

The Tubes, Todd, and Utopia

I first heard about The Tubes from my friend Vic Luke back in 1984. I had heard about The Tubes from other people here and there, but Vic was the one who really got me started. He went on and on about how great they were and went into great detail about their awesome drummer and singers and the guitar players and the keyboard players and how great the songs were and the stage show, etc.

Vic was a big fan. He'd go on and on about the show and the hot back up chick singers, and all the costume changes of the lead singer. So, I was pretty intrigued and it sounded like a pretty cool band.

Vic told me that The Tubes were coming to Boston and that there was free outdoor concert at M.I.T. and that we should all go and check it out. It sounded like a good idea and, hey, why not? I was in college and it was the 80's, and it was fun to be a college kid in Boston. We all went to check out The Tubes and when we got there it looked like a pretty cool setup. It was a free, outdoor show in front of some frat at M.I.T. They were smart kids over at a completely different breed of people than the college I went to. Musicians aren't like the average M.I.T. student. But, I didn't feel intimidated because, overall, musicians were cooler than M.I.T. people, and I was there to check out the music and, of course, the chicks. That was a given. At Berklee College of Music, there were about 6,000 guys and it seemed like only about 15 girls. The ratio was not good. Of the 15 girls, about half were gay. The others were either ugly or taken. So, I didn't get a whole lot of girl action at my college. I had to go to other schools to find the fine women. This particular time at M.I.T. was primarily about the music, but if there were hot chicks, that would be fun too. I had to go to B.U. or Emerson or Tufts or Northeastern to meet the single, straight women.

The stage was fairly elaborate and I was a total equipment geek, so I was checking out all the amps and keyboards and guitars and all their cool stuff. The P.A. was really big and powerful and super high quality, so I knew it had the potential of sounding really good. I had been to concerts and shows before, but I was never really completely blown away by anything that I'd seen in the past. I was excited to see what The Tubes were all about because I had heard so much about them from Vic Luke.

When they started playing, I immediately noticed that they were better than any other band or show that I'd ever seen in my entire life. It only took about 15 seconds and I knew I was in the presence of something really great. Everything about The Tubes was super great. The drummer was, and still is, a super monster player and by far one of the best funk rock drummers who ever lived. The bass player was totally a pro and locked in with the drummer, and it was obvious that they had been playing together for years because the chemistry between them was unmistakably tight.

There were two guitar players and two keyboard players, plus two backup singer/dancer chicks who were totally hot. The lead singer had it all: a super great voice, charisma, stage presence, a great personality: everything you could ever want. Plus, the actual songs and music were by far superior to anything I'd ever heard live. These guys were real good and I mean, they could play. Not only was the band great and the material really well crafted, but the physical sound quality was also out of this world. It was clear to me that the sound guy had been mixing these guys for years or he was just incredibly good.

I was blown away. I am not blown away easily. I have a very critical and discriminating ear and little to no tolerance for mediocrity. This was my first experience of seeing one of the best bands of all time, live, with an amazing sound system and everything working perfectly. It was from this moment on that I gained a new level of expectation about what a great live band should sound like and be like. It was proof that it could be done and that there was enough technology and skill and talent to make something like that happen, in real time, in the real world.

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The Tubes were so good that I was literally mesmerized by the whole experience. My life would become different. The molecular structure in every fiber of my being had been altered, bringing me to a new level of consciousness. (I don't say that lightly, either.)

It wasn't so much that their message was all that spiritual or that I was so moved by how amazing they all were as human beings. I was amazed at how fuckin' good this rock 'n' roll band sounded on EVERY level. I had never seen people able to play so well and sound so good, all at the same time, and with such a good sound system. That made all the difference in the world. It was a perfect mix and I mean perfect. Plus, every single member of the band had a great voice and could play and sing at the same time and it was a perfect blend. They all had unique and interesting voices and the quality of the sound was just so right on.

The Tubes were truly a great band and the songwriting and arranging was outstanding. The show was a flawless mix of great songs, amazing singing, amazing playing, and an awesome sound system. Everything was flat out amazing. I'm still amazed just thinking about it right now. I was now a Tubes fan and they were the best live band that I had ever seen so far in my life. For a while that is.

Until that one fateful night, when everything changed.

I went to see the Tubes again when their Love Bomb tour came to Boston in the summer of 1985. Some random band that I had never heard of was opening up for them. When I got to the show, my nerdy friend from Berklee (whom I can't even remember his name) was telling me about the opening act.

He told me it was Todd Rundgren's band, Utopia.

I was like, who's that?

He couldn't believe that I had never heard of Todd Rundgren and Utopia.

Sorry, dude, but I don't know who they are.

He went on and on about how much of a genius Todd was and how great Utopia was, etc.-blah blah blah. My friend was kind of a geek, so I didn't believe a word he said. I was there to see The Tubes, my favorite band in the whole world, and I wasn't about to get all excited about some random opening act that NOBODY had ever heard of except for my random skinny-ass friend who I don't even remember his name right now.

So, the lights dimmed down low and the band walked out on stage. They were all wearing white jumpsuits and had wireless mics attached to their lapels and they were using instruments that were also wireless. There were no amps or monitors on stage and it looked totally barren and naked. I guess the monitors were under the stage through the metal grills or something.

The fact that there was NOTHING on stage except four guys and their instruments seemed a bit odd, but I was mildly interested to see if they could pull this off. The drummer had an interesting drum set that was on a revolving pedestal, positioned so that it looked like it was a motorcycle. It was kinda cool in a stupid way. The first song started and I was instantly surprised by the playing, singing and overall vibe. I turned to my skinny, white trash know-it-all friend, what's his name, and said, "man, these guys are really good. It must be just a lucky break or something; otherwise, I would've heard about these guys before."

