

Photo: Michael Ochs

# 'RABBIT' BUNDRICK

IT MUST FIRST BE UNDERSTOOD that John "Rabbit" Bundrick is one of the best live musicians in the business, not an old-school rock 'n' roller. An in-demand solo pianist is just not the way when — and this is key — it means that live shows are a thrill in this case, the venue turned out to be an extremely noisy and raucous club in SoHo, and Rabbit was his usual, strident self: slightly larger than life, but with the less entertaining for all that.

Bundrick's career in the top-down has been accident-prone, but there can be few musicians, and surely no keyboard players, who have not turned an ear to his amazing playing, and especially the sound he extracts from his synthesizing with the organ. Last year Bill Appleby took over as the point at which he'd been invited to link up with the WHO — at that time, a reunion and possibly their final inclusion. It is, therefore, to his credit that he's managed to stay the course. It's a damn shame with himself, he'd

probably agree that it's pretty surprising he isn't. Like I said, Rabbit ain't like anyone else. I began, with a formal agreement between the division (Bundrick) described at the next table, to pick up from that last fall.

"Oh yeah — I broke my hand shortly after that," he admitted, covering a pair of tightly sculpted frowns. "I lost it climbing out of a jet. I was taking the piss out of the show in the film. I just jumped out as he was taking a corner. I suppose I could have been hit over, but I came out with just a broken hand, no it was all right."

Which hand was it? I asked, considering that that is a pretty major one hand for any musician, but there are also had just been mentioned to back the film.

"Ah," came the answer in his unassuming Texas drawl. "I don't remember. I've broken both hands in the past."

"So, let's call it a wild mania then?"

"Oh, yes, just wild mania stuff. If I get too drunk I can get pretty crazy. I think it comes from insomnia. The if the stick is a hotel. I'm not too dangerous, I usually bury myself, not other people. Well, what's the point of having a reputation if it's not too, anyway?"

"I lost everything, I used to party a lot, but now I just put a split on it myself. You can usually tell if it's a top break or not, but this one was the."

Regarding the best way to start a possible take over through Radio City, Bundrick began chuckling from the back seat of a taxi, never once to try and continue to a musical conversation. I asked if he still enjoyed his natural selection in syndication.

"I don't like to see them too much. I regret them as being very subtle instruments for me. The power of what I'm saying, is that I know a hell of a lot of music, consistent in comparison, but I feel that I like that, and



because like a synthesizer player... well, there are just so many. And there used to be so many Hammond players, that I'd just get another order. But if I run out of real light or synthesizers, and run out of keyboard players, then I might find a unique place for them in my studio so that I wasn't having synthesizer dominated, but synth would be an addition."

I reminded him that in an earlier meeting (because we had said there was no way that he'd play them.

"Well, that was out of pure embarrassment," he replied, "I just didn't know how to thank them. I mean I could be embarrassed if I run on a studio if somebody else there who knew how to work them but wasn't a keyboard player, and I was a keyboard player but didn't know how to thank them... know what I mean? So that was like, pride, or something."

"Now I've figured out that I don't have to be a synthesizer player in order

to work. In order to make music, I can learn a bit about them and use them, rather than be damn one of 'em."

"I mean, there's a lot of female staff coming out at the moment, but anybody's doing all of that. I'd like to have a little bit of uniqueness."

"Basically synthesizers all sound the same. I know manufacturers and their own's agree with me, but in the picture there's little differences between one synth and another. Now me, I'm a little bit simpler my taste isn't capable of really transferring that to synthesizers."

Having said that it came as something of a surprise to me to discover that Rabbit has a Prophet synth among his keyboard armoury, but then, nothing about Rabbit is that surprising to me!

"Yeah, I've got a Prophet, and a string machine, and I got the trusty old Yamaha piano, and I got my Hammond. I can't create synthesizer sounds on the Hammond, but I can use it instead there. I've got a wah-wah on the Hammond, and create different sounds. It doesn't sound like a synth, but there it doesn't sound like a Hammond either!"

We spent a little time, at the bar, remembering the fact that so many manufacturers are trying to simulate the original Hammond sound whilst Rabbit tries to clear out which is, basically, the playing piece the musician.

"Oh," he stretched, "they just don't have the GPT man!"

We pointed out though that the technical accuracy of these imitations isn't ultimately that important, that they don't have to imitate, only simulate. "In today's terms of sounds, the act of simulation is accurate enough, know what I mean? It's so far away from a Hammond, and yet so far away from other synth sounds that it's a case of most people not knowing the difference."

