

**Puremusic interview with Todd Rundgren
by Bill DeMain (5/2005, Puremusic.com)**

Todd Rundgren reached a crossroads on November 10, 1973, when his ballad “Hello It’s Me” rose to number 5 on the Billboard singles chart. One way pointed to superstardom. The other to the shadowy land of cult status.

But for Todd, it wasn’t a matter of choosing. While *Something/Anything*, the double album that spawned “Hello It’s Me,” was catching on a year after its release, for its creator, it was already a speck in the rearview mirror. He had followed his muses into new experimental territory, releasing the ambitious *A Wizard, A True Star*, an eclectic tour-de-force on which the 25-year old wunderkind wrote, arranged, engineered, produced and played every instrument. Though *Something/Anything* was chock full of potential hits, Todd refused to backtrack. “No fucking way am I releasing anything else off that album,” he told his label.

He did however concede to perform “Hello It’s Me” on Wolfman Jack’s TV show, *The Midnight Special*, a move that sealed his commercial fate. Viewers who were seeing him for the first time must’ve been shocked. Sporting blue-orange hair, eyes painted with glitter teardrops, dark lipstick, and a skimpy top made of iridescent feathers, Todd looked like a cross between a drag queen and the NBC peacock.

This incident typifies the erratic career choices (some might call it sabotage) that Todd would make over the next three decades and thirty albums, choices that would test even the allegiance of his most faithful followers. Looks, bands, labels, philosophies, styles—if it was a skin that could be shed, Todd would shed it.

The constant in this fascinating evolution has been his masterful songwriting. No matter if he was writing beautiful love songs like “It Wouldn’t Have Made Any Difference,” 30-minute prog-rock suites like “The Ikon,” ferocious rockers like “Trapped,” or silly pop ditties such as “Bang The Drum All Day,” he couldn’t hide his enormous gift for tuneful melodies (Todd once wrote in the foreword to a songbook collection of his, “These are songs that would’ve been hits if I hadn’t subverted them”) and lyrics that addressed the human condition with an open mind and heart.

Aside from his prowess as a composer, Todd is feted as one of pop’s most original producers, with a resume that includes Badfinger, New York Dolls, Grand Funk Railroad, Cheap Trick, The Tubes, XTC, Jill Sobule, and his biggest success, Meat Loaf (Todd says that the *Bat Out Of Hell* album helped finance many of his audio and video projects through the ‘80s and ‘90s).

He has also been a pioneer for enhanced CDs and online delivery. His 1995 album *The Individualist* was one of the first CDs to be offered over the internet, where subscribers could download the music before it was released in stores. Todd was doing the file sharing thing years before anyone had ever heard of Napster.

Currently, Todd lives and works in the balmy climes of Hawaii. In 2004, he released *Liars*, his nineteenth album (not counting live and greatest hits collections), both in the form of a traditional CD and downloads to subscribers of his website (www.tr-i.com). This spring, he's on a world tour, sharing the bill with fellow pop maverick Joe Jackson.

Puremusic: What was the first song or piece of music that moved you?

Todd Rundgren: It would have to be some orchestral music of some kind, very early on. It's so hard to pinpoint. I look at my life as being sort of fated to be a musician. Circumstances have sort of borne it out, because it turns out I'm able to make a living at it. In terms of my musical remembrances, they're so rife with so many different things that continue to show up as influences in my music that it becomes difficult to pinpoint one particular piece of music. But my memories go back so far that they precede pop songs and things like that. I was aware of the work of Richard Rodgers or Leonard Bernstein before I was aware of Elvis or Patti Page. [laughs]

The first thing I ever tried to pick out as a player or musician, the first time I ever got out a pencil and drew out staves on a piece of paper and tried to actually figure out what a melody was, was probably one of the songs from *On The Town*. It was a very sort of Latin thing and it had a flute line in it. I would try to copy the flute part, and I was actually inspired to try to learn how to play the flute. This was before my love affair with the guitar.

PM: How old were you?

