

# "sausage, anyone?"

It is a hot, sunny day in February 2015, and Todd Rundgren is playing the perfect host. We are in the kitchen/dining room/lounge of Rundgren's home in Kauai, the fourth largest of the Hawaiian islands, and the youthful 66-year-old musician, producer and multi-instrumentalist is cooking bangers and putting the finishing touches to a pasta salad.

His wife Michele is watching him closely, as his last such concoction saw him pour most of a \$12,000 bottle of wine – a gift from their film director pal, Francis Ford Coppola – into the mix. Smiling indulgently, she cites as a further example of his cavalier attitude towards money the time he turned down the use of his music for a Sprite ad, for which he would have received \$175,000.

Rundgren is oblivious to the chatter; he's too busy ensuring that the assembled – MOJO, five hungry dogs, four fans-turned-friends, cosmic disco doyen Hans-Peter Lindstrøm and Emil Nikolaisen of the 4AD noise-pop band Serena-Maneesh – have a steady supply of artfully grilled comestibles.

"You guys must be doing something right," says Michele to Lindstrøm and Nikolaisen, who've been staying with the Rundgrens all week. After all, her husband famously took studio solipsism to new heights on 1972 double-album *Something/Anything?*, and recorded his three most recent albums alone in an upstairs room at the house, singing, playing and recording virtually every note himself.

"He doesn't usually invite other musicians here," she adds. "And he has never worked on an album like this with anyone before."

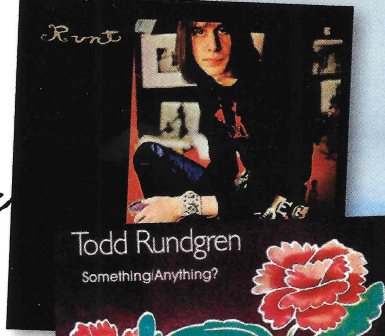
In May, after three years of live sessions, Skype encounters and e-mailed files, Rundgren and his young Norwegian collaborators will issue *Runddans*, a swirling, shimmering synth cycle with a spiritual quality that evokes his most questing work, particularly the dense, intense primitive electronica of 1975's *Initiation*.

*Runddans* is a smorgasbord of arpeggiated monophonic '70s synths and high-frequency guitar and keyboard sonics bearing titles such as Liquid Joy From The Womb Of Infinity and T.H.E. Golden Triangle (Dry Mouthed Gargoyles In A Fountain of Fluorescent Shepard Tones).

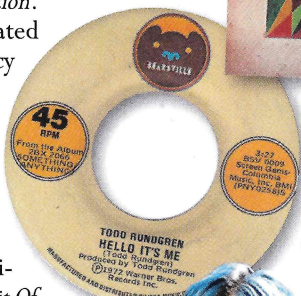
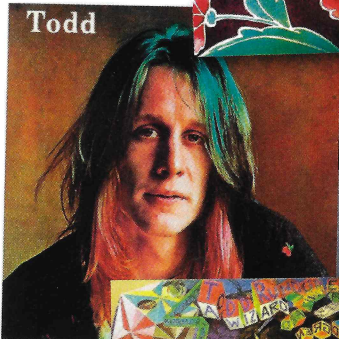
An extreme remove it may be from his early '70s pop hits, it is, nevertheless, as beautiful as anything he has done since 1978's *Hermit Of Mink Hollow*.

Before that, however, Rundgren will issue *Global*, his 25th album (38th if you count his three releases with late-'60s Anglophiles Nazz and 10 with '70s prog rockers Utopia). A sparkling collection of popped-up EDM and electronic balladry addressing the ills of the planet, *Global* evinces the sort of songwriting smarts that prove the man's muse didn't go AWOL in the '80s.

A near-simultaneous release of two brand new albums would be unwise for any musician, let alone one of Todd's vintage. But it is entirely in keeping with the idiosyncratic, terminally restless Rundgren, who is currently working on an album with rap outfit The Roots as well as a musical based on 1977's *Bat Out Of Hell*, the 43 million-



Aloha, It's Me: Todd, with below, right, his wife Michele, relaxes at his Princeville home, January 28, 2015; (below, left) on NBC's *Midnight Special* in 1973.



selling behemoth that he produced. It is also exactly what the faithful would wish for from their obdurate, chameleonic hero.

