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Keeping the Faith
The Rainmakers' Rockin' Road

Stian Omland

The sun was beating down, hard, to the sound of a very loud drum. Mid-whirl, Bob Walkenhorst grabbed a garden hose, and doused the mass of wildly rocking fans in front of the stage, offering them a few moments of relief from the blistering heat. Steam rose from the crowd as Walkenhorst sprayed himself before launching into the final verse of "Big Fat Blonde".

It was the Kalvøya festival of '89, and Kansas City rockers The Rainmakers were the kings of the island. They were facing their most faithful audience, and making more than a handful new converts. The band probably won themselves more new fans in that single day, than they had done in one swoop since "Let My People Go-Go" dominated the airwaves in '86. The concert was the stuff of legend. Loud, smart and shock-full of straight ahead undiluted fun. It was vintage Rainmakers.

One year later, it was over. The band came back to the festival the next summer, and did another classic set. But a lot of things were different. The day was overcast, and plenty of showers proved that the band could live up to its name if the mood required it. Just a few days earlier the band had announced that they would be breaking up after this, their final concert. But when they entered the stage that day they did not hold back one inch. It was an American band going out with a bang. They whipped the crowd into the same state of near-frenzy as they always did, and the audience begged them to stay. When it was finally over and the band left the stage, bass player Rich Ruth turned towards the roaring thousands. "I have to leave all this?", he seemed to ask himself. He looked sad.

Bob Walkenhorst (now 41) grew up in Norborne, MO, population 900. "[It was] a small-town church environment," he says[1] ,"[and] I think the best thing we got out of church was the music." He worked his way through art school playing music in bars and performing in shows. After school, he considered trying to make it as a painter, and was well on his way when he grew disillusioned with the art world; "It had so much to do with elite rich people that could afford to buy artwork, it didn't really seem to have a lot to do with everyday people," Walkenhorst feels. Music consequently became the focal point of his life. "The thing about being in the Mid-Western part of the U.S. is that you really can, from a pretty early age, start making a living playing music, whereas I think if you're in New York or Los Angeles you never really can make a living playing music, unless you make it big. But in the Mid-West there are so many small towns, so many schools, that if you are willing to travel a little bit you can start making a living, and you don't even have to be very good (laughs)." In 1983 what would eventually become The Rainmakers started out as as the trio, "Steve, Bob and Rich", in Kansas City, MO. Steve Phillips (now 37) played the guitar, Rich Ruth (now 39), the bass, and Bob Walkenhorst led the way on a stand-up drum kit and vocals. "When Steve and Rich and I got together of course the goal was to make records and play original music, but even before we got to that goal we were making a lot of money just playing cover tunes and playing some of our own songs and playing bars and colleges, so it was possible to start making a living right away." With their independent album "Balls" (it had their bowling balls on the cover) they began to get some airplay on college radio. "It really is a good little record. It was pretty crude, and not very well played, but there was a lot of spirit on it."

Drummer Pat Tomek (42), a seasoned musician from Wichita, with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, and a Masters in Speech and Communication, joined the band in late '85. "It was kind of weird," Tomek tells *IMAGE,* "I've almost always started bands. In this case the guy that had played the drums before was now up front, and had a definite idea of how the drums should go. I go one way and he goes the other way sometimes, but that's good, because it brings up things you wouldn't have thought of."

BIG TIME

By then, things really started speeding up for the band, who were now calling themselves The Rainmakers. They got signed to PolyGram Records and started recording their major label debut in Memphis in early '86. But recording an album is no picnic. "When you're signed to a big record label, when you are working with an A&R (Artists & Repertoire) department, and a very expensive well known producer (Terry Manning -ZZ Top-), even though I am the songwriter and lead vocalist of the band, their

ideas are most important," Walkenhorst claims. "My ideas are now third, and Steve, Rich and Pat's ideas are pushed down even further. We were working with a producer that wouldn't even let Pat play. And the band didn't have anything to say about that at all, it wasn't our choice, that was the way Terry Manning worked." The band stuck together, and came up with an album that would not go unnoticed in the music world. Tomek says,"To a certain extent, I think we all feel that we were kind of lucky with our first record. It came together better than we had any right to expect." The record, simply titled "The Rainmakers", was a stampede of charged rock and roll, full of inspired songs with provocative lyrics.

