

Todd Rundgren

# SOMETHING TO FALL BACK ON

JoE Silva explores the history of a classic track made entirely with the human voice and the humble sampler.

**B**y the time Todd Rundgren arrives in the mid-80s, his career has seen the best and worst of the pop industry. Lauded as a top-shelf producer, guitar hero and a creative force always leaning towards the bleeding edge of technology, Rundgren was entering a tricky phase of his career, simultaneously watching his band and his relationship with his record label disintegrate.

"This was a crazy period," Rundgren says, now 25 years on. "1984 was the swansong of Utopia and I was moving into solo ventures more or less exclusively. Plus my contract with Bearsville Records was ending."

Bearsville had been built up by infamous Dylan manager Albert Grossman, and now at the end of Rundgren's relationship with the dyspeptic impresario, Todd was feeling somewhat squeezed. Falsely informed

**"AS FAR AS MY EXPECTATIONS WERE CONCERNED I THINK I MET MOST OF THEM AND I WAS PRETTY HAPPY WITH IT."**

by Grossman that his latest offering was being rejected by Bearsville's distributor (Warner Brothers), the record's release was held up until Rundgren gave over one more "pound of flesh" to Grossman in the way of three more albums' worth of publishing rights. That record was *A Capella*, an album that Rundgren fashioned entirely with his voice.

"I've had a fascination with choral music ever since I was young. So I'd had in the back of my mind the idea of what could be done using voices alone, but that was before samplers came out, and I thought: 'This would be a terrific amount of work, and I'm not sure that I want to take it on'."

Enter the E-mu Emulator, the everyman's 8-bit sampling platform – every man, that is, who had about the equivalent of £12,000 or so in 1982 to spend on a fancy new keyboard. The first Emulator didn't have much going for it (eight voices, one filter and a floppy drive for sample storage), but it was nothing less than revolutionary. Rundgren found it to be the perfect foil for his project.

"I began sampling my voice, sometimes treating it so that it would take on the characteristics of other sorts of sounds, like percussion. I made rhythm beds using that and sometimes it would sound like a drum kit or an ethnic instrument or just like vocals. Essentially, I just explored the possibility of using vocal sounds alone or other bodily

sounds like clapping. And since I didn't have a sequencer, when I constructed those drum tracks I was just playing them in real time on the keyboard."

Rundgren recorded these experiments at Utopia Sound, his longtime studio in Lake Hill, New York. Nearly everything in the facility was custom-made for Rundgren, and it was also home to a Stephens 24-track capstan-free / pinch-roller-less deck that at the time was considered fairly exotic. The specially built console featured only sends and no EQs other than the 24-band equalizers built-in to every channel.

"First I would sample the drum sounds, so I would put my lips right on the microphone and blow into it just like that human beatbox thing that people would do years later. That was the track where I was going for something that sounded like a drum kit the most. I loaded in the 'do do do' sounds that made up the keyboard bit, then I

would start layering parts like I would on any keyboard."

But for all Rundgren's work, *A Capella* lacked a single, and Todd returned to his sonic laboratory to craft a new song in a vein similar to

the rest of the album. The instantly catchy *Something To Fall Back On*, was classic Rundgren powerpop, featuring a big multi-voice backing choir, primal beatboxing and a hooky chorus. And although he reckons that track took him only a day-and-a-half to record, the album as a whole wasn't always that easy going: "There were obvious challenges. Often I would have to play a piano part to sing over so I'd have pitch reference, and laying down the drums tracks at times was extremely nerve-wracking."

Groundbreaking as it might have been, *A Capella* never garnered much commercial recognition, but *Something To Fall Back On* became a staple of his Todd's setlist for several years: "As far as my expectations were concerned I think I met most of them and I was pretty happy with it. And it always goes down great live. It was always a highlight of the show." **MTM**

## Key Facts

- Todd Rundgren's many production credits include XTC, Meatloaf, The New York Dolls and Grand Funk.
- The E-mu Emulator and its various progeny were produced from 1982 through 2002.
- Rundgren's latest album is *Arena*, a rock LP he recorded entirely with his laptop.



### TRACK DETAILS

Todd Rundgren  
Sampler, vocals

Recorded 1984  
Studios Utopia Sound, Lake Hill, New York

Released September, 1985



Something To Fall Back On can be found on the *A Capella* LP.