TR: Five maybe. [laughs] Before that, the music I was most aware of was this collection of 45s of the Boston Pops doing various classics. It was one of my principal playthings, partly because the records were made out of semi-transparent colored vinyl. Green and red. I used to gaze through those. RCA, they did this very smart thing, they marketed a record player that was just for playing 45s, and then they started marketing classics and other things on 45s, and eventually pop songs. I think my parents must've gotten this all as a package. The whole pile of Boston Pops records and this little RCA 45 player. You could just stack them up on the spindle, high as they would go. That's what I would do. [laughs] I'd stack them up, listen to the stack, flip the stack over, listen to the other side, while I gazed through the records.

PM: When you were picking out those songs at age five, were you doing that with the thought that you wanted to make your own music?

TR: I don't know whether that was my intention at the time. I'm sure I had some vague idea of eventually composing something. But at the time I think it was just a mysterious new thing to me. Not music, because it was omnipresent, but the concept involved in how music was transcribed and the ideas transferred to other players so that they could perform them.

PM: Was there anybody in your family who was encouraging you?

TR: My dad was encouraging, but it was in a sense that it was a certain kind of music. Like, for instance, when pop music did happen—in particular, The Beatles and other acts that I was interested in—my dad had this hi-fi player that he built himself. It was hi-fi, it was not stereo. [laughs] He wouldn't allow any sort of pop music on there at all. It had to be only his classical long-players and the other kinds of music he liked to listen to, which would also be from musicals. He was fairly high-brow in his tastes in terms of musicals. I don't recall hearing *Music Man* being played a lot in the house, but *Kismet* all the time.

PM: By the time The Beatles came along, did you have it in mind that you wanted to write your own songs?

TR: Yeah, but I don't think I had a good idea of how to go about it. I was well into high school before I came up with anything that resembled an original musical thought. [laughs] It probably wasn't until my senior year that I started to mess around with chord progressions that would eventually become my songwriting style. So no, I wasn't really serious as a songwriter until I was more or less forced into it. It wasn't until I actually put The Nazz together that I came to the realization that “Now you actually have to start writing music” because I had a band that I was fronting and the band has to have original material.

PM: You've said that “Hello It's Me” is the first song you ever wrote. That's pretty accomplished for your first at bat.

TR: As I say, I was an avid listener to all kinds of music, so my influences, even though The Beatles were the biggest thing happening, I still had all of this other music in me. I think one of the reasons why I really appreciated The Beatles was their eclecticism and their willingness to continually incorporate new musical influences. In that sense, it was possible to write a song that would be derivative of The Beatles in a certain era, but you couldn't write a song that captured everything they did. When I first started writing songs, I had no inclination to imitate The Beatles. As a matter of fact, by that time, they were starting to get a little silly. Like *Magical Mystery Tour*, which was what they might call odds and sods nowadays. [laughs] It wasn't done as an album, it was fragments of things all pastiched together. At least to me, it was a disappointment in some sense. I thought The Beatles lost a lot of momentum after *Sgt. Pepper*.

But in any case, the main influence for “Hello It's Me” was an eight bar intro that Jimmy Smith played on a recording of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” He had this whole sort of block chord thing that he did to set up the intro of the song. I tried to capture those changes, and those changes became what are the changes underneath “Hello It's Me.” I then had to come up with melody and words, but the changes are actually almost lifted literally from something that was, from Jimmy Smith's standpoint, a throwaway.

PM: I once interviewed Becker & Fagen [Steely Dan], and they talked about how their approach to chord voicings and harmony was influenced by Laura Nyro. I know you've said you were influenced by her too. What kinds of things about her writing affected you most?

TR: I think there is that more sophisticated R & B thing or the Burt Bacharach side of pop music that involves not just chords that are richer, major and minor sevenths and suspensions and things like that, but the sort of melodic movement and the classical counterpoint elements—that's one of the things that attracted me. But I know for a fact that her influences were the more sophisticated side of R & B, like Jerry Ragovoy and Mann & Weil and Carole King. That is Laura Nyro's lineage. She was a source for that, in a sense, and she also had her own very original and very jazz-influenced way of seeing things. It was that extra layer that made her influential. A lot of those chords she got from other people.

