

A true Star

Is **Todd Rundgren** the greatest wizard in rock, plotting a path from Harry Potter child genius to questing Dumbledore? In a major new interview, Ken Sharp quizzes the modern musical polymath and superproducer, and, on page 68, interrogates Utopia, Rundgren's highly acclaimed prog band

The only thing predictable about Todd Rundgren is his unpredictability. A master at confounding expectations and stubbornly following his muse – often to his own commercial detriment – Todd's raison d'être as an artist is to constantly challenge himself and push to forge new musical ground. Case in point, his new album, *Global*, embraces electronica and dance music, while still retaining the artist's idiosyncratic creative stamp. "Go ahead and ignore me" was a record company sales slogan employed for one of Rundgren's early-70s solo albums. But long since that slogan was first unveiled, some fans have been unable to ignore anything this gifted visionary has created. Witness his extraordinary body of music with Nazz, solo material and Utopia, and his consummate production work for The Band, Badfinger, Hall & Oates, Patti Smith, Meat Loaf,

Cheap Trick, XTC and countless others. A musical maverick, whether touring with Ringo Starr's All Starr Band or performing and recording as a solo act, Todd Rundgren cannot be ignored.

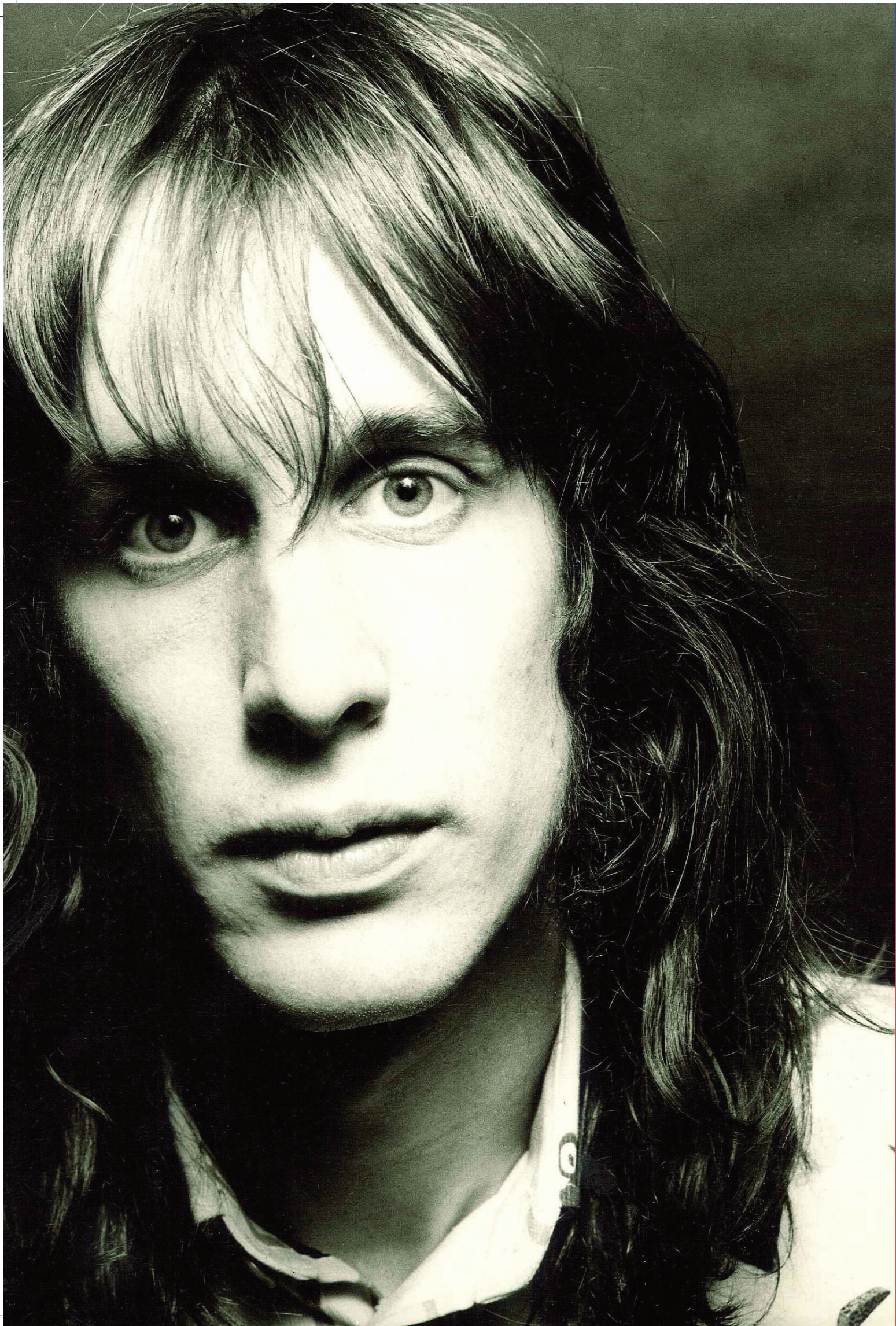
Global carries over some of the touchstones on your last studio album, but in many ways broadens it; what did you learn from *State* that you apply to the new album?

Todd Rundgren: Well, *State* was sort of a catch-up record for me. I was getting a lot of requests to do remixes for younger bands and I was sort of wondering what that was all about! The record that got cited the most by them was *A Wizard, A True Star*. That was a record where I set aside all the rules that I thought I understood and tried to

"I was getting lots of requests to do remixes for younger bands"

experiment as much as possible and learn new things. So *State* was that kind of record; it was me playing catch up in a way. I did a lot of research before I did the record. I travelled







A long time, a long way to go – the path less travelled

on YouTube and tried to see what was happening and what was new and interesting to me. There were a lot of things I tried to fold into it, with greater or lesser coherence! But I fully admit, and did so at the time, that it was new territory for me in that sense. But not in the sense that I was uncomfortable meddling around and fiddling with things and plugging things into other things. But from the standpoint of suddenly that this was my catch-up record and once I'd done that I'd kind of assimilated references and knew better what I wanted to do with the knowledge that I'd acquired. Then I also had more of a focus about what the record should be about. It started out that I wanted to make a kind of cheerleading record, a feel-good record in a way, but I also realised that there was an important topic that I'd never fully addressed before, which was the effect we're having on our planet. So I thought, I've got a lot of work to do but let's do it cheerfully. Let's all get together and get down to work and we'll sing our field hollers and we'll laugh and sing and get down to the hard work we have to do!