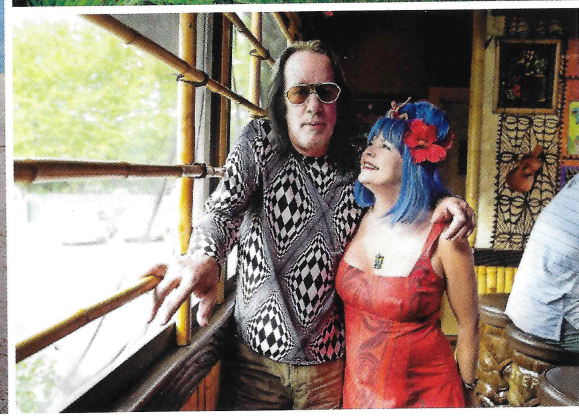
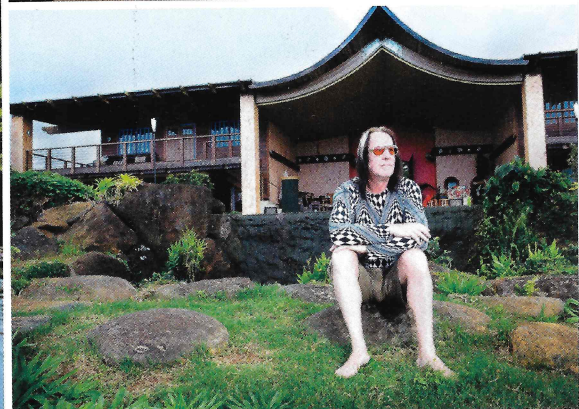
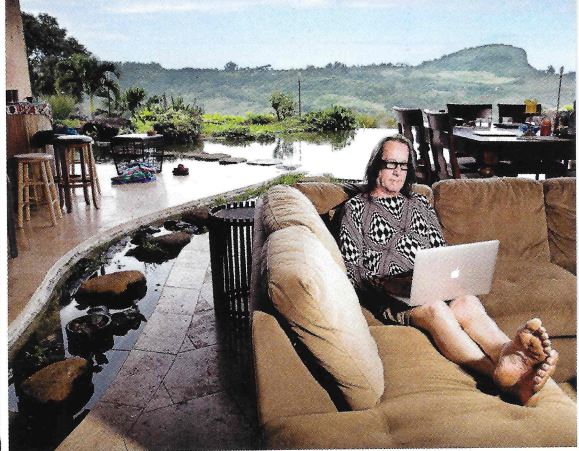
"I've always depended on the audience's curiosity," says Rundgren, taking a BBQ break. Although his voice is deep and slow, clear and precise, he speaks in a manner suggestive of permanent amusement. "It's that 'what'll he do next?' thing, in the way that people used to wait for the next Beatles album: 'What'll they do now? What kind of music will it be? Because it's going to be different from the last one.'"


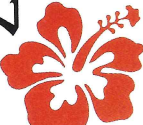
Asked why the changes between his albums have been so dramatic, he roars with laughter. "Well," he says, taking a drag on a pot-enhanced e-cigarette, "that's a testament to what drugs can do."

**I**N FEBRUARY 1975, TODD RUNDGREN was a long way from pop hits such as *I Saw The Light* and *Hello It's Me* and 1971's descriptively titled LP, *Runt. The Ballad Of Todd Rundgren* ("The best album Paul McCartney never made", according to *Rolling Stone*). He had recently issued *Todd Rundgren's Utopia*, 58 minutes of super-complex technoid prog-funk that was like some outer-space jam between The Mahavishnu Orchestra and Parliament.

Now he was holed up in Bearsville – the studio owned by Albert Grossman, the manager of Bob Dylan and The Band and Rundgren – near his home in Woodstock, upstate New York,

Piper Ferguson (4); Getty Images



 "I COULD HAVE BECOME SYD BARRETT OR BRIAN WILSON - AN ACID CASUALTY - IF I'D WANTED TO." 

poring over *Initiation*, the longest album made up to that point. The six harmonically adventurous but relatively conventional pop, rock and soul songs on side one offered some hope to those who feared Rundgren had lost his way on 1973's stream-of-consciousness trip *A Wizard, A True Star* and 1974's double-LP opus *Todd*.

