

A CONVERSATION WITH

TODD RUNDGREN

Along with creating Tin Pan, blue-eyed-soul masterpieces (*Something/Anything?*), prog-rock epics (everything his band Utopia recorded), psychedelic garage classics (his Philly-born Nazz's "Open My Eyes") and Technicolor soundscapes for productions clients like XTC and Patti Smith, Todd Rundgren long ago laid down the multi-layered blueprint for much of what EDM pop is today with *A Wizard, A True Star*. "At least, that's what they tell me," Rundgren says with a snicker, before discussing his newly released, 25th solo album (the electro-glide soul of *Global*), an upcoming collaboration with Norway's Lindstrøm (*Runddans*) and time playing and writing with Ringo Starr. —A.D. Amorosi

You've been gigging with Ringo since you cobbled together a Jerry Lewis telethon band with him, Bill Wyman and Utopia in the late '70s. You've been an on-and-off-again member of his All-Stars for 15 years. His new album finally features your co-songwriting credit. What took so long? I would like to imagine that my "Jerry's Kids" band was the inspiration for Ringo's All-Stars, by the way. Starr was working on an album during his off-time, which isn't much. One song we all co-wrote together happened to come from a jam with me and Gregg Rolie messing around during sound check. Ringo just wanted to make a song out of it, so we did. As for our one-on-one collaboration, it's two days before the tour ends, Ringo sits down and says, "Fancy writing a song with me?" Short notice, but sure. There was an idea he banged out on his synthesizer-rhythm box combo with a lyric based on Beatles song titles. Then, he told me a story about a box of postcards the Beatles shared—when they were apart, even after they broke up, they stayed in touch with postcards. He wanted to call it "Letters From Paradise" until I figured that it had to be "Postcards." I did the demo, sent it, and went on my own tour. I just heard the finished song. I didn't realize he was using it, let alone making it his new album's title.

Forget about production charges or cats in Utopia—since you're pretty much a one-man band, do you find it hard to play nice, to collaborate? It's true. I haven't been good necessarily in

one-to-one collaborations in that McCartney/Lennon vein. I'm better at trading things back and forth, which is certainly more convenient nowadays. In another era, I couldn't have done that thing with Ringo. Now I carry a laptop, recording software and microphones, and can do it anywhere. That's how I got to work with Peter Lindstrøm in Norway. If somebody has a good start or something has stalled, I can usually help wrap it all up. I remember when I lived in Sausalito, Rick Springfield came to my house wanting to write songs together, and all I could do was sit and stare at him. Same thing happened when Kenny Loggins stopped by. I warned these guys, though—I'm not that guy who comes up with songs cold. I'm a ruminator. I think and think, and when it comes out, it does so in a form of automatic writing, all at once.

The last time we spoke, we discussed how you had just started to hear that *A Wizard, A True Star* was a big influence on EDM stuff, as well as on the nu-psychedelia. A younger generation has gone and discovered, bored as they may be by current stuff, that particular music of mine. Curious musicians like Lindstrøm and Tame Impala, both of whom I've done remixes for, have told me as much. It's probably because that album—by today's standards—still breaks rules. People like that sometimes. Even the guys in the Roots, with whom I'm sharing tracks for a Ruben And The Jets-like cartoon R&B album, talk about how much they've felt for my stuff of the past.

Well, you're all Philly guys. You don't need that acknowledgement, I'm sure, but how has hearing that steered where you're going now, say on *Global*? Did that knowledge and all those technological advances—making your studio more portable—change how you went into new music?

I've had a studio since my fourth record. That way of working—using the studio as an interactive compositional device—is ingrained in me. When it became possible to make that all portable and cheaper, I took advantage. I have more power in my laptop than in a tricked-out Pro Tools studio 10 years ago. Guys who started out with that advantage like my music. How it influenced *State*, my last album, and *Global*? OK, when guys like Lindstrøm and Tame Impala came to me, they knew more about me than I knew about them, and that wasn't fair. I began doing my research, but in the confines of what appeals to me. The first result was *State*, which was technologically aggressive and expressive—and comfortable. As I like doing any next album differently from the last, *Global* has much of the same feel of *State*, only with simpler songs, to be more thematically concise and to use more of my range as a singer—especially the R&B part of it. This one's more vocal.

Not that you've been blissfully unaware, but *Global*—along with focusing on your usual anti-religious stance—concentrates on universality: earth versus skyscrapers, man versus machine. Is that a condition of age or what the planet wants?

I was trying to make, essentially, a cheer-leading album—a feel-good record—as much as I can. There's my usual scolding throughout, but it's more about looking forward than pointing downward. That's why I wanted to make it easier to follow than my more usually obtuse work. It's not so much of a phase, as I don't think I'd make this record next time. Then again, I have a label now, same one as with the last record. That hasn't been the case for a while. These guys were great; they didn't even demand to know what it was about.