Where much electronic dance music does not seem to have much soul, your record does; you could strip away your gritty vocals on Everybody, Global Nation and Earth Mother and they'd work on a funk record.

I had pictured in my own mind that I'd tell people the genre was neo-R&B; that I was trying to retain some of my R&B sensibility in the way that I sing. I wanted to keep the songs pretty simple but it was going to sound modern and it would have all the stuff

I learned on *State* in it. So I think all of my choices throughout the construction of the record were kind of leaning in that direction thinking, "How can I make this a little bit more soulful and how can I make it more personal?", that sort of thing. Hopefully the record has a certain amount of soul to it as well as the electronic trickery.

Where some people might view *Global* and *State* as a major departure, going back to the late 70s with *Utopia's Disco Jets* album, it's a milieu you've embraced many times.

Yeah, we've been in and out of it. But the one thing I was never into was disco. The *Disco Jets* album was sort of a spoof for us. No matter if Blondie went disco or if Rod Stewart went disco, we were *not* going disco! That doesn't mean you don't want your music to be danceable. But disco represented a whole sort of mindlessness that wasn't what I was about or what *Utopia* was ever about.

But you nailed that dance vibe with intelligence back in the late 70s and early 80s with *Utopia's* songs *Rock Love* and *Too Much Water*...

Yeah, well, that's ideally what you're going for. With *Global*, there's a song called *Flesh And Blood*, and that's about the phenomenon where, if you create the right sort of atmosphere and the right music and the right place you can turn tens of thousands of people into a single organism. And that's kind of what you need to accomplish the stuff that we need to, we need to be able to unify people in that way and music is one of those things that in some way shortcircuits peoples' brains

[laughs] and makes them stop thinking about other things and focus on the thing you're dealing with right now.

There's also a cerebral vibe to some of the tracks on the album, namely *Holyland* and *Soothe*, which bring to mind the textures of your *Healing* album. Can you see that connection there?

It's not surprising you say that. I didn't want the album to be flat and just have one sort of mood or tone to it, so even through some of the happy-go-lucky numbers there are scolding moments. *Blind* is a pretty scolding song. Then there are moments of introspection and those are necessary because you need a breather and you need to step back every once in a while; sometimes you need to just calm down and collect your breath every once in a while. I want those moments to be as much a part of the experience as the happy go-lucky-dance-y moments.

Has the process of writing songs and recording them changed a lot in the last 30 years?

It's actually not different. It's gotten more and more to this sort of extreme that started on *A Wizard, A True Star*. On *Something/Anything* I had to have songs before I went into the studio. But with *A Wizard, A True Star*, I'd built my own studio just for the purpose of being able to kind of experiment and take as long as I needed to develop ideas without any sort of interference or time limit or time-frame. If I got an idea at one o'clock in the morning, I'd be able to go into my own studio and work on it. And, ever since, that's

Photo: Rob Shanahan



pretty much been my ideal environment except for just a couple of records like the live albums that I did at the end of the 80s. I'd been using the studio or whatever passes for the studio as an interactive composition device. Instead of dreaming of something in your head and then putting dots down on a paper, instead you go directly to the sound that you imagine and you put it down on the tape, or now you put it down in a digital file. Then you can immediately tell if those are the right notes or whether it's the right sound and you can change it and make it conform with what you imagine. Sometimes you discover things that you hadn't imagined. That's the exciting part when you're doing it all in real time, when the ideas are coming and being realised almost in a complete unbroken flow. So I tend nowadays to complete almost the entire track before I sing a word or before I even write a word. I'll have a title or placeholder and, eventually, I'll get to the point where I think I've finally gestated the idea of what I'm trying to write about and I'll write the lyrics in 20 minutes or half an hour. Then I'll sing them right after that and usually sing them in the first one or two takes. So it's become more and more working that way rather than less that way.

In terms of predictability, you've taken the road less travelled. Following a huge success of *Something/Anything* with *A Wizard/A True Star* or *Utopia's Adventures In Utopia* with *Deface The Music*, is this just the contrarian in you, or simply the way that you keep things creative and fresh?
For me personally, it's not just kind of

"I never thought that I had to satisfy a certain audience"

ingrained in the way that I work. I started in a band, Nazz, and that didn't work out so well, so, shortly after, I started working as a producer and engineer and that went quite well. That became kind of lucrative. So when it came to making my own records I never thought I had to continue to satisfy a certain audience, or do the same thing over and over to build up an audience. I was perfectly satisfied to produce other people's records and worry about those concerns for them. Then when I made my own records I didn't have to think about any of that. I could just think about what musical things I'd like to accomplish. It's just become the way I work now. I suppose I could enact the same discipline on myself that I would on another act if they came to me and said, "Help us make a coherent and commercial record." But there's a world full of people doing that. As for me, half the time I'm trying to educate myself in a way by learning new things and techniques or refine those that I have. So that's why I continue to produce records for other people, and do remixes, which leaves me free to choose my own direction.

Just released is a *Live At The BBC 1972-1982* multi-CD/DVD set documenting

Utopia performing Singing And The Glass Guitar and showing you climbing to the top of a pyramid prop and throwing yourself off: you have balls of steel.

That was shot in a field up in Woodstock. The BBC came to cover Bearsville in general and all of its artists; they also interviewed Albert Grossman. Albert thought it would be a good finale for us to set up our *Ra* set, but there was no building at the time big enough so that the camera could capture the whole thing in the frame! So they essentially prepped a bit of field next to some houses that Albert had and we put the set up outdoors. And as I recall, during that particular performance I had stomach flu and could barely get through it.

After I did the flip from off the top of the pyramid, I went off the back of the stage and puked my guts out, then came back and finished the song. Doing that flip off the pyramid was just foolhardiness. Today, I'd never do it. That pyramid has actually been erected on a friend's property up in Rhode Island. I've been up there and I've seen other people climb up the pyramid, but I would never dare go up that thing again. It's also harder to go up than come down. The flip part is the easy part, as long as you have the proper tension. It was what we did in the old days, upping the ante all of the time with theatrics.

