

Idiot/Savant?

Todd Rundgren: Goofball wizard

by David Deaton

Todd Rundgren defies analysis. Examining his musical *corpus* offers the same personal challenge as nailing jello to a tree. All that one can say of his dozen solo albums, given to the world at longer intervals now, is that they are acts of Todd.

Now his latest: a handsomely packaged double-album retrospective simply titled *Anthology*. "Greatest Hits" would not have been accurate, because Todd Rundgren has had very few in his 20-year career.

But of those that were, some people will smile just at being reminded of their titles: "Hello, It's Me", "I Saw The Light", "It Wouldn't Have Made Any Difference". These aren't merely hits, they are gems.

These songs, dating from the early '70s, show off the best of Rundgren's songwriting abilities. Nova-like, these abilities came to a head in 1972 in a double album that was hailed then, and remains now, an unqualified masterpiece.

Something/Anything? appeared as a fountain of rapturous melody and earned for its creator the onerous honour of being called a genius. Not only did Rundgren compose all the songs, he arranged, performed, and produced them. All by himself. At the hoary old age of 25. (Take that, Prince!)

Even the liner notes concede that Rundgren never surpassed the precocious mastery of *S/A*, and only embarrassed himself when he tried. *Something/Anything?* turned out to be a one-shot wonder.

What does one do for an encore? After scaling the charts and his own artistic heights, Rundgren took a slow-motion dive that has yet to bottom out. Eighteen years later, he borders on being another pop relic, his music surviving as cultural artifact.

What went wrong? *Anthology*, alas, reveals all. The story unfolds in chronological horror on the songs themselves.

After the incomparable magic of Side One, which closes with four prime cuts from *Something/Anything?*, we enter increas-

ingly rocky terrain. Three pitfalls make themselves pitifully evident.

The first of these, an almost inevitable concomitant of success, is wimmin troubles. Love is Rundgren's great theme. As he puts it in one song, "It's like nothing else to make you feel sure you're alive."

His early ballads are made by such boyish, buoyant innocence you wonder whether he really had someone in mind. (All of them are addressed to someone.) It's hard to recall a more evocatively touching song than the one that admits:

But it wouldn't have made any difference
if you loved me.
How could you love me?
When it wouldn't really make any difference
if you really loved me.
You just did not love me.
(1972)

Subsequent years show that Todd has had better luck with the tender gender, although not usually for very long. Women seem to come and go, as grieving turns to grievance:

It's the last ride,
Your little game is over . . .
(1974)

Predictably, greivance turns to gloating:

You cried wolf
Once too often.
You cried wolf,
You made me run . . .
(1978)

The saga of Todd and the maidens concludes not in bitter balladry but in a driving dance-number, so pointedly and omnivorously lustful it would make disco music blush ("Hideaway", 1983). So much for relationships!

There is more simple goodness in the early song "(Please Be) Nice To Me" than on all of Side Four (1981 onwards). One yearns for the kinder, gentler songs of lucked-out youth. But those days are through.

Is it necessary to mention that Todd Rundgren moved to California? As sorely reflected in his

music, T.R. traded his fighting Philadelphia soul for the groovy crypto-spiritual snap-crackle-optimism of Lotus Land. It was a bad move.

Like a true Californian, Rundgren shows on later songs that his ultimate involvement is with himself. He's the kind of guy who can ask, apparently in all seriousness, "I wonder what I'd do with myself/If the world was gone?" (Gee, Todd, good question. Make more records perhaps?)

Rundgren's self-absorption reaches its apotheosis on the very last song of *Anthology*. In "Something To Fall Back On" a cascade of sounds hitherto unheard-of leads into a lively little number replete with intricate harmonies and — every sound is Todd's! There are no instruments here, only Rundgren playing with his vocal organ and an editing machine. What is the song about? Don't even ask! Just sit back and bask in this symphony of solipsism.