But beyond the elements of her composition, I always thought it was the way she played her own material that really sold it. Nobody ever did a cover version of a Laura Nyro song that was as good as her original version. As time went on, she got into this more introspective, less blatantly emotional approach to music and I sort of lost interest in her after that. It wasn't as if she didn't still have all those elements of her songwriting in there. I just don't think she was selling it in the same way.

PM: Did you know her?

TR: I knew her fairly well. I met her right after *Eli & The Thirteenth Confession*. I actually had arranged a meeting, just because I was so infatuated with her and I wanted to meet the person who had produced all this music. We got along, and we were kind of friendly, and actually, after I met her the first time, she asked me if I wanted to be her band leader. But The Nazz had just signed a record contract and I couldn't skip out on the band, even though it was incredibly tempting.

Years later, she was having trouble getting into the groove on an album called *Mother Spiritual*. She had worked with a lot of the old people like Roy Hallee who had helped her get *Eli & The Thirteenth Confession* recorded. She just wasn't making progress. She was stumped. And we had never worked in the studio together before, but for the purposes of getting her project completed, it worked. I managed to get her into the room and get all the songs recorded. After that, I couldn't really stick around for the mixing part. The pace at which she worked was so slow that I couldn't stick for the duration. But I did get to work with her and knew her for a good period of her professional life.

PM: At the time of *Something/Anything*, you commented that you hit upon a formula to write songs in 15-20 minutes. What was your process like?

TR: It was an evolution from, first of all, writing songs that were supposed to be for a quartet. A drum, bass, guitar kind of quartet. There was a side trip. There was a point where I thought I was not going to be an artist in my own right. I thought I was mostly

going to work with other artists in production, and possibly write songs for them. As it turned out, after doing a couple of productions, there were just some sounds I wanted to hear and some musical experimentation I wanted to do, so they indulged me and let me record my first solo album. It's a real potpourri of different kinds of styles, and in some ways is a signature of the things I would do later. A lot of the songs evolved backwards, from the production that I wanted to do.

PM: The production dictated what kind of song you'd write?

TR: Yes. But by the time I got to the second album, the significant difference in my thought processes was the introduction of pot. [laughs] A lot of people, they talk about the effects that drugs have and often think of them only in the context of them being recreational and of making you goofy and stupid. But the effect it had on me was to give me an overview on what I was trying to accomplish as a songwriter. Suddenly, by the time I got to the second record, I was able to write something that sounded like a style of my own. I was writing things that were adapted to my own vocal range and capabilities, rather than trying to do it backwards, where I'd say, "I want to sound like the singer in Humble Pie so I'll write something higher than I can possibly sing." [laughs] Instead of doing that, I thought, "What's good for me to sing? What ideas are more originally mine?" If you listen to the first album, then the second album, the second album sounds like a songwriter. The first album sounds like a producer.

By the time I got to *Something/Anything*, the kind of overview that I'd gotten about my songwriting became nearly formulaic. I remember the moment that it dawned on me, and it was pretty close to the time I'd finished up most of the recording of *Something/Anything*, and I came to the realization that the very first song on the record, "I Saw The Light," took me approximately twenty minutes to write, from top to bottom. From the time I sat down and started banging out chords until I had all the lyrics done and I was ready to record it. It took about twenty minutes, and I said to myself, "You're not even thinking about it now." [laughs] It's getting too easy. They were all basically starting out with C Major 7th, and I'd start moving my hand around in predictable patterns until a song came out. I thought, "I don't want to be that kind of songwriter."

PM: *A Wizard, A True Star* was a big milestone in your development as a songwriter.

TR: The significant development in that particular evolution was the introduction of psychedelic drugs into the mental mix.

PM: When you were actually writing?

TR: Well, writing to me isn't sitting down at the piano with a pencil in my mouth, the typical movie-style of how songwriters write songs. I'm a terrible collaborator. I can't sit down with someone and start pulling chords out of the air and rhymes. It started just about this time. It's possible that up until the moment I started taking psychedelic drugs, I could've been a perfectly good collaborator, because I'd sit down and those chords would just start to happen.