Side two's *A Treatise On Cosmic Fire*, however, was a 36-minute barrage of electro-noise, made using state-of-the-art hardware amassed by Rundgren and his latest Utopian recruit, Robert Moog protégé Roger Powell. The result of Todd's explorations of religion, philosophy and consciousness, and exposure to Alice A. Bailey's metaphysical tome of the same name, *A Treatise* also reflected Todd's new drug-induced mental state.

"I could have become Syd Barrett or Brian Wilson - an acid casualty - if I'd chosen to," Rundgren told me in 1999. "If I'd allowed my fascination and fixation with the illusory nature of reality to completely take over."

Surveying that tumultuous phase today, Rundgren can see clearly how all this happened.

"Between *Something/Anything?* and *A Wizard, A True Star* I took acid and everything changed," he confesses.

We have sought refuge from the midday heat in his bedroom, an endearing shambles of boys' toys and female bric-a-brac.

"Don't tell Michele you came up here," he requests, "because it's not very neat."

Sitting amid the student-pad chaos, with his dye-streaked hair, black hoodie and baggy khaki shorts, Rundgren looks more like a well-preserved fortysomething hipster than a musician who made his first album in 1968.

"There was a lot of stuff floating around," he explains, "like synthetic mescaline or psilocybin, active ingredients in mushrooms. I took a couple of trips before I did [*A Wizard*... ] and they had a pretty profound effect. I didn't want to jump off the roof and commit suicide but my world view permanently changed. I'd be walking down the street and it would be like the buildings were falling on you."

After 1973, Rundgren got off the synthetic drugs.

"I didn't trust them," he continues. "I was still smoking pot all the time - I still do. Then I got hold of a shoebox full of peyote buttons. I was on mescaline for a month straight. I'd take three [buttons] in the morning; I could really regulate it, and get to the place I wanted to be, which was about six feet over everybody else! The idea was for me to be productive at the same time. So I'd be doing gigs, rehearsals, writing in the studio... I was completely functional the entire time."

Perhaps inevitably, Rundgren found the musical, spiritual and ➤

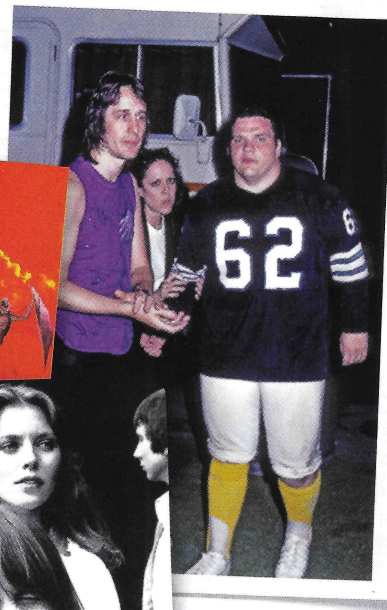
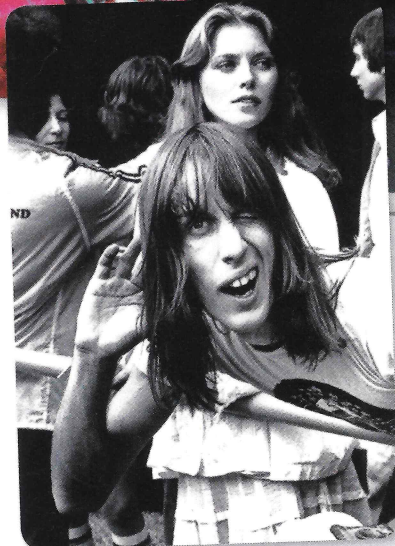
Runddans society: (from left) Hans-Peter Lindström, Todd and Emil Nikolaisen reach for infinity; (below) Rundgren with Meat Loaf and Bebe Buell.



◀ pharmacological rigours of 1974-75 unduly challenging.