The provocation was intentional. Walkenhorst wanted songs that made people go "Wait a minute, what did that guy just say!?" But he was walking a very thin line between recognizable irony, and the risk of being taken seriously. One of the tracks from the first record, "Government Cheese", illustrates this ambiguity in Walkenhorst's lyrics. The song, among other things, accuses the American Government of "passing out drugs to the American people". The intention of the song was most likely just an attempt at getting a different take on the relationship between the government and the people, but the right wing, because of this song, hailed the band as the voice of the new conservative minds, while the liberals saw it as pointing its finger at everything that was wrong with the Reagan presidency. Somebody must have got the wrong idea. Or did they? "I think that if a songwriter gets upset about being misinterpreted, he shouldn't be writing songs, he should be writing more words than songs. This is an interpretive artform," Walkenhorst says. Touché.

Another song from their first album that also goes every which way is "Big Fat Blonde", a swampy number that struts out of the speakers, boldly stating: "I want a big fat blonde to hold my hand/ To keep this skinny boy from blowing over in the wind" and "I'm talking six-foot Swede/ 40-30-40/ Amazon bomb shell/ Tall damp and dirty". By many considered to be an outrageous, good-naturedly sexist, over the top celebration of sexuality, it might also be perceived as a symbol of the overwhelming ripeness of a creative impulse, "a song of inspiration". Walkenhorst sees the duality, but says; "I don't know that when I first wrote [it] that my idea was quite that profound.[...] The song sometimes seems extremely stupid to me.[...] I would like to believe that songs can always be profound however you construct them, but sometimes I think I'm fooling myself." He laughs.

That boldness, that audacity that the band was looking for is epitomized in the their only international hit "Let My People Go-Go". The song introduced the gospel according to The Rainmakers; [God says]" I did not put you here to suffer/ I did not put you here to whine/ I put you here to love one another/ And to get out and have a good time." God sounds like Little Richard, and Jesus complains, Charlie Brown style; "Why's everybody always picking on me?"

The music world perked up its ears. Several rock magazines proclaimed The Rainmakers the next big thing. *Rolling Stone* described them as "one of the most original bands the heartland has to offer" and "the smartest of the recent crop of American bands". "At the time that Rolling Stone was saying all that stuff, it was kind of like;'Yeah, right, you guys go ahead and blow away all you want', but we're just sort of doing our thing," Tomek says. And their thing through the years, more than anything else, has been playing live. You have not really experienced The Rainmakers until you have spent 2 1/2 hours dancing and singing along at one of their concerts. Most people look a little ridiculous after a Rainmakers concert; sweaty and grinning madly, giving the impression that a great weight has just been lifted off their shoulders. "Man, that was a blast!"

BOB WALKENHORST
ROCKEFELLER AUGUST 1994

So they toured to support their new, critically acclaimed record, they traveled the world while the "buzz in the biz" did its work. And they ended up in, of all places, Norway. Their final European tour '86 concert at Sardine's is the kind of happening that by now more than three times as many claim to have been present at than actually fitted in the club in the first place. Everybody seemed to know the lyrics to the songs, and the band really realized that they might have something going here. Soon "Let My People Go-Go" started climbing the charts. But being on tour is not all fun and games. The road eats up 6-8 months of every year. Everywhere you go the media ask the same questions, everybody wants a piece of you and home is a place far, far away.