But after that, I came to realize that what's actually in my head is far more complicated than the songs that I finally come up with, because I'm still allowing myself to be constrained by basic formulas of songwriting that I didn't come up with. Somebody else invented them and capitalized on them, and everybody else realized, "Oh, that's how you write a song." And the songs are always about your relationship [laughs], and you use the word "love" all the time, whether you're thinking about love or not. The word "love" has got to be in there. All of these things came to me, and no matter how I might be improving as a songwriter, I was improving according to somebody else's yardstick, not my own.

And that was the point where I realized also that the studio was becoming my compositional tool. It wasn't a piano. I don't sit down at the piano with a pad or something like that. What I do is I gestate musical ideas and lyrical ideas and hope that they will, sort of like DNA, match themselves up by the time we get to the end of the process. [laughs]

PM: I've read that you don't write lyrics until the very end of the recording process

TR: Right. I completely record everything before I ever get to the vocals. That's because the studio became my compositional tool. Some people, the first thing they'll do is come up with chords and melodies and figure them out on the piano. For me, I've figured them out on tape, or now, digitally. Why try to commit to memory what I'm playing on the piano when I can perform it once, then listen to it back and make changes to it if I think that the suspensions are wrong or something like that? I can continue to flesh it out until it sounds something like the final musical bed. The more I do that, the more it suggests to me melodies that belong in the song and also what the most appropriate lyric approach is for the music I'm creating.

Because, in the end, we're going to run out of either notes or words. [laughs] They're going to run out. We in the west listen to a twelve-tone scale, and in most cases, that scale is in a mode, so there are only eight notes out of that scale, all recombined in various ways. But there's all the melodies that a western ear can stand to listen to. It has to be drawn out of eight notes in a scale and put them into combinations that sound "original," but by the sheer mathematics have already been written.

And almost every topic that you could probably think of has been written about. If you want to get really obtuse and stupid, you're still going to have trouble because David Byrne wrote most of those songs about buildings and food. [laughs] It's really hard to sit down and be original and come up with something that nobody's ever heard before. So I'm always looking for ways to trigger something that is almost unexpected.

So my process has gotten almost completely reversed from everybody else's, in which they say, "Okay, this song is about this. Now I have to come up with some words that describe this. Now I have to come up with a melody and chords that go with the words." My process is completely backwards. I have a completely vague idea of the things that

I'm going to write about. I figure, why do I have to come up with an actual idea first. All I have to do is just be thinking all the time, and keep an eye on what I'm thinking. And that's the subject of what I'm going to write about. The challenge for me is going to be to come up with a proper bed for ideas that are eventually going to make themselves clear to me.

In a way, it's more like sculpture than it is like typical prose. It's more subtractive than it is additive. When I start out, a song could be anything. It could sound like anything and it could be about anything. [laughs] For me, it's more a process of figuring out all the things that don't apply, and don't juxtapose, as I move along through this process. I'll say, "Maybe they'll work better in this other thing that I'm growing over here."

PM: Is that the way you wrote the songs on *Liars*?

TR: I started out with sort of an older process that I was trying to adopt, which was, "Write and complete an entire song before you move on to the next one." What that resulted in, at least for me, was a process that was so protracted that it was taking me six months to write a song. I wasn't parking any of those other ideas. I was just saying, "Anything that doesn't apply, I won't do." How many damn things could I freaking go through before I came up with the ideas that I thought were really proper for that song?

What that demonstrated to me was that I really have developed my musicality as an album artist. In other words, I think in terms of, "If this was a hundred and fifty years ago, I wouldn't be writing minuets, I'd be writing symphonies." Or else, "I'd have to be writing a dozen minuets at a time, in order to get all of the ideas properly distributed." So again, it's sort of backwards. Most people are accumulating a body of work which becomes their oeuvre, their egg, that big mass. For me, it's always a mass, and I'm trying to find little chunks of it that make sense.

So I'm always working from the standpoint of, "Okay, I'm about to do some recording, and that recording could be about anything, and I can adopt any musical style that I want to do it in." That leaves me with my first bunch of decisions I have to make, which is "What musical style am I *not* going to do? What subject matter am I *not* going to deal with?" That becomes the process. And at some point, it will become clear enough that I'll have something of a direction and that'll help me guide everything to where it's going to be. I had all sorts of musical ideas collected and a few lyrical ideas before I realized what the overarching idea was, and that helped me finish everything else.