“It’s impossible to keep that level of concentration and intensity going,” he admits. “I had to constantly readjust to the changes that had been made and figure out how to fit things into those changes.”

His next two albums were consolidations, allowing him to breathe. 1976’s *Faithful* featured one side of cover versions – of The Beatles, The Beach Boys, The Yardbirds, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix tunes that turned the teenage Todd’s head back in ’66, while *Hermit Of Mink Hollow* was the closest he has ever come to a

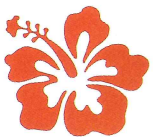


“He likes to be a mystery to people,” Todd says of Bowie. “In order to pull that off you can’t share any of your real self. You can’t have the relationship with your fans that I have. You have to be this kind of old school star, somewhat aloof and above the rest of humanity.”

As with Bowie, the ’80s were a testing time for Rundgren. There was a break-in at his Woodstock home; it also emerged that John Lennon’s killer Mark Chapman was obsessed with Rundgren and had attempted to find him before murdering the ex-Beatle, events which prompted 1981’s quasi-ambient *Healing*. Although the ’80s saw few signs of commercial life – Bang The Drum All Day, from 1982’s *The Ever Popular Tortured Artist Effect*, was a sports stadium hit – artistically 1985’s *A Cappella* predated Björk’s *Medúlla* by nine years while 1989’s *Nearly Human* showed he could craft an exquisite white soul album at the drop of a hi-hat.

The ’90s saw Todd experimenting with new media and technology. He moved to the Bay Area and briefly rebranded himself as TR-i (Todd Rundgren Interactive). Then, in 1996, he and his family (he has two children with ex-partner Karen Darvin, and one with Michele) relocated to Hawaii. It worked: he has made six albums in the last eight years alone.

His house is an endless source of inspiration. Designed by Todd, it doesn’t have a back wall, which means the entire ground floor – the open-plan kitchen, diner and lounge – is open to the elements: in a storm, the Rundgrens have to strap everything down, including their couch and TV. It is also open to uninvited guests, a brave, or maybe fool-hardy, position considering Rundgren’s fan history. Only last year a woman turned up at the house with a removals’ van, instructing the driver to remove Michele’s belongings and replace them all with her stuff, because, as she declared, she



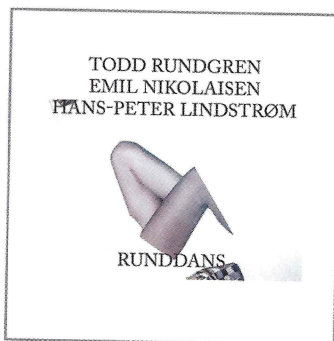
“I’M NOT THINKING ABOUT WHAT THE FANS WANT. I EXPECT THEM TO SWALLOW IT ALL.”



*Blood On The Tracks*, all heavenly melodies and heartache, recorded in the aftermath of his break-up with Bebe Buell.

But what began as delightful eclecticism and impressive polymathy eventually made him tough to market, an artist who never quite delivered on his early commercial promise. “I can understand,” he replies, with a knowing, toothy grin. “I certainly got enough grief from the record label about it.”

In a sense, he was the American Bowie: both pale and thin, with multicoloured barnet and alien, androgynous aura. They both worked with Hunt and Tony Sales (Todd on 1970’s *Runt*, Bowie in *Tin Machine*), underwent exhausting transformations, issued albums of ’60s covers (*Faithful/Pin-Ups*), (re-)discovered R&B (Todd on *A Wizard... ,* Bowie on *Young Americans*), and in ’73 they both produced early punk albums (respectively, New York Dolls’ debut and *Raw Power*). And they both courted Bebe Buell. Arguably, Todd’s journey, from *Runt* to *Initiation*, broke more ground, more rapidly. Although flattered by the comparison, Rundgren can spot the differences a mile off.



was his wife now. Bizarrely, the woman is still at large, not visiting but working in Kauai. For Rundgren, such unwarranted attention goes with the territory. “It’s dangerous to idolise people, because you’re likely substituting things you want for things they have,” he shrugs. “You pretend they’re more ideal than they are.”