In the past decade you've undertaken a series of album shows with *A Wizard/A True Star*, *Todd and Healing*.

I didn't initiate doing any of those album shows. They came through www.rundgrenradio.com and the fanbase. They're the ones who kind of decide which record they'd like me to attempt to perform. Then I'll decide to do it or not do it! As a matter of fact we considered doing something this year but so much effort goes into mounting these kinds of shows and they only run for about two weeks. I'm trying to find a way to amortise all of the labour that goes into them.

There's been talk of a Utopia reunion tour of the classic Todd, Roger Powell, Willie Wilcox and Kasim Sulton line-up. Is that just talk?

Well, it's always just talk! We never know. It's something that gets bandied about. It depends, first of all, on my availability, because I'm still working a lot, and Kas' availability, because he still works a lot. Roger (Powell) and Willie (Wilcox) don't tour much anymore. It's not the kind of thing where I would be satisfied just showing up and playing a couple of the songs. People have a greater expectation than that. We have to play really well and to play really well requires a goodly amount of rehearsal and warm-up dates and stuff like that. And once you go through all that rehearsal, you've gotta play a couple of months' worth of dates to make it worthwhile. We did have an original Utopia revival a couple of years ago and that was a lot of fun. We were doing the serious



Images from Todd's A Wizard/A True Star dates, 2010

prog rock. I'm not ruling it out, but there's a certain bar there that I require. I'm not willing to go back and be worse than we were. It needs to be as good as before and that's gonna require a lot of commitment and effort to do that.

Before Utopia recorded *Deface The Music*, which was almost a tribute to The Beatles, you'd already met the entire band.

The reason why we did that record wasn't really because we had some long-standing desire to make a Beatles-style record; we were kind of contrarians. The Knack was really hot at the time with My Sharona. They dressed like The Beatles and were doing that whole 60s English Invasion thing, so we recorded a power-pop song called I Just Want To Touch You for laughs and submitted it for the movie soundtrack for a film called *Roadie*. I had produced two songs for Alice Cooper for that album and they said to us, "Why don't you put a Utopia song on the soundtrack?" We weren't using Alice's band, so Utopia played on the records and actually appeared in the movie except for me. So we gave them that song and they came back and gave us the excuse that it sounded too much like The Beatles. They were afraid The Beatles might take some issues with it and sue them. You have to remember that Apple was very litigious at that point. I can't see what issues they could have had with it; maybe they just didn't want to use the song. So then we go and say, "Well, screw you, we're gonna do a whole album of Beatles-inspired songs like this!" We had a lot of fun with that record. We thought it would get some attention just for the novelty of it. We did a little bit of touring behind *Deface*

The Music, but we didn't actively promote it because we considered it a novelty. We did it as an act of spite!

Prior to *Deface The Music*, you'd deconstructed some Beatles songs and covered Strawberry Fields Forever and Rain on your solo album, *Faithful*.

I was also musical adviser on the set of the movie version of *Beatlemania*. I don't even know if I was credited, but I spent the whole frigging time there while they were essentially just filming the Beatlemaniacs onstage with an invited audience.

You're currently in Ringo's All-Starr Band. What's impressed you the most about Ringo as a player?

This is a topic of conversation among all of us in the All-Starr Band, which is how disappointed we are that Ringo won't play a song without a second drummer. He had two other drummers on his very first tour! I think it's just a habit at this point. But he was just paranoid about taking on the entire load himself as the only drummer. Part of it is he likes songs that are simple and straight-ahead in terms of his own playing. If it gets too complicated it becomes an issue. The first tour I did with him, one of the songs was called Black Maria and there's all these odd stops and starts in there and odd bar counts. As soon as we started practicing that one Ringo said, "No, I'm gonna sit this one out." So I think he depends on the other drummer to sort of remind him where in the songs we're at, because we're playing some songs that are five or six minutes long – particularly the Santana songs, we do have some odd time

signatures in there. So he depends on the other drummer to kind of cue him to what's happening. But from a playing standpoint it's a great disappointment that we don't ever get to play with just Ringo and get to wallow in that groove.

What is it about his groove that makes it work so well?

There's a little bit of a shuffle or something in everything he does. He's got this other feel going on over the top of it. And when you hear the drum arrangements on records, oftentimes he can slip in and out of various feels with a relative degree of ease. He can go from a shuffle feel to a straight eight feel without having to think about it. For instance, the drum part on Rain, at the time people had a hard time figuring out how to do that. How do you play this combination of solid rhythm and at the same time cope with the bizarre syncopation going through it. Ringo's playing characterised the entire song.

This incarnation of the All-Starr Band has stayed together for a much longer time than the other versions. It seems like you're not just aligned musically, but personally.

We all sort of felt that way in the beginning. When Ringo puts these acts together he doesn't really require that you undergo a psychological evaluation; you just have to have three hits! So there certainly have been instances where there were issues with people in the band. I think it also affected how Ringo would feel about the bands. Personality-wise we all clicked since day one and I think that's one of the reasons why Ringo has kept the band together. It's not only a superlative



group of musicians, but also it's just a fun bunch of guys.

You've written a song with Ringo for his new album.

There's actually two in which I participated; one was a soundcheck jam that turned into a whole song after a couple of writing sessions: *Island In The Sun*. Right before the tour ended and before Ringo was wrapping the record up he comes in and sits down next to me in the dressing room and says, "You fancy writing a song with me?" I said, "Well sure, but it's kind of last minute." But he had an idea about what he wanted to do. He wanted to use titles from Beatles' songs. With The Beatles growing up previous to the age of emails, even after the band broke up they communicated with each other by sending postcards. Ringo found a shoebox full of them, these postcards from the other Beatles that he'd received. Ringo published a book of those postcards (*Postcards From The Boys*). He thought that maybe there's an idea in there and I came up with the *Postcards From Paradise* idea. I essentially came up with the lyrics and wrote this little melody, but he writes with a synthesizer that had a drum machine on it and a chord player and stuff like that. He had a little track he gave me first that I wrote to.