PM: What was the overarching idea?

TR: It's about the fact that human beings lie so easily. We are essentially bred to do it. For many people, it's basic survival instinct, and it's not as if we can't change it, but we deny it, and that's the problem. The record is about the denial of what is true in all of its possible facets. There's still a lot of ground in there. You say, this album is about a paucity of truth. You've got a lot of area to cover, from denial to hubris to outright lying

to white lies to prevarication to compulsion to lie. There are all kinds of ways of looking at it.

PM: You've written songs about a lot of subjects. To choose three songs at random—"Couldn't I Just Tell You," "Onomatopoeia" and "Communion With The Sun." Over time, which kinds of lyrics tend to be the most meaningful for you in the long run?

TR: Well, certainly not "Onomatopoeia." A song like that isn't meant to be anything more than amusing in a Yanni-like way. [laughs] There are songs that are sometimes written to a purpose. Music has always had a utilitarian aspect to it, and in some cases and in some eras, that's all it is. In other words, there have been eras in which it was sacrilegious to write about anything except God from a musical standpoint. You were to only write liturgical music and no music about profane subjects, and in some cases, you were compelled to write only in certain modes. And if you wrote in certain other modes, that was the devil's mode. [laughs]

Being able to write music for a purpose is one of the things that a well-rounded musician ought to know how to do, and many do have the capability of doing that. Like, for instance, Stewart Copeland reinvents himself. At one point, he's a drummer in a pop band, another point, he's a composer of film scores. So when you're composing film scores, you are not simply writing whatever comes off the top of your head. You have to write to specific notes about what's going on, often with the realization that what you're writing is not the thing that's foremost in people's consciousness when the final product's being experienced.

In the case of "Communion With The Sun," it's something that's supposed to be a big set piece in a live show. That's what the song was written to be. From the lifting of the Bernard Herrmann theme in the beginning of it to the sort of galloping and swelling and all this other stuff. It's all for smoke bombs and lighting cues. It's almost like writing for a Broadway show. And then there are songs that are like "Couldn't I Just Tell You" which are written to almost a classical pop form, in a way. It goes back to songs like "Substitute" and "Pictures of Lily" by The Who, and maybe songs by The Byrds, you know, the jangly sort of way that's done. But the song was written to be an example of that form. I don't know what that form is called. A power pop song. I don't know what the hell that means, but you know one when you hear one.

[laughter]

PM: I'd like to mention some of your songs to get your thoughts about what inspired them and how they came about... "Love of the Common Man."

TR: From a lyrical standpoint, it's fairly mysterious. From a musical standpoint it may have some influence from folk-rock. It's got shades of the Buffalo Springfield and other sorts of things, and possibly early Eagles and Jackson Browne. But from a lyrical standpoint, it's part of a whole class of songs that I write, which are about filial love. That's what that song, and songs like "Love Is The Answer" and "Compassion" are

supposed to be about. I'm not a Christian, but it's called Christian love, [laughs] the love that people are supposed to naturally feel because we are all of the same species. That may be mythical, but it's still a subject.

PM: "Just One Victory" is in the same category.

TR: That's sort of the same thing, but also some of the songs are meant not necessarily to exhort. In a way, the song sounds like it's an exhortation to a specific thing, but it isn't. It's supposed to be more uplifting or inspirational and you apply to it the obstacle that you're trying to overcome and the goal that you're trying to reach.

PM: "Bread."

TR: As I said, I'm not a Christian and I am not a materialist. Unfortunately, I'm in a country full of Christian materialists. I still have the sensibility that makes a lot of people think that I am born again or something like that. In fact, a lot of my songs are covered by Christian artists in the mistaken assumption that if I say "he," "it" or something like that, that I'm referring to their God or their prophet. But my religious beliefs, in some ways, are much more simple and they're much more strict, at least from my standpoint. One is, in my religion, you don't take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain, which is you never, ever align yourself with the so-called Almighty. Because you have no fucking comprehension of what that is, and how dare you assume to know [laughs] what the Almighty, whatever the hell that is, is thinking. And so whenever people say, "God wants this" or "God tells us to do this," that to me is profane.