Long before punk, Rundgren dismantled the barrier between star and audience, asking fans for their autographs at gigs, while 1974’s *Todd* contained a computerised image of the singer composed of thousands of names sent in with postcards given away free with *A Wizard, A True Star*.

He’s still at it. In 2008, Rundgren celebrated his 60th birthday with a week-long fan gathering in his Kauai garden; “Toddstock II v6.5” took place in 2013, at Nottoway Plantation in White Castle, Louisiana. He knows the value, if not the perils, of a close relationship with his followers.

“There are certain people who come in agog and won’t stop talking to you, but after a while they calm down,” he remarks of these

Piper Ferguson, Getty Images (2), Rex

mini-festivals. “The fans have this self-levelling thing: they take care of themselves if you empower them to; they take the crazy ones aside ’til they calm down.”

He also acknowledges the financial debt he owes these fans. “Without them,” he admits, “I’m screwed. That’s a good reason to stay humble.” What’s more, he says, “It’s important to understand the human animal if you’re going to write about them all the time. People have always said what they like about my music is that I articulate things that have never been articulated. Like, ‘Yes! That’s what I’ve always felt.’ That’s one of the signs that makes them fans, because they think I’m doing their thinking for them.”

Unfortunately, this was the problem with Mark Chapman – an excess of identification with his idol. “Yeah,” he chuckles, warily, “that is an unfortunate side effect...”

**A**PPARENTLY, TODD RUNDGREN HAS NEVER HELD a playback before. The arch technocrat is in his lounge, treating everyone to an impromptu run-through of *Global*. The dodgy Soundbar speaker attached to the TV rattles under the pressure of *Global*’s Guetta-fied dance pop, frequently requiring prodding and banging. After the mellifluous blue-eyed soul of Soothe, Rundgren looks up from his couch and, taking another drag from his dope-strengthened e-fag, shouts, “Fuck you, Sam Smith!” Cue applause.

He exhales. It has been a good year so far. In the wake of *Global* comes *Runddans*. It took two young Norwegian Todd-freaks to take Rundgren back to the future, in the same way Daft Punk teased out Nile Rodgers’s Chic-ness for 2013’s *Get Lucky*.

“Me and Emil love *Initiation*,” says Lindstrøm, and *Runddans* – an homage to an artist that involves the artist being homaged – has enough ’70s period details to send fans into raptures.

“There are so many hidden meanings, messages and meta-hints to Todd fans,” says Lindstrøm. “The stuff we’ve done here is really serious and deep.”

Nikolaisen – whose responsibility was to knock the hours of material into shape – is equally happy with the result.

“I’d like to think we brought something out of Todd that we really love from way back,” says the multi-instrumentalist and producer. The album title, he explains, means “round dance” in Norwegian, and refers to the cyclical nature of the album’s central chord progression, while also, fortuitously, alluding to the surname of its creator.

“It was a strange coincidence,” says Nikolaisen. “But it led to something truly beautiful. This is an homage to the sense of adventure and pure progress of [Rundgren’s mid-’70s] but it’s also a record of our time. I’m very proud of it – my life has been changed more than a little by this.”

“It’s funny,” says Rundgren, remembering his mid-’70s output, “because when I was doing that stuff, it wasn’t meant to be redolent of anything else – I was trying to destroy conventions.”

Mellowed by the medicated vapes, he explains that the intention, without exception, was always to please himself. “While the [recording] is going on I’m not thinking about what the fans would or wouldn’t like,” he says. “Michele, after she heard *Global* for the first time, started saying things like, ‘Oh, the fans will love this or that.’ But I never pay attention to that. I expect them to swallow it all (*mimes child gagging on medicine*): ‘Don’t make a face! Open wide!’”

Rundgren, lest we forget, could have been a contender; the true star who chose inconstancy and wizardry. He tells MOJO about his first royalty cheque, for *Bat Out Of Hell*: \$700,000.

“That was an incredible payday,” he says. “I didn’t even know such a thing was possible. But it didn’t cause a desire to hold any more cheques like that.”

