

## **NRBQ: The History and Discography**      **Frank Goodman (Puremusic 12/2000)**

Thirty years. That's a long, long time. It's a long time to be married, a long time to be partners, a long time, even, to be friends. But to any that have tried, it's an unthinkably long time to be a band. NRBQ has not only stayed together for thirty years, they have been on the road steadily, and have arguably played more dates than anyone in the history of popular music. And that's basically what their repertoire is: the history of popular music.

They are the crown princes and the court jesters of rock and roll. They are multiple musical personalities, and will throw every style of music in the book at you in an hour show, and shred them all faster than Oliver North. They make you laugh your ass off, dance your ass off, make you want to fall in love, and pull you right out of your bag. NRBQ is the ultimate refuge for grownups that want a living rock and roll outlet and young people who are looking for a roots band that's more than their peers imitating old records. NRBQ might laugh at the phrase, but they are living legends.

Unlike imaged bands, they don't do their hair and clothes to reflect the style of music they play. They'd literally have to wear wigs and change outfits for every song. Some say their repertoire is 500 songs, others even more. Sometimes they have a "magic box" on stage where fans try to stump the band and they'll attempt to play whatever they draw. Some of these magic box numbers are on the live CDs, which many Q diehards insist are the best ones.

I recently digested nearly 100 pages of articles written about NRBQ over the years. The difficulty in writing a comprehensive article about them is that the story is inevitably very long, and potentially minutiae-intensive. So I'm only going to tell some of the story, but I will refer you to all the fine articles on them as they were referred to me. Check out the Unofficial NRBQ Page (at <http://users.loa.com/~ceol/nrbq.html>). It's a fabulous labor of love by a devoted fan, and there you will find most anything related to NRBQ, or a link to it.

Rather than tell the story again at length, I'd like to urge readers who've never heard the band to check them out, because there's literally nobody like them. (We'll include some short audio clips, but they need to be seen live, really.) They've been around so long that many more people have heard of them than have actually heard their music. For the best cross section of their work, you just can't beat the Rhino release called *Peek-A-Boo*, an NRBQ compilation from '69 to '89. 35 tunes, 5 record labels, 20 years. Rounder Records, the actual home of NRBQ, has re-released a number of their early efforts and offers its own fine compilation titled *Uncommon Denominators*.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of the band's story. In 1967, original guitarist Steve Ferguson and keyboard virtuoso Terry Adams left the bands and scene they'd shared in Louisville, KY, for Miami, in search of steady work. There they were destined to meet two musicians from New York who'd gone there to play some dates as The Seven of Us, a white soul band. They were Jody St. Nicholas (aka Joey Spampinato) and Frank Gadler.

When the keyboard player from The Seven of Us decided to go home, Terry Adams took his spot. Soon Ferguson was also added, quickly followed by a pair of horns, Keith Spring on sax and Terry's brother Donn on trombone. After incorporating drummer Tom Staley into the mix, the former Seven of Us were renamed NRBQ. They journeyed north to Jersey and met the legendary Slim Harpo. Slim knew Steve Paul, who owned the hotspot in NYC called The Scene. Harpo arranged a gig for the band, which led to a contract with Columbia, and their eponymous debut record. Their stage show had created a big buzz in the city, and Hendrix and Page were among their fans. They'd already successfully pissed Bill Graham off by insisting that the Joshua Light Show be turned off during a Fillmore performance.

Right from the top, NRBQ released multi-genre records that confounded the marketing department and fans alike. (Pop groups had never done that. When the Beatles had success pushing the pop envelope, they were already established.) On top of their original tunes, the first LP included covers by artists as diverse as Eddie Cochran, Sun Ra, Bruce Channel ("Hey, Baby"), Carla Bley, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. It's now 30 years later, and you still can't get away with that on your first record.

Looking for a marketing approach, Columbia paired NRBQ with Carl Perkins for the second record. Although there are some high spots, only half the LP was done together. (At least they insisted on not doing another remake of "Blue Suede Shoes.") But again, critical reaction was mixed and it didn't sell. The hippies didn't like rockabilly, and the greasers didn't like long hair, so there you go.

Even the esteemed Peter Guralnick in a Rolling Stone review said, "NRBQ...don't seem able to settle on a style. It isn't so much that they don't know what to play as that they don't know what to leave out..." He continued on in even less complimentary terms, but I don't care to repeat it. I do wonder what he thinks of them now, 30 years later, having made rock and roll history. (Guralnick himself went on to write a series of fabulous books on American music.)

Dang it, I had promised the reader a thumbnail sketch of a long story. I guess I don't know what to leave out, either. Exit Columbia, enter Kama Sutra records, home of the Lovin' Spoonful success. Steve Ferguson, guitar wunderkind and co-founder, also exits. Unfortunately, his sporadic later efforts would come to little, though his talent as a player, singer, and songwriter were truly extraordinary. He was replaced by Al Anderson, who would thrill their audiences for decades with his Telecaster made tiny by his frame, but especially his hands. His onstage persona was charming, comical, moving, all at once, and mesmerized many. Al was in NRBQ from 1971 to 1994. His successor will be discussed at due length later.