So in that sense, I'm only asking people to do what people are capable of doing. And in any one of those songs I mentioned, I have derived it out of the good book. My basic philosophy is very simple. We can solve our problems. Why? Because we created them. Stop bringing God into it. [laughs] We've got plenty enough knowledge and plenty enough resources that we can create any sort of paradise that people think they can imagine. We just don't. And that's what I'm writing about.

PM: "Bag Lady."

TR: There are certainly eras in which I'm not looking to do much more than write a song that's clear and concise and simply and directly performed. On an album like *Hermit of Mink Hollow*, my objectives weren't much beyond that. I was writing songs that were intended to be performed on the piano, and that didn't require a huge amount of extra embellishment beyond the bass and drums. Most of the arrangement was done with voices. Of course, there were guitars and other things, but most of the embellishment was with vocal arrangements. In a case like that, the songwriting process can appear to be fairly conventional. But I would say that I probably still did not have the lyrics completed until I had the track completed and that would be true of most of the songs on that record.

PM: That song has a beautifully poetic lyric.

TR: It's important to me that my lyrics have a certain poetry to them, and the only way I can make that happen is if I have a full understanding of what it is I'm trying to express. This is why I don't sit down right away and start jabbering out lyrics as soon as I've got a glimmer of an idea about what the song is. That's only the start of it for me if I think I know what the song is about. Once I think I know what the song is about, I have to exhaust my own thought processes on the topic because the first person that I have to provide for in a musical sense is me. I have to be able to listen to the stuff afterwards and not say to myself, "What the hell were you thinking?" [laughs] Because I've listened to records that I've done, especially early on, when I didn't take the process as seriously, and I say, "What the hell were you thinking writing words like that? You couldn't have spent an extra five minutes and completed that thought properly?"

Now I put off the finalization of the lyrics until right before I sing. That's the only way I can come up with my sort of poetry. I'll have fragments of lyrics laying around all through the process. One liners, as it were. But they can grow into more elaborate ideas. Usually, if I bother to write something down, I consider it a breakthrough. I've somehow reached a moment of clarity in a topic. In particular, if it's something that people have written about before, why should I write the same thing? I have to come up with some new insight on the subject, or what's the point of me beating a horse that somebody's already beaten to death.

PM: "Bang the Drum All Day."

TR: Then there are the few songs that come about because of this general immersion thing. When I start immersing myself in a soup of musical and conceptual ideas, I will begin to actually dream fully completed songs. They may be completely unrelated to everything else I'm doing. It isn't necessarily during the recording process. "Bang on the Drum" was something that just popped into my head one night, and I think this was after I'd developed a discipline to work out the changes in my head. Not as if there was much to work out, it was so stupidly simple. I don't know that the song in my head was called "Bang On The Drum All Day," but the musical part of it was fairly complete. The title lyric must've been in there too. Songs like that, I can't deny them. In other words, I have to finish them, and I have to put them on the record, even if they don't sound like they belong to me. If a song comes to you completely realized, then that's really your muse at work.

If it comes to you completely realized and you don't know what it's about, and you have to figure it out, you think, "Where did it come from?" Well it came from inside me somewhere. So there must be something in me, yet another thing that I have to uncover and examine in order to fully understand myself. For me, that's what I have to get out of the music. A greater understanding of myself. Why I do the things I do. Why I think the way I think.

PM: "Life Goes On."

TR: It was obviously an homage to “Eleanor Rigby.” In that sense, the subject matter might be considered almost the same. We’re not only parodying the music, we’re parodying the lyrical idea. All the lonely people, et cetera. [laughs] In that sense, I’m not sure that there’s anything but a different kind of poetry in the song. You might say that it doesn’t mean anything more or less than “Eleanor Rigby” does.

PM: Are there any songs from your catalog that are favorites of yours that you feel were overlooked?

