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# Graham Parker on Judd Apatow, Glenn Beck, and Getting the Band Back Together

By David Haglund | Posted Friday, Oct. 26, 2012, at 1:31 PM ET

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Graham Parker, center, and the Rumour Kevin Mazur

Graham Parker and the Rumour were one of the great English rock acts of the late 1970s and the very beginning of the '80s. Parker's songs have a biting, class-conscious wit not unlike those of his contemporary and countryman, Elvis Costello, and his albums with the Rumour are especially beloved. The first two, *Howlin' Wind* and *Heat Treatment*, got raves, and their fourth, *Squeezing Out Sparks*, was voted album of the year in the *Village Voice's* influential Pazz & Jop critics' poll.\* More recently, *Rolling Stone* named it one of the [best rock albums of all time](#).

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It was also the last studio album Graham Parker and the Rumour recorded together. Until this year: Next month, they will release *Three Chords Good*, having reunited after 30 years. Even more improbably, they play a major role in *This Is 40*, Judd Apatow's next movie, which hits theaters in December.

I spoke with Parker over the phone earlier this week about the Apatow movie, his songs about abortion and war, and how he and the band got back together three decades apart.

**Slate:** How did you end up in a Judd Apatow movie?

**Graham Parker:** He contacted me in May, I think, in 2011—or his music supervisor did, and said Judd would like to make contact with me. And just about a week before that I'd got the Rumour on board, as it were, to record a new album. That came first. It had nothing to do with anything, really, it was just one of those whims. That all came together and I hustled to get a studio booked, and then suddenly this came out of the blue—Judd wanted to contact me. So I met with him and he outlined this film that had an element in it about Paul Rudd playing the character Pete from *Knocked Up* and starting an indie label. Judd said Pete would probably want to sign someone like me to his indie label. And I said to him, "Pete not only gets me, he gets the Rumour, how does that sound?" He calls me back a week later and says, "I want you to act in this movie, and I want the Rumour flown in, wherever they are, bring 'em to LA this summer sometime, pick a bunch of songs"—he picked a bunch of songs, quite honestly, he's a bit of a fan, so that was good. And we did a bunch of new songs and old ones and filmed them over and over again in front of an audience in downtown LA. Then I was back again, doing an acting stint in the fake record company offices. And I wrote a bunch of songs, and one of them is actually embedded in the movie and a couple of them could be on the soundtrack album.

**Slate:** So in addition to the concert scenes, you also act?

**Parker:** Yeah, I'm playing me. Judd is unbelievable—the amount of work that goes on. You start off with the script, and then you bring your own bit, you add to it, and then Judd starts shouting things at you. Suddenly, you have to react and say these lines.

**Slate:** Was it strange to find yourself making a big Hollywood movie?

**Parker:** It was a different world for me, to find myself basically in a trailer with John Lithgow on one side and Albert Brooks on the other. You know, Lena Duham would be there. It was just like, "Why am I here?" There was definitely a few moments of that.

**Slate:** You told *Rolling Stone* that you're "basically a metaphor for abject failure in the movie"?

**Parker:** Yeah, because anyone starting an indie label now—or any time—it's like, "Good luck." Maybe you'll pull it off, probably you won't. Pete's having trouble selling records and I'm the flagship, but it's not quite working. I think I'm largely responsible for his record company not going as well as he'd hoped. But somewhere near the end of the movie, there may be a little light, which I won't elaborate on. Unfortunately, it doesn't involve me, there's no light coming from me. I'm like a fucking huge black hole.

**Slate:** You've had a successful and long and prolific career, but sometimes critics will say Graham Parker didn't become as famous as people thought he would. Was Apatow picking up on that?

**Parker:** Oh yes, he did pick up on that. Because I never did sell a million records, you know. There's a feeling that if you don't go over that, you're a failure, really. I had record deal after record deal with major labels who were giving me lots of money to enjoy myself—and basically had a pretty privileged life. But in the '70s and '80s, you had to sell a million or you weren't doing as well as you should be. Unfortunately the perception was unless you're traveling in a limo with fifteen ladies and cocaine dribbling out of your nose, you're really not a success.



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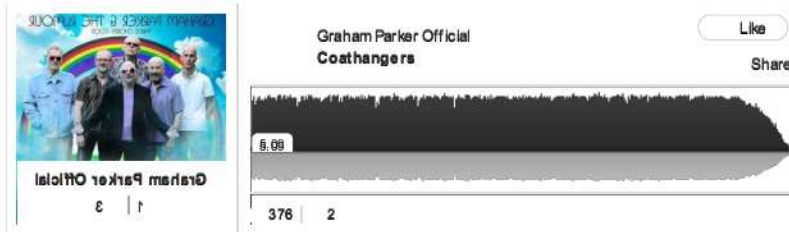
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**Slate:** Almost nobody sells a million records now.

