‘RABBIT’ BUNDrick

IT MUST FIRST BE UNDERSTOOD that John ‘Rabbit’ Bundrick is one of the last fun men left in the business we all call Rock’n’Roll. An interview with Rabbit is just not like any other—and this is by no means the first time I’ve tried! In this case the venue turned out to be an extremely noisy and riotous pub in Soho, and Rabbit was his usual, ebullient self: slightly larger than life, but none the less entertaining for that.

Rabbit’s career in the business has been recorded elsewhere, but there can be few musicians, and surely no keyboard players, who have not turned an ear to his amazing playing, and especially the sounds he extracts from his relationship with the organ. Last time I spoke to him was at the point at which he’d been invited to link up with the Who—at that time, a tenuous and possibly short-term invitation. It is, therefore, to his credit, that he’s managed to stay the course: it is by not with himself, he’d probably agree that it’s pretty surprising as well! Like I said, Rabbit ain’t like anyone else! I began, while a furious argument between two drunken Scotsman developed at the next table, to pick up from that last talk.

“Oh yeah — I broke my hand shortly after that,” he shouted, downing a pint of highly acceptable IPA. “I bust it climbing out of a cab. I was taking the piss out of the driver at the time... just jumped out as he was taking a corner. I suppose I could have run over, but I came out with just a broken hand, so it was all right!”

Which hand was it? I asked, considering that that is a pretty major set-back for any musician, let alone one who had just been requested to back the Who.

“Oh,” came the answer in his endearing Texan drawl, “I can’t remember. I’ve broken both hands in the past!”

So, he’s still a real manic then?

“Ah, yes, just wild maniac stuff. If I get too drunk I can get pretty crazy. I think it stems from boredom, like if I’m stuck in a hotel, I’m not too dangerous, I usually hurt myself, not other people. Hell, what’s the good of having a reputation if it’s not true, anyway?

“I bust everything. I used to panic a bit, but now I just put a splint on it myself! You can usually tell if it’s a bad break or not, but this one was OK.”

Figuring the best way to avert a possible cab ride through Soho with Rabbit leaping drunkenly from the back seat on every corner was to try and pin him to a musical conversation. I asked if he still retained his natural aversion to synthesizers.

“I don’t like to use them too much. I regard them as being very subtle instruments for me. I’m aware of what I’m saying, in that I know a hell of a lot of music nowadays is synthesized, but I feel that if I join that...
to work, in order to make music. I can learn a bit about them and use them, rather than let them use me.

"I mean, there's a lot of fantastic stuff 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 that won't agree with me, but to the punter there's little difference between one synth and another. Now me, I'm a little bit simple: my brain isn't capable of totally transferring itself to synthesizers."

Having said that it came as something of a surprise to me to discover that Rabbit has a Prophet synth amongst his keyboard armoury, but then, nothing about Rabbit is that surprising in the end.

"Yeah, I've got a Prophet, and a string machine, and I got me trusty old Yamaha piano, and I got my Hammond. I can't create synthesizer sounds on the Hammond, but I can sort of imitate them: I've got a wah-wah on the Hammond, and create different sounds. It doesn't sound like a synth, but then it doesn't sound like a Hammond either!"

We spent a little time, at the bar, bemoaning the fact that so many manufacturers are trying to emulate the original Hammond sound which Rabbit holds so dear and which is, basically, his playing piece de resistance.

"Ah," he drawled, "they just don't have the SPIT man!"

He pointed out though that the technical accuracy of those imitations isn't ultimately, that important, that they don't have to imitate, only simulate. "In today's sorts of sounds, that sort 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 view of Pete Townshend's known relationship with synthesizers, and his abounding interest in anything new, I asked if he had been put under any pressure by Pete to get into synths, to expand the Who's live sound.

"Not at all — he's so accustomed to synthesizers himself, anyway — know what I mean — in other words, it's there on the off. I mean, I think he prefers to do that sort of thing himself. I mean, you can learn synthesizers because we've got plenty of them, but don't worry about it if you don't because it ain'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 me whatsoever. I mean almost all the synthesizer parts that I play are like duplications of what he's done already which to me is fine. I mean if he knows what he wants on synthesizers anyway, and plays it and records it — it's no strain for me to pick it up and play it.

"There's an example like on Sister Disco, which is a sequencer. He told me to go and learn that part, and I had to learn it, but he didn't tell me it was a sequencer and I didn't realise 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 tore my brain out and everything (he means it): I was thinking 'how the hell does he do that?'. 'He's not a keyboard player', and I was trying to do it on one hand. So, I used both hands — by this time it was like eight o'clock in the morning, but I managed it all the same.

"Then, and only then it hit me, like 'he's a crafty bugger!' On the other hand he could have said like it's a sequencer, and you're probably going to have to use two hands to play it!

"It's interesting to have developed 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 crossed my hands the sequencer started working."

Despite this, Rabbit exudes his enjoyment with playing with the band... "It's a sort of love hate relationship I have: If it wasn't like that then it wouldn't work. If I just loved it, then I'd be suspicious, and if I just hated 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 wimps. They get up there and they fight — it's a real struggle, you know. It's great. I mean, I get such a kick out of playing live with them. Like I feel like I'm part of the audience, but I get a front row seat, and I also get to jam as well — that's the way I look at it. 'Hey, I've got a front row seat, and I also get to play along. It's like a privilege for me! I mean they could have got somebody else, and I could have been in the audience, but I feel it would be nice to work with them!"

Rabbit has been known to turn in sessions for anybody who asked him, not out of kudos or money, but more simply because the man absolutely loves playing; but he's conscious that his 'membership' of the Who has slightly altered his status, although I for one, would have thought anybody who played with Free has got enough Status with a capital S anyway.