TORNADO, BLOWING HARD

Even though Walkenhorst is the major contributor of songs in the band, and his voice and live antics have become a band trademark of sorts, this is not The Bob Walkenhorst Band. Steve Phillips contributes with, and sings, a couple of songs per album, and all four members have important parts to play in shaping the band's sound. But when the time came to start recording their second album, "Tornado", in '87, that balance was not entirely evident. "I think that any time that there is a band member that writes most of the songs and does most of the singing, that the public is going to perceive it as that person's band," Walkenhorst says, thinking back, "And sometimes that person will start believing that a little bit himself. I went through a little bit of that 'round "Tornado", that I thought I really had to control everything. I was thinking, Well, I'm doing the creating here and... I think I put slightly too much importance on my ideas". But the spirit of the *band* prevailed. The four members have remained very good friends, through all their touring, all their recording and have not let their personal hang-ups get in the way of the band's progress. "I think the other members have been real tolerant of me at certain times. My ego maybe got a little too big for its own good," he continues,"I would show them the part and say 'Play that exactly' and 'I know it sounds like it ought to have a guitar, but we're gonna put a synthesizer in this time'." But maybe there were other reasons for this as well: "It was necessary for me to work, and on occasion fight, with the producer to try to get what I thought the band's ideas were." Time just wouldn't allow everybody equal input. "I tend to think that we should have taken more time before our second album came out," Tomek ponders, and understandably adds, "I wonder if we shouldn't have changed producers, because it seems to me there was less interest in our second album than in our first." But Terry Manning stayed.

"Tornado" remains a strong album, but that is more due to Walkenhorst's songwriting than to the record's sound and production. Gems like "The Lakeview Man" and the hilarious "Wages of Sin" alongside the disillusionment of songs like "Small Circles" and the ambiguity of "No Romance" might have deserved a better fate than the a-little-too-slick production of their second album. In terms of sales, "Tornado" didn't do as well as the first record. Walkenhorst leaves no doubt as to his opinion of the business side of being a recording artist: "I don't want to sound like I didn't ever want to be bigger, I just didn't worry about that part. I don't know what the magic number is... I've always said that this isn't McDonald's; I'm not here to sell a billon hamburgers, I'm here to make music. I know that our band was heard by a lot of people, I know that our music was enjoyed and touched a lot of people's lives. That's the part that I'm concerned about."

"THIS NORWAY THANG..."

The band got back out on the road to support "Tornado", and by now it was becoming more obvious that in addition to their home state, Norway was becoming their core market. While the rest of the world started losing interest, The Rainmakers just kept on growing in Norway. They came back for another set of concerts in '87 and again in '88. But why Norway? "That is kind of odd," Tomek says," but it's one of those things like meeting the right person, you're so happy that it happened, who cares why (laughs)."

By the time they recorded their third album "The Good News And The Bad News" in '89, and ironically, while the band seemed to really come into its own musically, Norwegians were practically the only ones left around who bought their records. The band got a new producer for the record, Jeff Glixman, who had previously produced The Georgia Satelites ("Keep your Hands To Yourself"). The album came out sounding raunchier, rougher than their previous efforts, and declared: "Crank up the noise/ Rock with the boys/Come on jam with the band/Blow the horn o' plenty." And in Norway, people did. The band came back for their classic appearance at the Kalvøya festival in the summer, and toured again in the fall of '89. They were cranking out their brand of wild rock like there was no tomorrow. But for all its rampant energy, "The Good News And The Bad News" had a sense of desperation to it. Songs like "Battle of the Roses", "Reckoning Day" and "Thirty Days" contained anger and frustration that had not really been evident on the previous albums. Walkenhorst shouted at a world that didn't make sense to him, but he also tried to provide himself with an answer: "Spend it on Love". "I see the world and the universe as being mostly chaotic, with some threads of purpose running through it," Walkenhorst muses,"The purpose is to create some order and some love and some human connection out of all that chaos."

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

The road had begun to take it's toll. Their private lives suffering, the band had reached a crossroads: "I had decided in the middle of [that] tour that I just couldn't do this anymore. I had something like twelwe years on the road, and I'd had enough," Tomek recalls. "I called Bob after the touring was over and said 'I need to talk to you about something.' So he said 'Well, I have to talk to Steve and Rich, and I'll come over to your house after that.' And he walked in the door, and before I could tell him I'd quit, he said 'I've decided to break up the band.'" And that was that. End of story? Not quite... They came back for their farewell concert the summer of '90 at Kalvøya, along with the live-album "Oslo-Wichita", a record made especially for the Norwegian market.