In case of Peter Townshend's known relationship with synthesizers, and his astounding interest in anything new, I asked if he had known just exactly any pressure by Pete to get into synth, to expand the Vito's set sound.

"Not at all... he's an accustomed to synthesizers himself, anyway... know what I mean... in other words, it's there on the office, I mean, I think he prefers to do that sort of thing himself. I mean, you can have synthesizers because we've got plenty of them, but don't worry about it if you don't because it isn't going to cost you your job if you can't play 'em. Like on an album he'll do all the synthesizer parts because his brain is geared for that, so there's no pressure on the musician. It means almost all the synthesizer parts that I play are the duplications of what he's done already which no one's done. I mean if he knows what he wants on synthesizers anyway, and plays it and records it... it's so easy for me to pick it up and play it."

"There's an example like on Steve Nicks, which like is a synthesizer. He told me to go and learn that part, and I had to learn it, but he'd learn that he'd want a synthesizer and I don't make it; that's what I mean about him not putting any pressure on me. He didn't tell me, he just asked if I could learn it. I took it home and stayed up all night and almost lost my voice up and everything like when it's I was thinking 'how the hell does he do that?'. He's got a keyboard player, and I was going to do it on one hand. So, I used both hands... by the time it was the night it took in the morning, but I managed it all the same."

"Then, and only then it to me, the 'hey-a-choo' figger! On the other hand he could have said he's a requirement, and you're probably going to have to use two hands to play it."

"It's interesting to have feedback that technique. I mean, I was about ready to quit the band, you know I just couldn't figure it out, but the moment I created my hands the sequence started working."

Despite this, Rabbit makes his appointment with playing with the band... "It's a part of how his relationship I have. If it wasn't like that then I wouldn't work. If I just said it, then I'd be nervous, and if I just talked it, then there wouldn't be any point in keeping the gig. As it is, it's just right."

What is it about the band that keeps them going?

"They're fighters, see. They're not things. They get on their feet and they fight... it's a real struggle, you know. It's good. I mean, I get such a kick out of playing live with them. Like I had the first part of the audience, but I got a front row seat, and I also get to see as well... that's the way I look at it. Well, I've got a front row seat, and I also get to hear things. It's like a privilege for me! I mean they could have got somebody else, and I could have been in the audience thinking it would be nice to work with them!"

Rabbit has been known to lose in sessions for anybody who asked him, not out of laziness or shyness, but more simply because the man absolutely loves playing, but he's conscious that his membership of the Vito has slightly altered his status, although I, for one, would have thought anybody who played with Pete has got enough status with a capital E already.

"I can pick and choose a bit more now," he admitted as the two had dropped dramatically in a couple of quads. "If something comes in I can usually decide if I really want to do it."

So a bit of working with the Vito has really helped?

"I don't mean it like that. I mean, somebody knows that I'm working with the Vito, so if they need that the band is not on the road they won't bother to call me 'cos they know that

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is he working."

He says that he's been working mainly with unknown people, and describes that as being his "American position" because there's "a lot of music in unknown names, and there's no ego involved."

"I do a session generally for some Australian, and it was an album. There was no fighting, no competition, no ego. I just sat down and got appreciated for what I played. For me to do sessions is like a relaxing thing: it's for enjoyment, instead of going home and getting all the way up on a studio and work at it. I find that much more relaxing in a way. The atmosphere's right."

We described the difference in mental pressure between being asked to play on a "special guest" where there was no such appraisal, and the pressure—considerably greater, than on those where maybe even some of the band had no idea who he was, just the "session keyboard player."

Having known Rabbit on and off for a little while, it came easily to ask him if the gig with the Who was, indeed, something of a dream come true.

"Well, I wouldn't say yes, but I was glad to have it," came the answer.

"The idea, coming from Texas like I do, I know that if I went out to work in the States, I'd just be a number, no recognition. I thought, where do I go? But that all the English music was happening in the States, and I felt that English music had moved on, as I thought, it'd go to England. I was sitting there in Texas, thinking that one day I'm going to England. I mean, as soon as I heard Rabbit I knew I was going to leave."

"I mean Steve Winwood's just passing, to be at night? I've always loved that guy's playing. He's always going to be all right... He's my main influence really, him and Floyd Kramer."

"He's funny, really. I came over here because I thought it'd rough and ready and he's going to the States, with Traffic and the new album, and get in all surrounded out? He's one person that I try not to listen to too much because the influence is so strong. I think he played just naturally just into my blood, in some respects. I don't have any regrets — it's just that him and Floyd Kramer and that's about it. Well, maybe Jimmy Smith as well."