One of your most notable productions was *War Babies* by Hall & Oates, your fellow Philly natives.

When I began to work with them, I think that I came in with certain expectations, to the degree that I was familiar with their previous material. I'm pretty sure the label also had

certain expectations. I deduced that from the fact that the label dropped them soon after the release of the album, mostly because there was not an obvious follow-up to *She's Gone*. In our pre-production discussions and upon hearing the demos of the material, I discovered that Hall & Oates hadn't necessarily settled on what their direction was gonna be yet. *She's Gone* was actually an uncharacteristic piece of material for them up until that point. The previous albums were fairly eclectic and I think they may have been possibly chafing at the idea that they only would be able to do one kind of music. So coming into the record that became *War Babies*, the material already had an experimental and exploratory quality. They were on the cusp of deciding what direction to go in and *War Babies* gave them all kinds of opportunities and places that they wouldn't go later!

My deduction is Daryl wanted to be a more experimental artist such as David Bowie, and not have to do the same record over and over again. Atlantic gave the record a tepid response and didn't work hard to promote it. They expected something much more conservative, something along the lines of the blue-eyed soul type of material. Since I'd done some dabbling with that on my own records, they thought that I would steer them in that direction. I didn't. I was perfectly happy to make the record that they wanted to make.

I never had any significant issues working with them and I was very impressed with their talent and their singing. There was the willingness to experiment, but they didn't have enough studio experience at the time to implement it. Having my own studio and not

being on the clock allowed them to be more experimental. It was the element of the musical sandbox, the fact that nobody is gonna say, "We have another session coming in, we don't have the time to experiment with that idea." Often I was trying to interpret ideas into techniques we could use to get what they wanted, like an echo on the voice, a certain kind of keyboard tone or an especially watery sound. Artistically, it's a great record to go back and listen to. I don't know that they ever did another record that was as conceptual.

War Babies was based on a baby boomer concept, the whole idea of the generation that Daryl and John and I belonged to. But it wasn't supposed to be simply centered around one concept. A lot of the atmosphere of the record was supposed to reflect a certain bleakness. That was because of the whole shadow of growing up in the nuclear age and how it had characterised the attitude of a generation. So much of what they did seemed to have a light pop attitude and this record was not intended to be a light excursion into pop music. It was a cultural manifesto.

Do you have a lot of unreleased material in the can?

I don't have a lot of unfinished songs laying around. If I don't get past the first couple of instrumental passes at it – if it doesn't turn me on or I can't visualize where it's going – I just kind of drop it. I have little fragments of ideas that never turned into songs. When you release legacy packages, people always want bonus material, and there really isn't any! Everything that you hear on the record of mine is pretty much everything that I recorded.

A Different POV



Classic Utopia: Kasim Sulton, Roger Powell, Willie Wilcox and Todd Rundgren

Ken Sharp speaks to all four members of the classic **Utopia** line-up about the highs and lows of being the least predictable band in rock, and walking in a giant's shadow...

Ra tour, New Victoria Theatre, London, England, 1 February 1977... Dressed in a pure white Egyptian-styled costume, against the wild cheers of the appreciative standing-room-only crowd, Todd Rundgren, with chrome ankh-shaped guitar in tow, speedily ascends the stairs of a giant gold pyramid and once he reaches the top he stands triumphantly legs akimbo, peeling off a flurry of lightning speed licks; his fellow members of Utopia, also in Egyptian garb, kick their prog-rock epic *Singing And The Glass Guitar* into overdrive. Utopia is here...

Formed in 1974, Utopia was the brainchild of Todd Rundgren. Mining an experimental prog sound rooted in virtuoso playing and freewheeling improvisational flair a la Mahavishnu Orchestra and Weather Report, the initial six-piece line-up issued two albums, *Todd Rundgren's Utopia* and *Another Live*. By the time of the band's third album, 1977's *Ra*, Utopia was a quartet: Rundgren, bassist Kasim Sulton, drummer Willie Wilcox and keyboardist Roger Powell. In their final configuration, the band adopted a more streamlined, accessible pop-driven sound.

In many ways, Utopia was the ultimate cult outfit led by the ultimate cult artist. Over eight years (1977-1985), Utopia released eight albums – *Ra*, *Oops! Wrong Planet*, *Adventures In Utopia*, *Deface The Music*, *Swing To The Right*, *Utopia*, *Oblivion* and *POV*. Refusing to be pigeonholed, each album was different from the next, resplendent in its diversity, embracing sprawling prog-rock, jazz-fusion, arena-rock, power-pop, smouldering R&B, jazz-rock, psychedelia, industrial, disco and new wave. And while Todd had the profile, in its most Utopian form this was a real band of brave sonic adventurers who enjoyed a communion of collaborative spirit; all four members sang lead vocals and shared songwriting duties.

Never achieving massive commercial success, *Set Me Free* from 1979's *Adventures In Utopia* was their only major hit. During their tenure, Utopia were one of rock's finest bands, masters on the road and in the studio, consummate practitioners of intelligently crafted and inventive pop/rock music. They were assailed by a perpetual cycle of record company problems – they were virtually ignored by their label, Bearsville, and a follow-up label, Network, folded shortly after the release of one their best albums, 1982's *Utopia*.

In 1986, the group shut up shop, leaving a legacy of extraordinary music. In this exclusive career-spanning conversation, we rounded up Todd, Kasim, Willie and Roger to reflect on their life in Utopia.

Utopia was a working entity for a few years with various line-ups. How did things change with the addition of Kasim in 1976?

Todd Rundgren: We quickly shrunk to a quartet. The guys started leaving the band pretty quickly after *Another Live* to do things that didn't involve touring. Our bass player, John Siegler, decided since all the original members had gone it was time for him to move on as well. Previously there wasn't a lot of singing. When we were auditioning for bass players and first met Kasim, vocals were an extremely important part of the audition process. We knew we wanted to get someone who was a strong singer in, that Roger and Willie had just started singing and they weren't fully confident and couldn't share any of the lead stuff. In order to make the band more of a band and less a variation of my solo career (*laughs*) the object was to look for somebody who had a strong enough voice that he could take over the lead singing at times, which

Photo: Alamy

would help make the band a more unique musical entity, and Kasim delivered that. He had a very strong voice. My feeling at first was he was too McCartney inspired (*laughs*), which he totally admitted to, but, fortunately, he played bass in a style that was much more suited to Utopia than something Beatles-esque. **Willie Wilcox:** Kasim was the right fit because of his writing and singing ability, stage presence and musicianship.

