of a sapient—yet inhuman—entity. Imagine Star Trek's Mr. Spock on a first date, and you get the idea. Love is illogical.

Rundgren's lonesome "solitary man" narrator pleads for the object of his affection to acknowledge him—even if from afar—on "Ping Me," a Bowie-esque exercise that couches a tired romantic trope in fascinating, technological terms. Think of it as an updated version of Electric Light Orchestra's "Telephone Line," or Todd's own "Hello, It's Me."

"When so much time has passed you wonder, 'Are things are really the same?'" ponders Rundgren in sweet falsetto. "I wouldn't take up all your time. Just let me know that I have crossed your mind."

The narrator of "Smoke" has already been scorched by love's flame and vows to guard himself from future burns as Todd's computer software blips and bleeps in the background like a virtual fire detector. Rundgren's "tinderbox of rage and desire" grinds to life like an engine, whose rhythm thumps with the staccato palpitation of a human heart. Todd's vocal is pleasant, if aloof (manifesting the character's detachment): "Life was a cherries flambé...but that was so yesterday," he muses. "Now I am kicking the ashes of a memory gone by."

Contradictions being like bumper cars in "Collide-a-Scope" as Rundgren studies how individuals plug into (or detach themselves from) global consciousness. Machine noises warble in a whirling centrifuge of "I'm real / I'm fake" opposites, whose components become inextricably entwined. Rundgren concludes that sometimes—perhaps all the time—people can't indulge one end of the emotional spectrum without at least dipping a toe in the other: "We love, we hate...we're friends, we're foes."

Rundgren goes Buddhist monk on "Something From Nothing" by likening a person of faith to the "sole survivor" of a "town dried up long ago." Ambient keyboard waves roll in and out of the mix like the surf at high tide as Todd expounds upon the power of belief—a magical process whereby people can effectively create something that didn't exist before. Rundgren's "Something / Anything" dichotomy is most prominent here, during his watchmaker's dissection of science (atoms) vs. romance (rainbows) and nature vs. nurture, and his spiritual themes make for a nice juxtaposition with the cold, calculated (satire) of "Imagination."

Todd lightens up again at the end, slipping on the white loafers of a reluctant debutante for the bacchanalian "Party Liquor." Here, our intoxicated tour guide catches himself "thinking thoughts [he] should never entertain"—but he retains just enough presence of mind to spot the disingenuousness of fellow revelers. He admits he wouldn't shack up with a particular girl were he sober, his confession bouncing to a chant-like beat lubricated by cheeky lounge keys.

can catch Todd again in August at The Akron Civic Theatre, where he'll play with not one but two symphony orchestras.

As for State....

"Imagination" gels with a synthesized arpeggio recalling Tony Banks' swirling keyboard intro to Genesis classic "The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway"—but then the music shifts into darker territory as distorted guitars and heavy drums weave a lumbering leitmotif. The verses are sparse and deliberately sanitized, with Rundgren pronouncing "I am what I am, and that's all that I am" in a detached tone, echoing the philosophical tenets of French mathematician Rene Descartes and Popeye the Sailor Man. It's a bleak yet engaging opener whose form, execution, and lyrics probe humanity's great questions, albeit in the voice of an automaton or some glitchy artificial intelligence—like 2001's HAL-9000—that longs to become more than what it is.

"What is hell?" Rundgren bellows, channeling Roger Waters in angry Wall mode as the menacing guitars resurge. "The same old smell, same old situation...no imagination."

"Serious" taps Todd's sense of humor, casting the fatigued "nice guy" opposite someone else's "wise guy." Trebly, funk guitar chords reverberate over electro-drums and jumpy synth bass, giving listeners an idea of what might transpire were Brit-pop keyboardist Howard Jones to collaborate with Nile Rodgers of Chic ("Freak Out"). The guitar fades during the bridge, waning in the distance until Rundgren defibrillates the beat, shouting "Clear!" as he charges the music back to life. It's another clever instance of Todd resuscitating (literally, in this case) what would seem an overused phrase like "serious as a heart attack" by underscoring it with a quirky musical flourish.

Delirious dance track "Angry Bird" has Todd comparing the cartoon rage of the popular aviary Internet characters with the vexation of women affronted by the Republican party's

"We are so urbane," he laments—or is it a wacky sort of braggadocio? "I'm mixing everything, including grape and grain...oysters and champagne."

The "True Wizard" trades his pointy Merlin hat for a space helmet on "Sir Reality," a fluid foot-thumper whereon he deconstructs a few more fundamentals (truth, mortality, freedom) with the "surreal" skills of a Salvador Dali-turned-disc jockey.

"The truth is plain to see, but you may not agree," surmises Rundgren's Vulcan-like Virgil. "Money brings you joy, and knowledge comes for free."

Todd embarks on a final guitar solo at 1:28, the searing tone and tasteful melody welcome organic elements in an otherwise electronic-laden mix. Rundgren's six-string prowess in underrated, but State effectively renews the argument that his fret board histrionics put him in league with Clapton and Beck.







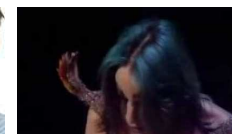

Visit the links below to purchase State, or to secure tickets to Rundgren's shows at Kent Stage (May 14, 2013) and Akron Civic Theatre (August 31):

- www.thekentstage.org (<http://www.thekentstage.org>)
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Pete Roche lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife and two kids. His work has appeared in Scene Magazine, The Plain Dealer, Experience Hendrix Magazine, North Coast Voice, Irish American News, and on both theclevelandsound.com and clevelandmovieblog.com. You may contact Pete with your comments...