Kama Sutra put out *Scraps*, a cool record. The Q started to gel at a different level, all their many influences began to combine and emerge as their own brand of pop, what many years later they would call omnipop. The songwriting of Terry, Al, and now Joey was steadily developing, and all three were lead vocalists and good front men. In 1972, vocalist Frank Gadler moved on. The horns that they'd used on records became full time,

and a big part of the next album, *Workshop*, their last one for Kama Sutra. It would be four years before another record came out, but NRBQ's essence was always live performance, and the shows raged on.

On stage, the band is led by keyboardist Terry Adams. He not only calls the songs (there's never a set list), he runs the energy. The guitarist is playing off him, and Joey is the glue between. Joey is the good vibe with a perfect sound, and a velvet voice for the naive beauty of his pop songs. Terry is a right off his rocker piano and clavinet genius whose songs and vocals are frequently more off the wall. He stalks the stage like a crazy man, and mugs the audience like a simian caged. He plays with his fists, his elbows, and his behind, and it all sounds right. He's a manic mystery. Little Richard meets Thelonius Monk and they beat the shit out of Bach. Around 1974 they joined forces with a suitably demented Rainman of a drummer, Tom Ardolino. He'd never played with a group before, and quit his job at K-Mart to join his favorite band in the world.

Tom knew the band already for a few years as a fan, and used to exchange offbeat reel to reel tapes with Terry, before cassettes became popular. One show, drummer Staley didn't turn up for an encore in time, and Terry gave Ardolino the nod. When Tom Staley headed for Florida to join the Breathers, Tom Ardolino joined NRBQ and the personnel locked in for 20 years. As great as Ferguson, Gadler and Staley each were in their respective rights, the magic of this particular quartet went from fiery sparks to constant current.

No labels were biting in 1974, so the band started their own Red Rooster label, and put out *All Hopped Up* (recently reissued by Rounder as *Ridin' in My Car*.) This included many favorites besides "Ridin' in my Car", like "I Got a Rocket in My Pocket," and "It Feels Good." Mercury records picked up NRBQ in 1978 and released *At Yankee Stadium*. Although it's one of their very best records, Mercury fared no better than Columbia or Kama Sutra had with promotion and sales.

*Kick Me Hard* came out in 1979 on Red Rooster, a swinging live record. (The later Rounder Deluxe edition has 8 bonus tracks, including some aforementioned magic box numbers.) The next year saw the popular *Tiddlywinks*. It's enigmatic how a band with relatively little or no airplay and low sales managed to tour so extensively and put out a record almost every year! And their cult status as the best working band on the road continued to grow.

The Q were freaks for professional wrestling long before it became hip, and in 1980 hired Captain Lou Albano to be their manager. Lou got involved with public appearances, sang a commercial that became a single "B" side, pushed the band on wrestling shows, and did some TV and video spots. Although he would later reappear on Cindy Lauper's video and in the mid-eighties as her manager, his stint with NRBQ lasted only a short time.

About three years of club dates later, Bearsville Records (owned by Dylan's former manager Albert Grossman) signed NRBQ. Their most accessible record to date resulted, *Grooves In Orbit*. It could have, should have, been a crossroads release based on the college airplay of the day, but failed to break them out onto the airwaves at large. What

really created a crucial impasse, though, was that another Bearsville record in the works was stopped cold. Warners had wanted a cut removed from *Grooves In Orbit*, “12 Bar Blues.” The band was behind the song, and it had been written by a friend, Jack Butwell, who was dying at the time. They had told him they were cutting his song, and it was staying on the album, as far as Terry and the group were concerned. That standoff opened up a rift with Grossman that proved costly. He refused to release the next album. Even worse, he wouldn’t let them out of their contract. NRBQ was unable to make any new recordings until he died a few years later.

But it didn’t preclude them from re-issuing music cut before Bearsville. Out came *Tapdancin’ Bats*, a decidedly less commercial collection of instrumental jazz and rock tunes less catchy than *Grooves in Orbit*. Although I haven’t gone into the numerous recording projects different members of the band participated in along the way, it’s personally important to note their collaboration with Skeeter Davis, an album called *She Sings, They Play*. Though recorded in 1981, it did not get released on Red Rooster until 1985. It won the NAIRD Country Album of the Year. And Joey Spampinato and Skeeter Davis got married shortly afterward.

While Grossman and their contract with him mutually expired, the Q continued to release on Red Rooster. They put out a Christmas release, a collection of material from the Lou Albano days, and *Little Al*, recordings from Al Anderson’s childhood that a neighbor had preserved. The next real Q record was *RC Cola and a Moon Pie*, which was a reissue of the early *Workshop* record with 3 bonus tracks.

One side project that is too big not to mention is the Chuck Berry concert film, *Hail! Hail! Rock ’n’ Roll*. When musical director Keith Richards put the band together, he picked Joey to play the bass, because Joey was the only person he knew who could get an upright sound out of an electric bass. He also used him on some tracks of his solo record.