Todd: In terms of moving in a more commercial direction, it wasn't so much an adaptation to Kasim, but a redefinition of the responsibilities of the guys in the band. *Ra* had plenty of jams on it so we weren't totally leaving that behind, but we were concentrating more on song structure and more tightly arranged background vocals. As we moved forward, we were trimming the soloing, at least in the context of our recordings, into much more concise parts of the song. Essentially that was our way of adapting to the demise of progressive rock. We still wanted to be doing music that was not necessarily pop.

Kasim, you were 20 when you joined Utopia for the *Ra* album and tour...

Kasim Sulton: We were up at Todd's house, the band was there with Albert Grossman [*boss of the Bearsville label*]. Todd started talking about this concept for a tour. This was around the time where everyone was talking about pyramid power, "put your razor blades under a pyramid and they'll get resharpened"! Todd explained this idea to Albert about doing an album and tour with an Eastern theme. He wanted this pyramid with a giant sphinx head behind us. Everyone in the band would represent an element – fire, wind, earth and water. He presented this idea to Albert because he needed him to come up with \$100,000 and we needed to put together a set. Nobody questioned it, it wasn't until *Deface The Music* when the questions started to be asked.

I wasn't thrilled with the costume I had to wear for the *Ra* LP cover and tour. We'd already designed the sphinx, the pyramid and the stage, and worked out which member would be what element. We were in LA and went to Western Costumes. Todd is picking out the outfits. He throws me something and says, "Put this on." I went into the dressing room and put it on and went, "This is a fucking dress. I'm not gonna wear this!" But I wasn't gonna question Todd, who was a power to reckon with. So I wore it. Right after the cover shoot, I went to a payphone and called my mother. I said, "Ma, this is the first real record that I've worked on and they're making me wear a dress!" I was beside myself with anger that my first foray into the industry had me on the back of a sleeve in a dress!

In support of *Ra*, Utopia embarked on its most elaborate stage spectacle...

Roger Powell: We spent most of our record advance building the set which didn't sit well with everyone in the band! Here was all this money coming in and it was like, "Oh, no, let's spend it on a set with a giant sphinx and

"We had lasers shooting out of the eyes of the sphinx!"

pyramid!" The Egyptian theme wasn't the original concept. We had a couple hundred thousand dollars. We hired Eric Gardner, because he's done some big stage productions. He tried to come up a big idea for a world-class rock band with big bucks behind them. None of us were happy with the ideas. One of them was this thing that looked like a futuristic giant floating water-bed. Another idea, which Todd really didn't like, was during a dramatic moment in the show he'd be thrust into the audience in a cherry picker. We finally hit on this Egyptian theme. Eventually it ended up being the sphinx and this pyramid and Singring And The Glass Guitar developed as a dramatic presentation. It's Wagnerian in a way, with each member of the band having to overcome a metaphorical and physical challenge and those were the elements: earth, wind, fire and water.

Willie's element was water and we thought what can he do, because he's behind a drum set? So we ended up with water jets with coloured lights – very Las Vegas actually! He also had the "trapparatus", which was a spinning electronic drum set made out of Harley motorcycle parts. He'd spin around and do a drum solo and the water jets would shoot up into the air. And of course the water would go all over the stage. It was a very active show, with Todd, Kas and I running around. I'd invented the Probe, which was one of the world's first key-tars and we'd invariably fall over because of the water. Eventually they put Coca-Cola all over the stage to make it sticky.

Kas had the most unfortunate prop. His element was wind and what do you do with wind? You get a giant fan. He had to act like he was fighting against a gale. His most embarrassing moment was when the roadies decided to get cute in Texas, and they put a tumbleweed on stage. He's trying to fight the wind and this fuckin' tumbleweed goes rollin' across the stage! He got really pissed off.

Mine was fire. Many theatres didn't allow it and often the road crew couldn't quite get the fire effect under control, so, occasionally, two or three canisters would fall and shoot fire everywhere. Singed my eyebrows once. Since we couldn't use the flame jets everywhere, they added a dragon. We had lasers shooting out of the eye of the sphinx. I also had a laser in the probe and could fire blasts at this dragon I was fighting, which was a guy dressed in a Chinese parade dragon outfit. That was kinda lame.

Todd's element was earth and his was the last challenge towards the end of the show. He had to clamber up the tiny steps of the pyramid and go to the top with his wireless guitar. Perched at the top, he'd grab a handle that was on a wire attached to a winch and do a somersault and land on the stage. Then they'd wheel out a "glass" guitar – made of ice – and he'd break that.

From *Ra* onward, Utopia's sound grew more accessible. Was it a natural progression?

Roger: Todd viewed the band more as an experimental venture and he was probably the least interested in commercialising the band. I enjoyed the more experimental things. Willie and Kasim were the ones who wanted the band to be more commercial and there wasn't anything wrong with that. There was a lot of pressure from the record company vis "Where's the single?" They didn't like the band or want it to exist. Todd had hits as a solo artist and they expected him to continue to do that. As soon as they started expecting that, it was the last thing he wanted to do. Utopia had been established as a democracy but it was a lopsided one when a particular member of the band has a successful career. After *Ra*, we gravitated in a more commercial direction trying to make pop songs. But with our songs there was always something deeper and with a little bit of a twist on the production.

Style, on Utopia's last album, *POV*, has the lyric "it's still a style to have no style". The band could not be pegged down as a pop or progressive band; did eclecticism hurt you?

Willie: I think diversity did hurt us. If you're talking about being a successful group that succeeds on the charts and has consistency in the business world, it was a mistake to be so diverse. If you're talking about having a fanbase of people who truly like the music that you do and a band unafraid to take chances then people appreciate you. Utopia was very diverse. The very fact that sometimes Utopia had songs that could be hit singles but were not, consistently, is confusing to the record companies. Utopia didn't gain the attention of major labels. We were capable of writing hit songs, but it was a choice. It wasn't my choice. I wanted us to be more mainstream and by that I don't mean selling out. It takes a tremendous amount of craft to get a pop hit.