"I can pick and choose a bit more now," he admitted as the beer level dropped dramatically in a couple of gulps. "If something comes in I can actually decide if I really want to do it."

So a tag of working with the Who has really helped?

"I don't mean it like that. I mean, everybody knows that I'm working with the Who, so if they read that the band is cut on the road they won't bother to call me 'cos they know that..."
'RABBIT'

I'll be working...”

He says that he’s been working mainly with unknown people, and describes that as being his ‘favourite sessions’ because there’s ‘a lot of music, drumming sessions, and there’s no egos involved’.

“I did a session yesterday for some Australians, and it was so relaxed, 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 jamming all day I can go to a studio and work at it: I find that much more relaxing in a way. The atmosphere helps.”

He described the difference in mental pressures between being asked to play as a ‘special guest’ where there was so much pressure, 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 his gig with the Who was, indeed, something of a dream come true.

“Well, musical wise, yes, but fame and fortune, no” came the answer.

“You see, coming from Texas like I do, I knew that if I went out to work in the States, I’d just be a number, no uniqueness. I thought, where do I go? But then all the English music was happening in the States, and I felt that English music had more soul, so I thought, I’ll go to England. I was sitting there in Texas, knowing that one day I’m going to England. I mean, as soon as I heard Traffic I knew I was going anyway...

“I mean, Steve Winwood’s just amazing. Is he all right? 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.

“It’s funny, really, I came over here because I thought it’s rough and ready and he’s gone to the States, with Traffic and this new album, and got it all smoothed out! He’s one person that I try not to listen to too much because the influence is so strong. I think his playing just naturally goes into my blood. In some respects, I don’t have any originality — it’s just from him and Floyd Kramer and that’s about it. Well, maybe Jimmy Smith as well.”

“It’s unusual for an artist to so strongly acknowledge his roots — and refreshing as well, although I’d argue the point, having been influenced myself by Kramer’s playing, as well as being reasonably au fait with Windwood’s, that they have had as pronounced an effect on Rabbit as he gives them credit for. Reverting the conversation back to the Who, I asked if there were any similarities between his present gig and with them, and his previous big-time seat with Free.

“It is pretty similar really...” he replied, before leaning over for the ‘off-button’ on the tape recorder which was struggling against the increasing background noises, and wandering off in the general direction of the bar for yet another re-fill. It’s not that he was living up to the promotion, rather than he likes his beer, and if that gives him a reputation, then so be it: it won’t stop or slow him 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 bureaucracy — which is something the magazine knows of well, having still had no reply to our invitation to contribute a column. Fortunately for him, however, he managed to resolve his problems, concluding that in the end the MU was able to help him out quite completely.

Ultimately, he says, that to have come to England and ended up being lucky 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 worked in Crawler and there was no brain power there. There was just a lot of good old boys who didn’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 responsible person, which is a downer for me! But I’d rather someone else takes the blame, or even the credit. You can feed off of people like the Who. Know what I mean?”

Mentioning that, I pointed out that when the Who first hit public (and my own) consciousness with ‘Can’t Explain’ they were down and out and were famous for cracking up his instruments rather than playing them, and yet the passage of time has changed the image, turning him, in the public eye, into a ‘guitar hero’.

“It’s sheer work on his part, and sheer respect I think: he’s just worked at it. But like for me, I just have to keep it real, and for me, the Who is right. I have to keep it real, and it totally out of it otherwise I’d be getting problems, but the more I keep putting myself down the better I am.”

But, I said, ‘you’ve got a freedom of movement and identity which Roger and Peter can no longer have.’

“I don’t know if I can come the quick reply, ‘If I was as famous as them I wouldn’t want to be like me — know what I mean? I’d rather be looking to people like me: I mean, they aren’t bad off, don’t let nobody fool them: they’re doing all right, and they’ve got everything in perspective. It’s people like me, who are just musicians, who are in two, 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 giving somebody else the chance, and they’re really generous people. I mean, they’ve got no problems, but they could have got someone just to play: as it is they got someone who can help them, and who they can help. That’s real important. It’s human. They could get any keyboard player in the world — you got to remember that.

“I stay out of the way: if I’m around too much it reminds them that maybe they need help, musically. That sounds like I’ve got too high an opinion of myself, but I don’t mean it that way. I stay out of the way, and stay like an employee. If they listen to the record, yeah I’m there, 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 fairness, despite Rabbit’s reputation for lunacy, he has joined a band which once possessed possibly rock’s greatest extrovert character, and there would be little point in trying to emulate the late and great Keith Moon’s personal antics.

“I mean, I’m not like that anyway. 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 shout about it, right? I’m there to help musically as a human being, and that’s my gig there.

“Is there any change 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 the 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 not write them out and make mistakes, and all that. But no way. I know what I can do, and I want them to know what I know... I take this seriously, you know what I mean?”

That may be something of an uncharacteristic statement from Rabbit to finish the interview with, but from the way he said it, he meant it.

Reputations, after all, are only for knocking down again, although I find it unlikely that he won’t find himself in a bit of light-hearted bother again from time to time. But, it’s pleasant to meet a musician who feels happy in a niche carved out for him by someone else, although as this business is so flippant, it could be that another gig’ll come his way and he’ll be off onto it like a flash.

On the other hand, however, it’s a hell of a gig to have got, and he seems to know it, but I doubt if anything would ever come before his vast enjoyment of life itself: there’s more to it than just rock’n’roll. Like, I’m just waiting to hear when he’s coming fishing!!

Tom Stock