One weekend at Lupo’s, a club in Providence, RI, two CDs worth of live material was captured: *God Bless Us All* (1987) and *Diggin’ Uncle Q* (1988). The latter is especially enjoyable, and I’m diggin’ on it right now, as a matter of fact. And around this time the band contributed to a Disney tribute album with Hal Willner, adding a rousing rendition of “Whistle While You Work.”

On the heels of the Chuck Berry movie and the Disney record, up stepped the third major label, Virgin Records. Like a commercially viable follow up to *Grooves In Orbit*, *Wild Weekend* had great radio sounds and songs, and got some airplay. In 1989, NRBQ was the opening act on the R.E.M. tour. Rhino’s excellent compilation, *Peek-A-Boo*, appeared in 1990. Although Rhino did another CD with the band, *Message for the Mess Age*, it did not appear for four years until 1994, just when Al Anderson decided to leave the band after 20 years.

The band bounced back to Rounder Records for 1996’s *Tokyo*, the first album to include Joey’s brother Johnny Spampinato on guitar. After 20 years as a formidable member, Al Anderson’s shoes were not easily filled. On top of being a powerful stage presence, his

contributions went beyond the uniquely guitaristic. He was also a singer with personality and a bona fide great songwriter. Covers of his tunes by other acts were beginning to roll in. He left, in fact, to pursue songwriting in Nashville full time, and has been very successful there.

But Johnny had grown up with the tunes, and he stepped in as seamlessly as anyone could have. His guitar playing in the group today is very distinctive, he sings good lead and harmony, and he's brought some fabulous songs into the mix that are likely to become band classics. With only two personnel changes in 26 years, the renegade personality of NRBQ remains intact and yet continues to evolve. They recorded a kids' album in 1997, *You're Nice People You Are*. Yet another great live recording was released by Rounder in 1998, called *You Gotta Be Loose*, recorded live in the USA.

To bring us up to date recording wise, there are two reissues (with bonus tracks, always!) and a studio recording. Rounder reissued *All Hopped Up* (from '77) as *Ridin in My Car*, and *Scraps* (from '72). Marking their momentous 30th Anniversary, the Q recorded *NRBQ*, self-titled like the first record. It's a tasty disc with a number of memorable songs. They also had a major anniversary bash at the Bowery Ballroom in NYC. One of the more unpredictable things in their unpredictable career took place recently when they were featured in an episode of *The Simpsons*. They appeared in animated form as a band in a biker bar, and Joey was the voice behind a tearjerker that Homer sang to his dad. Unprecedentedly, they appeared as themselves at the end of the show, taped backstage at the Bowery Ballroom anniversary show doing a completely whacked version of the Simpsons theme. Tonight I'm going to rent the video of *28 Days* with Sandra Bullock (about rehab), because the band is not only part of the soundtrack, but appears in the film.

I tried, but there is no such thing as a thumbnail sketch of a career so full, so long, and one still thriving. There is no other story in rock and roll that parallels that of NRBQ. All other candidates either gave up, broke up, or blew up in one way or another. Some because they got rich and famous, some because they didn't. Many of the highest profile musicians of our age recognize them as the greatest rock and roll band in history. Elvis Costello called them "the greatest band in America" and Bonnie Raitt proclaimed them "The Best Band in the Universe." And still, after 30 years of relentless touring and 23 CDs released domestically, they have not been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. If you think that's a travesty, add your voice to that initiative on the bottom left of the NRBQ Unofficial Page. And by all means, see them when they come next to your town, because they're coming, that's for sure. If you've never seen them, it's something you'll never forget. NRBQ is what rock and roll is all about.

### **A Brief Discography (LPs, no side projects)**

1. NRBQ (Columbia) 1969
2. Boppin' the Blues (w/ Carl Perkins, Columbia) 1970
3. Scraps (Kama Sutra) 1972
4. Workshop (Kama Sutra) 1973
5. All Hopped Up (Red Rooster) 1977

6. Live at Yankee Stadium (Mercury) 1978
7. Kick Me Hard (Red Rooster/Rounder) 1979
8. Tiddlywinks (Rounder/Red Rooster) 1980
9. Grooves in Orbit (Bearsville) 1983
10. Tapdancin' Bats (Rounder/Red Rooster) 1984
11. NRBQ and Captain Lou Albano 1986
12. RC Cola and a Moon Pie (Rounder/Red Rooster) 1986
13. Uncommon Denominators (Rounder) 1987 Compilation
14. God Bless Us All (Rounder) 1987
15. Diggin' Uncle Q (Rounder) 1988
16. Kick Me Hard- the Deluxe Edition (Rounder) 1989
17. Wild Weekend (Virgin) 1989
18. Peek-A-Boo (Rhino) 1990 Compilation ('69-'89)
19. Stay with We (Columbia/Legacy)
20. Message for the Mess Age (Rhino) 1994
21. Tokyo (Rounder) 1996
22. You're Nice People You Are (Rounder) 1997
23. Gotta Be Loose (Rounder) 1998
24. Ridin' in My Car (Rounder) 1999
25. NRBQ (Rounder) 1999
26. Scraps (Rounder) 2000 (remastered, 3 bonus tracks)