Roger: We didn't have a recognisable sound in terms of thematically repeating certain styles. Most Utopia albums would have a smattering of things; there wouldn't be two songs where you can say, "Yeah, that kind of sounds like the other one." We could record any style and theme of material... and, unfortunately, we did!

Todd: At our most popular, we weren't played on the radio like a lot of other bands. We played a big outdoor concert in Ohio in the late 70s and we were the headliners and The Cars and Cheap Trick opened for us! There was a point where the singles didn't really matter; it was the show we put on. At that time, we invested a lot in the theatrical aspect and it was very popular. Our greatest success happened without a big hit single. With Kasim's song Set Me Free, we had one



Utopia try pyramid selling their albums

hit single that wasn't representative of the greater part of what we did. He brought that in whole and we did a four-piece arrangement for it but it wasn't collaborative like so much of our material. Historically, that's the way that Utopia was meant to write songs.

From 1977-1985, Utopia was insanely productive, releasing eight albums. Was it a challenge to keep up that pace?

Todd: The band had several advantages from the beginning. We had our own studio that we could completely inhabit and do anything we wanted. That kind of expense was eliminated, which meant we didn't get a lot of pressure about, "You're running up the budget on the record." It was our own time and studio so that kind of pressure wasn't there. I was very fecund in those days. I would do possibly two solo albums, a Utopia album and three productions in a year, so a lot of records were getting made. I credit part of it to the fact that, in those days, I had no family. My time was my own and I spent it almost entirely making music. And the rest of the band were in similar positions at the time; none of us had children.

Kasim: Once we found our groove, the motor was runnin'. We'd do a tour behind a record, then do another one. We were in a really good creative space. Save for one album, we were at our collective creative peak during those years.

Willie: We were prolific and we'd occasionally have songs that could fall into the realm of pop music. All of a sudden the band would gain more interest and sell more records, but those were a small piece of the overall pie.

Did that pose a challenge coming up with material for Utopia?

Todd: Certainly as things went on there was the challenge of trying something different. Also, there was the challenge of us agreeing on what we wanted to do. It doesn't mean everything was a unanimous decision! We had a rule which was there's no such thing as a veto. You couldn't simply stop the process, you had to have a suggestion about what we should do.

Todd, throughout Utopia's career you were enjoying major success on the side as a producer and with your solo career. Without having to rely on Utopia as your sole source of income, did that impact on your creative decisions with the band?

Todd: There was some concern about that. Fairly early on we came to an agreement that regardless of who wrote what on the album we would split the publishing four ways so people would not become indignant if I continued to write or be participating in the majority of the material, which was my strength. There was always an ongoing debate every time we did

a record whether we should "go commercial" and the problem was always, what the hell *was* that? Aside from copying someone else, what the hell was commercial for us? It wasn't that we were trying to be anti-commercial. We wanted it to sound like a band, not sound like me or any of the individuals. None of us came from a history of writing pop songs except for me and the problem there is if I start writing pop songs, why am I doing that for Utopia? I'd do it for myself if I was so inclined.

Kasim: It was a chance for him to get his groove on; not worry about pleasing anybody but himself. If Todd was going to use the band to experiment, we'd have done more albums like the prog of *Ra*, but we didn't. We were doing straight, three-minute pop songs.

Did you feel a conflict between what you wanted to do with Utopia and what the critics apparently wanted Todd to do, which was I Saw The Light 1,000 times over?

Todd: I didn't worry about those things. From the start, the objective of Utopia was that we should be able to sing and play whatever we recorded. That was what we cared about.

Democracy in bands is tricky, especially with a member who's established in the industry.

How close was Utopia to achieving it?

Kasim: This is gonna sound horrible, but as long as Todd agreed with it, it was doable. But if he didn't agree with it, or it didn't match his vision of the band, then it very difficult to get an idea past him. Todd's attitude was "I'm extremely successful outside of this band, you really have to defer to my idea of what we should be doing. It's not to say your opinion doesn't count, but when you're as successful as I am then you can make the decisions."

I'd heard that *Adventures In Utopia* was an exercise in crafting material that mirrored what was popular in the charts at the time.

Todd: We were always conscious of what was big and successful. I remember going to see Boston at Madison Square Garden after their first big album came out. The whole idea of being a musician is the careful absorption of select influences. It was a mode of music that we could deal with and feel somewhat comfortable with. With *The Very Last Time*, for all of its superficial similarity to Boston's *More Than A Feeling*, I don't believe it was ever an attempt to mimic any particular part of that song. There's a broad influence with the slightly picky intro, the big power chord chorus and a double two-part solo! With *You Make Me Crazy*, it was just taking the piss out of a certain genre of music! We'd do things almost as a joke, like the speaking part that Willie does in the middle which sounded like one of those very mannered English bands. We weren't looking at any one group, but the whole new wave, prissy weird thing.

Kasim, your song, *Set Me Free*, from *Adventures In Utopia*, proved the band's biggest single, a Top 20 hit.

Kasim: I was signed to a publishing and

Photo: Alamy



Power-pop dressing in 1985

recording deal with Bearsville. Albert Grossman didn't feel I was ready to do a solo record and he said, "Keep writing, keep writing." I told Albert, "If you don't want me to do a record I'd like the freedom to do it with another label." And he said, "You're more than welcome to do it with someone else, that'll be 15 per cent and \$50,000 please." I was so angry that they weren't releasing me from the label without charging me, so I wrote Set Me Free. In deference to the other members, had it not been for the production on Todd's end and everybody's playing, it wouldn't have been as successful. The sax was Todd, the string line was Todd, the guitar part was Todd, so all those elements went into making it successful.

With sales of over 400,000, *Adventures In Utopia* was the group's most successful album, but that was followed with what many regard as a questionable move, an album of Beatles homages, *Deface The Music*. Did you shoot yourself in the foot?