He insists that he has never been tempted to make any commercial moves, saying, “I wouldn’t know what ‘commercial’ is. I don’t like what’s on the radio, so how would I make myself do that? At a certain point in my recording career, I told myself that I didn’t have any higher purpose than to try and create whatever wasn’t being created anywhere else. If I was simply going to do whatever anyone else did, then I really had no purpose. There were people who cared more than I did to write the perfect AM radio single. That was just one genre of music, one that I didn’t want to become a slave to.”

Having completed *Global* and *Runddans*, he’s looking forward to his collaboration with The Roots, his role as choral director for the *Bat Out Of Hell* stage show, and even a mooted Jersey Boys-style jukebox musical based on his diverse back catalogue. The part where they attempt to choreograph *A Treatise On Cosmic Fire* should be hilarious. And he says his next solo record “will be different again”. As we prepare to leave Todd HQ, Rundgren presents MOJO with a bag of organic breakfast cereal, a parting gift from his hospitable wife.

“That’s part of the fun,” he says. “I never wanted to get bored; I still don’t. I have to have new options and new possibilities.” **M**

*Runddans* by Todd Rundgren/Emil Nikolaisen/Lindstrøm is released by Smalltown Supersound on May 4.

## FOR THE LOVE OF TODD

PAUL LESTER LISTS A DOZEN RECENT CONVERTS TO THAT REAL RUNDGREN RICHNESS

### Earl Sweatshirt

In 2013, the Odd Future scallywag tweeted: “I got this here todd rundgren record im finna find me some food/kush and call it a sunday.”

### Tyler, The Creator

Meanwhile, the other OF wunderkind tweeted: “Whoa, I Just Listened To This Dude Named Todd Rundgren Or Something, And Fucking Got Damn. This Is Amazing. Reminds Me Of NERD.”

### J Dilla

The late sampladelic visionary based his track King on Intro – Prana from Rundgren’s *Initiation*. He also sampled Mūlādhāra: The Dance of Kundalini for his Track 14.

### Trent Reznor

Rundgren was invited by Trent Reznor, a Toddhead, to rework All Time Low, from Nine Inch Nails’ 2013 *Hesitation Marks*.

### Hot Chip

Halfway through their 2008 single Shake A Fist, a voice says “Before we go any further I’d like to show you all a game I made up.” That’s Todd’s Intro from side two of *Something/Anything?*

### Tame Impala

*Lonerism*, the 2012 LP by the psych wizards of Oz, owed a debt to A

Wizard, *A True Star*, and they added International Feel to their setlist. Rundgren remixed the single Elephant. See also Rundgren-esque Tame offshoot Pond’s latest set, *Man, It Feels Like Space Again*.

### Daft Punk

French duo’s 2006 film *Electroma* lifted *A Wizard*... intro International Feel for its opening theme.

### Charli XCX

The Icona Pop/Iggy Azalea songwriter heard hip hop producer Paul White’s use, for his track So Far Away, of the epiphanal “I want to... change... the world” climax to 1974’s *An Elpee’s Worth Of Toons* and used it as the basis for her 2013 pop hit, also called So Far Away.

### Neon Indian

Rundgren became chillwave’s architect circa 2009-11 when the likes of Neon Indian (with the Izzat Love? -sampling Deadbeat Summer)

and TV Girl (with Hello It’s Me-filching If You Want It) turned Todd gold into summer-dazed, parallel reality radio hits.

### Ty Dolla Sign

On 2013’s *Fuckin’ Tonight* the LA rapper incorporates a snippet of It Takes Two To Tango (This Is For The Girls) from *Something/Anything?* You can just hear Todd tut: “Don’t you think of anything but sex?”

### DaM-Funk

Self-styled Californian exponent of funkmospheric new-boogie has shared stages with everyone from Ariel Pink to Animal Collective, and recently collaborated with Snoop Dogg on the 7 Days Of Funk project. He asked to be Todd’s 2015 on-tour DJ.

### Rapsody

On *Rock The Bells* feat. Kendrick Lamar, the North Carolina rapper extemporises colourfully over Pulse from 1981’s *Healing*. For further evidence that Todd’s music finds favour with hip hoppers, see Madlib’s use, on *Drinks Up!*, of Johnee Jingo from ’85’s *A Cappella*.

The house of Todd: (from top) Charli XCX, Trent Reznor and J Dilla give props.