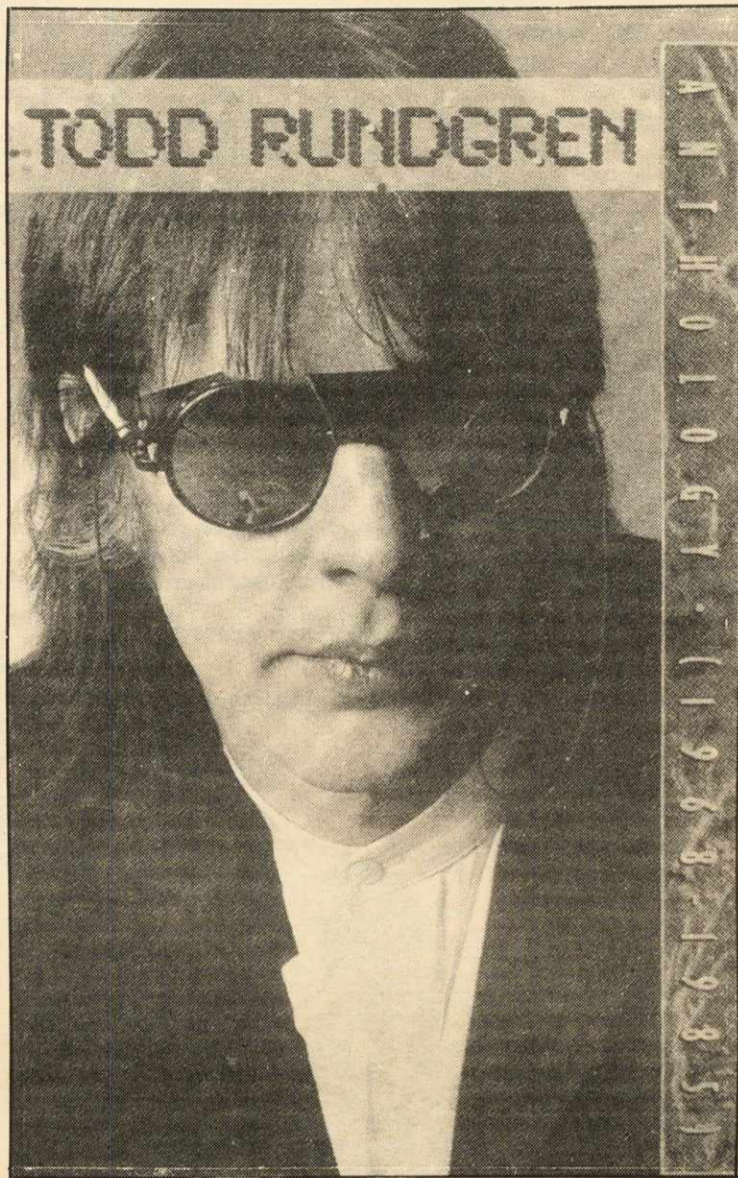
Except for this last gasp of brilliance, a certain sameness settles over *Anthology*. The songwriting declines into mediocrity, covered up by inventive and elaborate arrangements.

In other words, *synthesizers*. As befits a techno-whiz-kid, Rundgren was among the first rock musicians to run with the new technology. But, as with other perks of stardom, there can be too much of a good thing.

Some of Rundgren's songs positively drown in synthesizers. On the intended foot-stomper "Bang The Drum All Day" you can barely hear the percussion. But some of these latter-day songs would have been improved simply by not being recorded, and a hollow, ersatz sound suits them all too well.

It would unjust to dismiss Todd Rundgren as another young man ruined by sex, success, and synthesizers. By sheer ingenuity and a winsomeness that shines through occasionally, his songs can still astonish and delight.

But *Anthology* is humbling evidence that, somewhere along the line, Rundgren stalled as an artist. He stopped growing. (The Runt stunted!) The promise of



Todd Rundgren: *Anthology* (1968-85). Still flakey after all these years.

his genius went largely unfulfilled. The most he could aspire to was inspired insipidness. Todd Rundgren became, as his last album reveals, *Almost Human*. As for the album itself, *Anthology* stands as a worthy compilation that does full justice to Rundgren. It is graced with complete lyrics, sober liner notes, and, best of all, a two-cassette format that allows you to take in one 20-minute side at a time. You become grateful for this after Side One.

Todd devotees (and there are many of them) will no doubt scorn such a package, howling at what's been left out. Who knows if they're right? Me, I'm going to

trade this sucker in for a copy of *Something/Anything?*

Todd Rundgren Discography

- 1970 — Runt
- 1971 — Runt, The Ballad of Todd Rundgren
- 1972 — *Something/Anything?*
- 1973 — *A Wizard, A True Star*
- 1974 — Todd
- 1975 — *Initiation*
- 1976 — *Faithful*
- 1978 — *Hermit of Mink Hollow*
- 1981 — *Healing*
- 1983 — *The Ever Popular Tortured Artist Effect*
- 1985 — *A Cappella*
- 1989 — *Almost Human*