Todd: Yeah. But the thing is we weren't about to try and re-create the same album again. We were always looking for success but on our own terms, not copying what we did previously. I still maintain there was an evolution in radio. We were able to take advantage of the tail end of what was album-oriented broadcasting and that accounted for a lot of our popularity. Our albums sold on their own merits in many ways. **Kasim:** I think we did shoot ourselves in the foot with *Deface The Music*. If we'd capitalised on the success of *Adventures* and done a similar record we'd have seen our audience double. We went into the studio after *Adventures* and Todd had written four or five songs and said, "This is what we're doing." Willie, Roger and I went, "Oh, alright. We'll do this." The record came out a few months before John Lennon was assassinated. It was construed as a parody, and with John getting shot, the last thing people wanted was a Beatles "parody".

The support at Bearsville for Utopia was virtually non-existent.

Todd: Certain people at the label stated outright that they did not care about the band. They were more interested in my career and were just indulging me in terms of Utopia. Had I not been on the label they wouldn't have signed the band. I recall one of the head guys at the label telling me flat out that it didn't matter what the content of the record was, he didn't care about it! Albert [Grossman] was bemused by what we were doing. I don't recall him being a fan. But it doesn't mean that nobody at Bearsville was a fan; it's just that Utopia wasn't a high priority.

Kasim: Todd made a lot of money for Bearsville, so for Albert, Utopia was just a way to pacify Todd so he'd continue to make solo records for the label.

Roger: We played to big crowds and worked our butts off, but the label didn't believe in us. There was no real promotion because they felt none of our songs had hit potential.

Utopia played the Knebworth Festival twice, sharing bills with The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin; your memories, please?

Roger: Paul McCartney is onstage watching one of the bands and Kasim worked his way up to stand next to this guy who is his main idol in life. Kas looked at him and McCartney had a drink in his hand that was almost empty. So Kas says, "Hey, I'm gonna go down and get a drink, can I get you something?" Paul says, "Yeah, thank you, I'll have a scotch and soda." Kas has to fight his way off the stage through security. He goes and gets himself a beer and gets a "scotch and soda" for Paul. Then he fights his way back up onto the stage and he hands Paul the drink. Paul take a sip of it and says, "Eurgh! Perrier. You can keep this one for yourself." He could tell it was mixed with Perrier, not club soda. So Kas had failed his hero! A few years later, I took the Concorde from New York to London as part of a trip to Australia to join a Bowie tour and McCartney and his family were on the same flight. I talked to Linda for a while and then I saw Paul and said, "Hey, Paul, it's Roger Powell from

Utopia. You were at the Knebworth show that we played." He goes, "Oh, yes, how's that fine young bass player/singer that you guys have?" I told Kasim and he was really happy.

Kasim: When we played Knebworth in '79, I remember going on stage and looking at John Bonham's set up backstage, and thinking, "We're opening for Led Zeppelin, what is going on here?!"

1982's *Swing To The Right* was the band's last album for Bearsville...

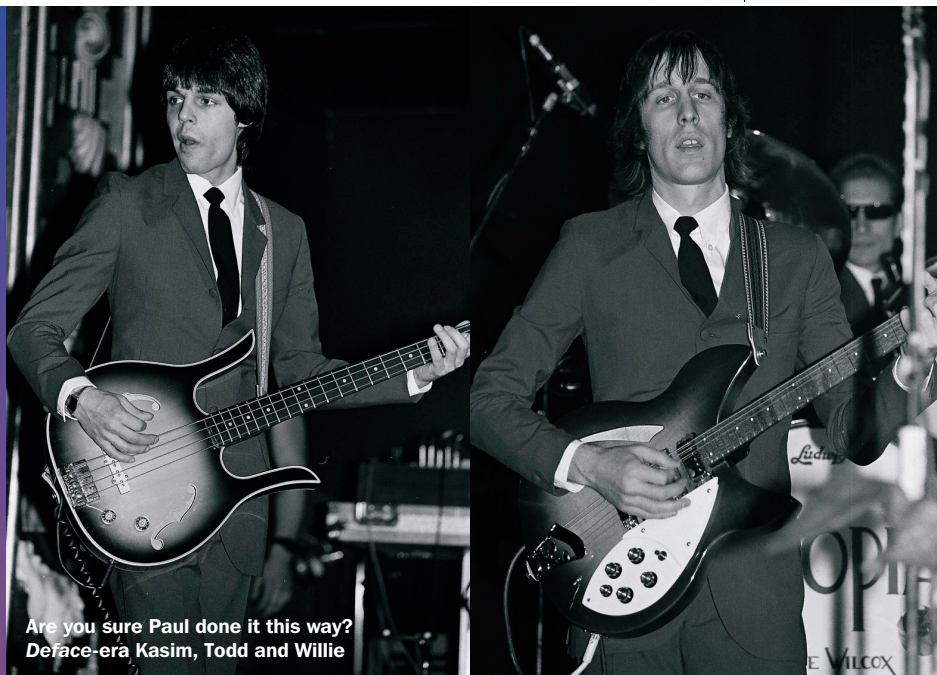
Roger: After our deal with Bearsville was over, Arista was interested in signing us. I remember sitting in Clive Davis' office with Todd and thinking, "This is so cool, we're gonna be on frickin' Arista! They believe in Todd and they believe in the band. We're gonna really hit the big time!" We were having lunch and Clive looks at Todd and the first thing out of his mouth was, "You've had hits of your own and I'm assuming if we sign you're gonna do that with Utopia." Todd took supreme offense at the assumption that without thinking about anything he could turn out hit songs and hit productions. So Todd said, "Well, Rog, we have to leave now," and we walked out of Clive's office. In actuality, Todd had had to be wrestled *into* Clive's office, as he thought the label was too commercial. I firmly believe Todd didn't want Utopia to be another Bon Jovi. He wanted the band to be more than a mainstream commercial success. He thought of it as an experimental, progressive unit.

When working on 1985's *POV*, did you know it would be Utopia's last album?