**Parker:** I know! I mean, I think of myself hitting quarter of a million around *Squeezing out Sparks*. And I remember reading in maybe it was *Rolling Stone* about some act that was at nineteen in the charts and it's sold 30,000.

**Slate:** *Squeezing Out Sparks* was named one of the greatest albums of all time by *Rolling Stone*. And I was thinking about one of its tracks when I listened to the new song, "Coathangers," which is about abortion laws. It reminded me of "You Can't Be Too Strong," which some people took to be anti-abortion, though you've suggested [those people got it wrong](#).

**Parker:** The thing with songs like that—they're not ones I want to write. You'll hear more on the album that are more emotional. There's a song called "Old Soul," which is very spacious and jazzy, for instance. And when I write a song like "Coathangers," I'm like, "Oh, no, don't, stop it"—I'm really chastising myself. But then if it's got a great, bendy riff happening, and it's rocking, I can't throw it away, just because I'm touching this nerve. There's another song on the album called "Arlington's Busy." You can guess, I suppose.



**Slate:** The cemetery?

**Parker:** Exactly. Again, it's like, the melody is so beautiful. And how many songs in the last 10 or 11 years really deal with this kind of thing? The song has Pat Tillman in it, for Christ's sake. It's a very tough thing to deal with, songs like that. And it's not the kind of thing I really want to sing about, but these things come out and you can't censor yourself too much. If the song's credible and moving and gives people a bit of the shiver up the spine, I've got to have an outlet for it. I mean, "[Snake Oil Capital](#)" is not exactly a sweet ballad. It's not exactly flowers and sunshine, is it, really?

**Slate:** What is the "snake oil capital of the world"?

**Parker:** Well, in the song America is the snake oil capital of the world. Of course, Americans got it from the English. And I'm sure every country has a bit of it. But it's kind of exploded in America. It was around the time of Glenn Beck that it hit me. I thought, "This guy is a snake oil salesman!" I mean, he's selling a philosophy: Buy into this anger, buy into this hatred of the liberals and the blacks and the gays. Buy into it, and it will make you feel good. And also of course he said, "Buy some gold from this company. I'm not getting a kickback or anything." It was snake oil. And suddenly the whole world, especially America, came into this prism for me. Even health food. "This is the latest berry from South America. It will do all these good things for you! Including... *schwinnng!*" It's snake oil. Suddenly the song just writes itself.

**Slate:** You and the Rumour seem to have been on pretty good terms, all these years. Why didn't you get back together sooner?

**Parker:** Basically because I assumed it would cost too much money. I thought if we came back together we'd have to play clubs, and how do you afford to do that? What I used to get from record companies was \$50,000 tour support. And I never made money on those tours—they lost. And I thought, "I can't do that again." But now people don't expect a fabulous tour bus—everyone's been out of work in the real world a bit. A lot of us actually are in the trenches now doing solo and duo and stuff and that's where you can make a

nice, modest kind of living.

**Slate:** Your live shows back in the day were legendary for being particularly hard-driving. Are you guys trying to recapture that?

**Parker:** If you listen to the album, it's not like an earthquake. The intensity of some of the early albums was then, you know. It was overdone—and by the time we were on the road after a couple of years, everything got faster and faster. Before we got together to do our performance part on the movie, people listened to "Fools Gold," because that was one of the songs Judd picked out. We listened to old live performances of it, and then we emailed each other saying, "Bloody Hell! What were we on?" We had this act that was about making the audience cower with fear, really. And it was brutal. I wasn't a singer then, I was just screaming. And of course punk came along a year and a half into my career with the Sex Pistols and it was like, "Well, we have to keep up with that, don't we?"

And so when we did "Fool's Gold" on the set, we brought it down to the speed of the album. And we brought "Soul Shoes" down—because it's better. It's funky. This band is a swing band. This is rock 'n' roll in the sense that the root of it comes from Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis—and that had been completely obfuscated by the intensity, because of our absolute fear of seeing an audience sitting down. We're not trying to terrify people anymore. It will be intense, but there are different types of intensity.

\* This post originally referred to *Squeezing Out Sparks* as the band's third album. It was their fourth.

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