HEADING HOME

"I didn't play at all for eight months or a year," Walkenhorst says," I was just so worn out, so I got rested up, and then I started playing acoustic music with a friend here in Kansas City, at a very small place for free on the weekends. It was a great experience for me. A lot of people were coming in and going 'Oh, Bob must have fallen on hard times, playing some bar.' I said 'Well, no, I'm doing fine, it's just that I want to play music and I want to walk in with my guitar, sing some songs and walk back out.'"

Walkenhorst made his living playing bars, and writing music for short films, more often than not for children, he got married, and had himself a baby. Rich Ruth toured with another band for a couple of years and eventually moved on into video production. Steve Phillips built a studio in his basement, and spent his time getting that up and running. And Pat Tomek dove head first into the world of computers and desk-top publishing, and hasn't come up since.

For a while there was talk of a Bob Walkenhorst solo album, but nothing came of it. "I'm really glad it didn't happen. Musically it's still better for me to work in the structure of a band." And he also says," I liked John Lennon better when he was in The Beatles, I liked John Fogerty better when he was in Creedence, I liked Sting better when he was in the Police." Point taken.

In '90, PolyGram Norway released "The Best of The Rainmakers". In addition to neatly summing up the band's career so far, it also contained lovely accoustic versions of "Small Circles", "Long Gone Long" and "Johnny Reb". The three songs raised the issue of what the band could have become, had they continued. A more sensitive side to the band, as yet unexplored, seemed to hold the promise of that horn o' plenty not having run out yet. But even so, these guys didn't even have a record contract. "There is no justice in the world," Tomek states, matter of factly. Right.

FOR THE FUN OF IT

Then all of a sudden they were back with a new record, "Flirting With The Universe", and a Norwegian tour in the late summer of '94. They had started recording the album in '93, in Phillips' basement, and they were only releasing it in Norway. The album was intentionally made to sound as if you had The Rainmakers playing in your living room. And it sounded good. Basically recorded as two guitars, bass and drums it gave the impression that the band had enjoyed themselves in the studio. "We only do this if it's fun," they agreed up front. And the ghosts from the "Tornado" sessions were nowhere in sight: "I think I'm a nicer person than I used to be," Walkenhorst admits,"and [...] I think everyone has grown, and I think we have also grown in our appreciation of our situation in The Rainmakers; the fact that we kind of made this little band personality that was accepted by this country clear across the world from us. We've got this unique little situation where we can come over here and have people waiting for our music, have people anxious to hear us perform, [so] that I think we all want to maintain and have that situation grow. And part of that is taking care of each other, and the creative process, so that everyone feels like they are making a contribution that they find rewarding."

The album quickly outsold "The Good News And The Bad News", and the tour was a total sell-out, with an extra concert added at the end. A Steve Phillips song, "Wilder Side", became a radio hit, and live, the band took well care of their newly developed, more quiet side, playing stripped down versions of "Small Circles" and "Johnny Reb", along with the new songs "Fool's Gold" and the maddeningly catchy "You Remind Me Of Someone": "I want to hear those gentle moments, just as much as I want to hear the loud ones," Walkenhorst explains.

Well, The Rainmakers are back, and there may well be another album in a couple of years, but in the meantime, Walkenhorst concludes: "I'm so, so grateful to have the opportunity to put out a record again, and know that people take those songs home... [...] A large part of it is still the faith that you're throwing something out there, and you believe you worked hard enough on it, and you put enough of yourself into it, that it will have some kind of power, that it will touch someone's life." You bet. Keep it comin', Bob.

Notes

1 *Image* talked to drummer Pat Tomek and songwriter and vocalist Bob Walkenhorst in August, September and October '94.