

A Conversation With Todd Rundgren

by Tony Thomas



Todd Rundgren has been called a wizard and a true star. With three decades in the music business, his resume is long. Very long. He is known as a singer, guitarist, pop icon, songwriter, record producer, arranger, video innovator, computer software developer, multimedia proponent and visionary. Besides his memberships in the Nazz in the 60s and Utopia in the 70s and 80s, Todd has released 16 solo albums and has produced, engineered and/or played on about 80 others by artists like Meatloaf (“Bat Out of Hell”), XTC (“Skylarking”), The Tubes (“Remote Control” and “Love Bomb”), Grand Funk Railroad (“We’re An American Band” and “Shinin’ On”), Patti Smith (“Wave”), The New York Dolls (self-titled debut) and The Psychedelic Furs (“Forever Now”). Todd will be the keynote speaker at Undercurrents at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this Friday. We talked to him (“Mr. Busy” as he dubbed himself at the start of our interview) about multimedia, music and his iconoclastic view of the music industry.

SCENE: Your last two efforts, “No World Order” and “The Individualist” were accompanied by exciting new multimedia technologies, namely CD-I (CD Interactive) and Enhanced CD. Was this by accident or by design?

Todd: It was sort of by design. “No World Order” came out in various versions including a non-interactive version and a “Lite” version for those who couldn’t handle the hard-core nature of it. The principal driving motivation behind the music and the form that it took was the idea of non-linear music. That is, music that can be deconstructed and reconstructed in a variety of different ways. On that particular record I was particularly conscious of how the music would be deconstructed and that affected the actual nature of the music. In addition, we had to come up with technology that would allow us to perform recontextualization in real time. And that became the interactive versions of “No World Order”. “The Individualist”, on the other hand, is what we call an Enhanced CD. It is not an interactive music CD because it doesn’t substantially change the way the music is presented. If you have a computer, it just adds another aspect to the music by allowing you to enjoy a visual presentation of each song or to explore the little interactive lyric engine that we designed. So, the interactive music component is minimal, but the interactivity is still relatively high as compared to a normal CD. The advantage of Enhanced CD is that if you don’t have a computer, you can still enjoy the music.

SCENE: Are you going to continue to innovate new technologies with future releases? For example, DVD (Digital Video Disc) is on the horizon. Will your next project be released on DVD?

Todd: It is quite possible we will get involved with that, however, I haven’t really thought about exactly how. Right now, we are moving away a disc based model to a direct-to-home delivery model. In other words, I am working to create systems that will allow people to listen to as much or as little of my music or the other aspects of the presentation as they want without actually having to go out and buy a disc. We’ll be using the Internet, interactive television delivery and private media-oriented backbones that are being built even as we speak. Whatever is there we’ll take advantage of it. We are convinced that direct delivery of entertainment and information into the home is going to be the prevailing model in the next millennium. After all, the idea of owning a plastic disc has nothing to do with the enjoyment of what is on that disc. You bought the disc to hear the sounds, not to own the disc. In the end, we’ll save plastic, trees, oil and all the things that have to do with manufacturing and transporting all those discs around.

SCENE: I’ve noticed when attending events surrounding your visits to Cleveland that your admirers fall into two camps: There are those who like your newer stuff and those who are kind of “stuck in the 70s” and yearn for the Todd of old. How do you respond to these two groups?

Todd: Well, we have uses for both of them. (laughs) The advantage of the group that is stuck in the 70s is they are the ones that have gone on to the board rooms of the Fortune 500 companies. Those are the folks that I deal with when I’m working on new deals and forging technology alliances. It is not required that they listen to my new stuff or get into it. The fact is, they are in a demographic that doesn’t even buy records anymore. So, there is a certain amount of hypocrisy there when they tell me to play the old stuff. Like they would go out and buy it if I did. The reality of record purchasing is that it peaks around your early twenties and then slacks off as you grow older. The record industry doesn’t even service an audience with that low of a return rate. Of course, there is Hootie and the Blowfish for the crowd that wants that mellow pre-70s sound. (laughs) The advantage of the newer stuff is that it attracts a younger and fresher audience that is more inclined to buy music.

SCENE: I’ve heard rumors of a possible Utopia reunion. Is there any truth to the rumors?

Todd: That is a total fabrication. I haven’t heard any circumstances under which that would happen. Not for a million dollars in cash (laughs) or sudden personality changes in the band. There doesn’t seem to be much point in that. The guys in the band have gone on with their lives and careers. The original idea behind the

band was “musical big game hunters” attacking new areas of music and not with the idea of creating our own style. It was fun for us and the audience to venture into new musical territory. At the end of the band’s existence, that started to wear thin as a “raison” because some of the guys in the band became concerned about their livelihood. And “musical big game hunting” doesn’t underwrite your livelihood very well.

SCENE: I noticed that your recent lyrics seem to mirror the rampant cynicism that permeates our society.

Todd: There is an element of that. My output veers back and forth between the introspective and the outward looking. Recently, it has gone into an outward looking phase and that is probably because I’m preparing to move to Hawaii. And that’s because I’m getting fed up with this country. I’m about to move to place where I feel that I can be more introspective and that will probably affect the things that I write about. I find it difficult to be in the world and not constantly react to it. It is something that I don’t enjoy and I don’t advise. I’m trying to find a solution for myself which is a quieter and more isolated place.

SCENE: You’ve spent the last 30 years in the music business and have released records in each of the last four decades. How do you think the business has changed and how have you changed as an artist?

Todd: That is too large a topic to cover in the time we have remaining and is essentially the basis of what I’ll be discussing in my keynote at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It will be “The Evolution of the Record Business from What You Mistakenly Thought it Was in the 60s to Mistakenly Think it Is Now”. I have the advantage of certain insights since I got in there before it seriously went downhill thanks to things ranging from the Arbitron ratings system to the success of “Frampton Comes Alive”. Before that, if an artist sold 50,000 copies, they were still viable. After that, record companies became attractive to multinational giants who started buying them up and running them from accounting offices. Ah, the good old days.

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