It's unusual for an R&B to so strongly alter someone's route — and something so recent, although I'd argue the point, having been influenced most by Kramer's playing, as well as being especially up for him with StevieNicks, that they have had an announced an effect on Rabbit as to give them credit for bringing the conversation back to the Who. I asked if there was any similarity between

his present gig with them, and his previous (big) one with them.

"It is pretty similar really... I've signed, before leaving out for the 'left button' on the tape recorder which was struggling against the increasing background noise, and wandering off in the general direction of the bar for yet another refill. It's not that he was being up to his equitation, rather than to take his beer, and if that gives him a reputation, then so be it. It was a step or two less down."

By the time he'd returned, he'd already changed his thoughts and approach and told a long tale about how long it took him to get official recognition by the Musicians' Union, complaining about the Internal Democracy — which is something the magazine knows of well, having still had to apply to our inclusion to contribute a column. Fortunately for him, however, he managed to make his problems, concluding that in the end the MU was able to help him out quite considerably.

Although, he says, that to have gone to England and ended up being able enough to play with Free and with the Who has been an incredible bonus to his career, and his own personality. "Anybody would want to work with the Who: it takes a lot of brain power. I mean I couldn't in England just show up to both parties there. There was just a lot of good old boys who don't really know where they were going. That was no good for me: I want to work with people who are better musicians than me, so I can learn."

"Otherwise you end up being the supportable person, which is a disaster for me! But I'd rather someone else take the blame, or even the credit. You can feed off of people like the Who. I know what I mean!"

Mentioning that, I pointed out that when the Who had for public land my own cynicism was with Carl's England: the young Pete Townshend was famous for making up his comments rather than playing them, and that the passage of time has changed the image, turning him, in the public eye, into a "guitar hero."

"It's their work on his part, and their respect. I think he's just washed it off. But like for me, I just have to keep it off in perpetuity, and be me. The Who is right. I have to keep eggs outside of it otherwise I'd be getting problems, but the more I keep putting myself down the better it is."

But, well, you've got a freedom of movement and identity when Roger and Peter can no longer leave?

"I don't know," came the quiet reply. "If I was as famous as them I wouldn't want to be like me — I mean what I mean? I'd rather be looking to people like me. I mean, they aren't bad off, don't go looking for them: they're doing all right, and they've got something in perspective. It's people like me, who are just musicians, who

are in there, but they're actually looking to me for help. You'd think they don't need any help, and in some respects they don't, but they just respect, and they're going somebody else the chance, and they're really generous people. I mean, they're not to go to problems, but they could have got someone just to clean up if it is they got someone who can help them, and who they can take. That's not important, it's human. They could get any keyboard player in the world — you got to remember that."

"There was all the way, if I'm around you make it sounds like that might they need help, musically. That sounds like I've got me high an opinion of myself, but I don't mean it. But why, I say out of the way, and stay the hell out of my way. If they listen to the record, you'll see them, but that's better than being around all the time going 'hey hey hey' all the time."

"Some people say I should be bigger, but that's not the point at all." In all fairness, despite Rabbit's reputation for luxury, he has joined a band which once possessed possibly one's greatest unknown character, and there would be little point in trying to emulate the low and great that Rabbit's personal antics.

"I mean I'm not like that myself. I mean I'm all right, you know? I've got to play with them, and as long as I stay anonymous I'm all right. I mean, I'm not going to stand up and stand about it, right? I'm there to help musically as a human being, and that's my gig there."

Is there any chance for any personal creativity in the band?

"Again, Tom, that's not the gig. I mean, that's not where it's at. I'm playing keyboards for the Who — that's my gig. If Peter comes to me and says here are the chords, then I write 'em down. I could just go in the studio and you write them out and make mistakes, and all that. But no way, I know what I'm doing, and I want them to know I know what I'm doing. I take this seriously, you know what I mean?"

There may be something of an uncharacteristic statement from Rabbit to think the freedom with, but from the way he said it, he meant it. Reputations, after all, are only for knocking down eggs, although I find it unlikely that he won't be that honest in a bit of light-hearted banter again from time to time. But it's pleasant to meet a musician who feels happy in a world where he can be him by someone else, although as his business is so flapped, it could be that another gig'll come his way and he'll be off into it like a fish. On the other hand, however, it's a hell of a lot to have you, and he seems to know it, but I doubt if anything would ever come before his vast enjoyment of the music there's more to it than that one's self. Like, I've just wanted to see what he's working fishing!

**Tom Stack**