Todd: We were aware the clock was ticking. The shrinking finances were a problem. Everyone was used to getting a certain amount of money out of the band and now it looked like we weren't going to get a big label contract, and the evolution of the business was going in other directions. People were kind of panicking. The band looked like a lifeboat to some of the members and they felt, "We have to make this a commercial lifeboat." We didn't have a natural aversion to making a commercial record, we were just never sure we knew how! At this point we were trying to be as accessible as we could; we were not interested in doing another dark, industrial-sounding record like *Oblivion*. It was the desire to somehow increase either job security for Utopia and the money the band was making, or the guys having an eye on doing other things. Roger was starting to develop software. We didn't know it'd be the last Utopia record until we'd completed it. Not only were we having problems with getting the record distributed, but our creative process completely broke down.

A power struggle ensued between Todd and Willie on *POV*. What were the issues?

Todd: The band evolved through a series of technologies. At first we didn't have drum machines and tended not to use them. We got to a certain point and it became irresistible to Willie! That period was the beginning of the end. Willie wanted a production credit on that



Are you sure Paul done it this way?
Deface-era Kasim, Todd and Willie

album. I'd been producing all of the records and Willie wanted to have a career producing records for other people so he was looking to get a credit. Unfortunately, he didn't really assume the role of a producer [laughs]. Instead, he decided to learn how to programme drum machines while we were trying to make a record! Using drum machines destroyed our working dynamic because we were used to being interactive and he was learning how to do this so we couldn't whip off a decent drum beat quickly. In the end, I thought it made for the most lifeless Utopia record.

Kasim: It was difficult doing that record. Willie was being a thorn in everybody's side, trying to rally support for his idea of what the band should be. In all fairness to Todd, Roger and I were like, "Look Willie, this is just the way it is. We just have to defer to him." He said, "No, that's not what the band is about, it's an equal band. There's four of us and we each get a vote." Things were tense. Roger threw a heavy keyboard manual across the room and said, "This is just bullshit!"

Roger: They fired me from the band because I got pissed off and yelled at everybody. The manager called me and said, "You're not in the band anymore," and I said, "Oh yes I am. You do not want to attempt to even fire me."

Kasim: We were having one of the arguments that was common during that record between Todd and Willie about drum programming. In his defence, Todd just wanted the record to have some feel of human-ness.

Willie: It had nothing to do with me wanting to bring a drum machine into the band. Typically, when we were making records I would sit at the drum set, Todd would be on guitar, Roger on piano and Kasim on bass. It's very difficult as a drummer to be able to contribute to a song harmonically when you're sitting behind the drums. So the impetus for me was never to programme drum machines, it was about having the ability for me to bring in material to the band that I had a role in conceiving other than being behind a drum set. Some of the grooves and the styles of music I brought in, the band wasn't that great at doing, so I wanted to bring some of those elements in, because I could do them. With the Oberheim drum

programming system I could make bass parts, keyboard parts; I could do grooves. The pop music culture started to embrace those sounds. For me it wasn't about wanting to control the band or break up their creative processes but simply to bring in an influence that would become a gigantic part of pop culture.

In terms of the credit, it was never about me wanting to be a producer for other people. It was about me starting to get credit for my contributions. Though Todd was listed as producer on our records, all the members added a lot. I felt my contribution to *POV* was significant enough to warrant a credit. Also, Todd engineered our records until that time. I always had strong feelings about what I wanted to hear, so I brought an engineer in on that record to do some of the drum recordings. I wanted to see us grow and add other colours to our music. For me, it was a band and we all had a voice. I didn't want to do things the way we always did them. It's not a mutiny; it's a colour and an artistic choice to grow.

What are your memories of the last Utopia tour, a shared bill with The Tubes?

Kasim: It was very sad because that was the swan song for both bands in the form they were in at the time. The Tubes had just been dropped by Capitol and Utopia couldn't get a deal if we'd paid for one. I recall we played in Ann Arbor, Michigan, playing to a third of the house. Neither could sell out a theatre. It was about more supply than demand.

Todd Rundgren UK collectables

NAZZ

68	Screen Gems SGC 219001	Open My Eyes/Hello It's Me	£20
69	Screen Gems SGC 219002	Hello It's Me/Crowded	£10
69	Screen Gems SGC 219003	Not Wrong Long/Under The Ice	£10
69	Screen Gems SGC 221001	NAZZ (LP)	£65

RUNT/TODD RUNDGREN

71	Bearsville K 44505	RUNT (LP)	£15
71	Bearsville K 44506	RUNT: THE BALLAD OF TODD RUNDGREN (LP)	£15
72	Bearsville K 15502	I Saw The Light/Marlene	£6

UTOPIA

82	Epic XPS 166	Infrared And Ultra Violet/Forgotten But Not Gone/Private Heaven/Princess Of The Universe/Chapter And Verse (EP)	£12
82	Epic EPC 25207	UTOPIA (LP, with free five-track EP)	£20

List seem short? Some Rundgren records never saw UK release; some fall below the RRP limit of a value of £15.

What do you miss most about Utopia?

Kasim: I miss the music the most, playing with Todd, Roger and Willie. I miss singing with them. The sum was greater than the parts.

Willie: Making records and playing them around the world and touching people's lives with that music. That group of people had a chemistry; we had a very special feeling.

Roger: What I miss most is performing and playing those songs. I was part of creating those songs and then they became part of my life. Those songs are permanently etched in me.

Todd: We did some reunion shows with the original line-up in 2009 and in 1992 the latter-day version reunited to play shows in Japan, so I've had an opportunity to relive the band.

If you had to pick one of your albums that best tells the band's story, which one is it?

Todd: You might as well say *Adventures In Utopia*, since it was right there in the middle. If we were going to succeed more broadly, that's the sweet spot we'd have stayed in.

Willie: It's a toss up between *Adventures* and *Utopia* because they were stylistically consistent.

Roger: *Adventures In Utopia*.

Kasim: *Oblivion*. There was a thread through that record. It was extremely cohesive. We weren't trying to do anything but write really intelligent pop music. I'll also add *Adventures*, because it was an extremely collaborative time.

Why didn't the band commercially make it?

Todd: It's possible that in the mind of the industry the band was somewhat in my shadow, but I was committed to it. There were years when I didn't do any of my own stuff, just Utopia records. It's unusual for a guy who has a potentially successful solo career to form a band. It's much more commonplace for you to come out of a band and go solo. There really was no model for what we were doing. People aren't used to a guy who's created a name for himself going off to be a member of a band and have that be a whole separate thing. RC

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