My loser friend just shook his head like I didn't know what I was talking about and told me to shut up and listen. I did, and the band just got better and better every second as I was listening to them. I was truly amazed that these four guys were all singing in four-part harmony, and playing intricate and difficult musical parts that all worked perfectly for the pop/rock genre they were pulling off. It was even kind of a progressive rock-pop sound and it almost reminded me of The Beatles but it was more intense and more complicated.

It was almost as if it were what The Beatles would have sounded like if they had stuck together longer and could play, sing and write BETTER. This was better than The Beatles. I was, and still am, a ridiculously huge Beatles fan, but in all honesty this was ten times better —

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more interesting, better playing, better sounding — just better. Not better looking though, I might add. This was not about looks. The Beatles were way cooler looking.

I was becoming more and more amazed as this was happening. It wasn't just better songs, better playing and better sound. The actual arrangement and specific chord choices and specific chord voicings and inversions that they were choosing to use were all better, too. It was all so tasteful and master-crafted and intelligent and honest and legitimate and basically perfect. It was SUDDENLY my favorite kind of music in the whole world, and I never knew who they were or where they came from.

I thought that this can't be and that it must be just a lucky first song and that there is no way that anyone could be this good without me already knowing about it. The second song kicked in and a different guy in the band sang lead. They all took turns singing lead. No one hardly ever does that. It's a very rare thing to have more than one lead singer in a band. I had never heard of such a thing or ever saw anything like it before.

The second song was even better than the first. Now, I'm getting weirded out by the fact that a band that was this good had gone totally unnoticed by me and unannounced to a lot of the world. How could a band this good go so completely unnoticed in the world and be opening for a fairly small-time band like The Tubes? Why weren't these guys huge? Why weren't these guys super famous like Aerosmith or The Beach Boys or U2?

This was the best band in the world by far, in every possible way! It had the best songs, the best singing, the best playing, the best arrangements and the best sound. The only thing it didn't have was the show. It didn't look amazing. It was just great music, without an amazing visual made just for a guy like me.

The third song started and it was yet another guy in the band singing lead. There were four lead singers and they all took turns singing lead and backups for each other. My friend sitting next to me told me it was Todd Rundgren's band and that he was the leader. I just was so amazed that I had never heard of these guys or this guy Todd. From that moment on, my life was different.

I had decided that I wanted to find out who this Todd Rundgren was, and learn how to be like him, in certain ways. Obviously, I didn't want to be exactly like him; that would've been crazy. But musically speaking, this guy and his music hit a nerve in me that no one had ever hit quite like that before.

I mean, I would say that The Beatles were the most successful pop rock band that ever was, by far. I would say that Led Zeppelin was the best hard rock band that ever was. I would say that Elvis was the best male singer/performer that ever lived. Then, I'd say that there are a lot of other truly great singers and songwriters and bands out there and that I had a lot of other favorites, like Freddy Mercury and David Bowie and Stevie Wonder.

But, to be honest, this Todd Rundgren and his band Utopia was in its own world class with me. After seeing Utopia perform that night I had made a new commitment to music and to excellence. I had seen it demonstrated to me, personally, right in front of my musically trained ears, with no smoke or mirrors. It was raw talent and skill and expertise in the field of live musicianship and it was the real thing. The molecular structure of my D.N.A. and my entire reality about what music was, had been uplifted to a new height. I had seen my favorite kind of music for the first time and it blew my mind.

I was also a huge jazz fan. Oscar Peterson was by far my favorite jazz pianist. The thing about jazz, for me, was that it was just too hard to play really well. For me, that is. I guess some people had more of a knack for it, or maybe they worked harder than me. Who knows? I just like pop music the best to play; it makes the most sense to me.

Todd's band, Utopia, made the most sense to me that night. It was very specific, too, the way the upper structure triads in the guitar and keyboards worked with the sophisticated,

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modern bass lines that weren't playing obvious cliches where you had to really pay attention to figure out the harmonic progressions.

I had studied harmonic ear training at Berklee and excelled at being able to hear the most complex and difficult chord progressions, but these...these were like no other that I'd ever heard before.

It was like hearing all my favorite sounds and colors of harmony that I never knew I loved so much, for the first time, right in front of my face, over and over again. I'm not going to say it was better than sex, but it was better in a different kind of way that stimulated a part of my brain and soul that has never happened again. Not like this.

After the show, I came home and started my research on Todd and Utopia. I found out a lot of things about who he was and what he had done. He was a multi-instrumentalist; he could play the shit out of the piano, guitar, drums, and horns, and sing his ass off, too. He also was a successful record producer and had produced artists/bands like: Cheap Trick, Meatloaf, XTC, The Tubes, Hall and Oates, and many others. His resume was very impressive and his skills were beyond belief.

I have spent 22 years studying him in great detail and have come to this conclusion: he may be my favorite overall musician, artist, producer and performer, but he isn't my favorite human being. I don't know him personally, and it really doesn't matter to me if I do or not. I just can tell that he isn't as amazing of a person as he is a creative force and innovative artist. I can separate the two things. Just like with Elvis. He is my favorite male performer, but I know for a fact that he isn't my favorite human being. I know it's a strange thing to have such affectation and extreme interest in a musical performer, but not really care about them much as a person. Most people like the musician AND the music at the same time. I do too, quite often, but not in this particular case.

I had heard a sound on that fateful night, showing me it was possible to be that good. Not just that good, but a very specific sound that would shape the next 20 years of my life on a very specific and focused journey towards discovering my own creativity and inner voice. Todd Rundgren and his band Utopia influenced my own song writing and production style more than anyone else, by far.