TR: Oh, hundreds. [laughs] Not any one in particular. I’m always surprised about the songs that do reach people sometimes. Like I say, “Bang on the Drum” is not really a song that I characterize as stylistically mine. But there’s something undeniable in the response to it that’s taken it to a whole other dimension. When it gets played at all these sporting events, and everyone knows the song, but nobody knows who they’re listening to. A small fraction of the people at any Rams game or Green Bay game, when they play it as a celebration song, a tiny number of those people are probably aware of the fact that they’re singing along with me. The rest of the people have no clue, but they know the song.

In that sense, as a musician, there’s probably no higher goal to aspire to than to have your music transcend you and penetrate the culture in a way that very few people are able to consciously do. Consciously create something that becomes a cultural icon in one sense or another. So it doesn’t bother me that nobody knows that it’s me they’re singing along with. It pleases me that I’m connected to something that connects me with everyone who just gets off on singing that song. Me and them have something in common. I don’t feel so separated from them now. [laughs]

PM: Do you have any dream projects you’ve always wanted to do?

TR: After I did *Up Against It* for the Public Theater, which wasn’t a commercial success and has never been mounted again, I’d like to see perhaps a new show written and the music be applied to that, and that’s certainly possible. Or, have the Joe Orton estate consider remounting it and allow some sort of rewrite or rearrangement of what was originally an unfinished work anyway. In other words, the stage play was originally supposed to be a movie script. It never made it past the first draft. And yet, with this kind of threadbare thing, they were trying to make a whole musical. A lot of the story was nonsensical and hard for people to relate to in terms of what issues it was representing, since it was written in the 60s. But Joseph Papp asked me after that if I would consider writing an opera for the Public Theater. And I was very much excited about the possibility of doing that. Unfortunately, his health deteriorated quickly after that, and he had to leave the helm. The next person coming in was not necessarily beholden to any previous projects. So I never got to do that, and I always thought that would be fun to do.

PM: Other projects?

TR: As time goes on, there are things I thought I wanted to do that now seem just purely like vanity. It's not as if I wouldn't consider doing them, but I couldn't do what, for instance, Paul McCartney does, which is come up with a bunch of little melodies and give them to an arranger to overinflate, and then pretend I'm conducting an orchestra. If I was going to write a symphony, I'd have to write a frickin' symphony. [laughs] And before I would do that, I'd probably take some of the instrumental music I've written and rearrange it perhaps for an orchestra. It does sound vain, but from a musical standpoint, it's where I started. That's the only kind of music I was originally aware of. When I was young, I yearned to do that, and I indulged myself in my early solo albums. I do it whenever I get a chance and it's appropriate, I ape an orchestra. I do it even in my most recent project. The question is, do I have the time and discipline to do something like that properly? I don't really care to attempt it with all the other things I could do. If I was going to come up with twenty minutes of orchestral music, it might take me five or ten years to get it right. [laughs] It's not the kind of thing you want to take on idly.

PM: As a producer, you work with a lot of songwriters. What advice can you offer them?

TR: When I get involved in record production, the first thing that I always make a determination on is whether the material is ready to be taken in the studio. I tell them—because I have to tell myself the same thing all the time, it's like anything else in life—the first 95% of it takes 95% of the effort. And then the last 5% takes another 95% of the effort. [laughs] People are often in a hurry to get done. At least for me, if you want to write songs, they get written when they're ready. You don't just say, "Okay, today I'm going to finish this." For me, it's all about a state of mental equipoise and it's all about the poetry of it. If it doesn't sound like poetry to me, then I'm not done. I still have more work to do.

Songwriters, automobile manufacturers, anybody—it all applies. People get most of it done, and then they're just in a hurry to finish up. The really remarkable aspect of anything is in the detailing. A painting looks like one thing when you're standing far away from it, but when you get up close, you can see the real difference between a master painter and somebody who's just sloshing paint around on the canvas. It's in those little brushstrokes.

My advice for songwriters is to take the time. I have to say that all the time. "Couldn't you have just spent another five minutes on the bridge?" [laughs] In a sense, you could say, it's never done. There's always room for improvement. I'm always looking to change a word here, a word there, a note here, a note there, just to constantly push it towards the best that I can make it.

