



# GRAHAM PARKER

## THE PETROL PUMP LEGEND

To attain the status of a genuine rock 'n' roll legend, a snappy beginning is very helpful. You know the kind — it's 1954 and a good-looking 19 year old truck driver strolls into a run-down Memphis studio to record two songs for \$4 as a present for his mother on her birthday. That was Elvis. Presley not Costello, of course.

Or . . . spiky-haired youth wanders into London's Sex boutique and is spotted dancing spastically next to a juke box. He's approached by two other youths who inquire, "Can you sing?" To which Johnny Rotten replies "Of course not!" That, according to legend was the formation of the Sex Pistols.

Or how about this . . . pasty-faced, diminutive, petrol pump attendant Graham Parker is sitting bored on the forecourt when a bunch of rock 'n' roll heavies drive up in a battered ban and with a "Hey kid, you wanna sing in a rock 'n' roll band?" Graham Parker and The Rumour are born.

Well . . . it wasn't quite that way. As Parker says, "it wasn't like that at all. It was more like: 'who is this little twerp.'"

But the alliance between Graham Parker and a bunch of pub rock legends was almost as much of an accident as the hype might suggest. Through ads placed in the musicians wanted section of *Melody Maker*, Parker, then a struggling singer-songwriter, was introduced to Dave Robinson, manager of London's Hope and Anchor pub adjacent to which is a small recording studio. Robinson was convinced that Parker's songs were worth recording and persuaded the Rumour to work with our petrol pump jockey in laying down some demos.

The Rumour existed before Graham Parker appeared — keyboard player Bob Andrews and guitarist Brinsley Schwarz were from the group that bore Brinsley's name, guitarist Martin Belmont was late of Ducks Deluxe and was, at this time, supporting himself working as a barman at the Hope and Anchor, while the rhythm section of Andrew Bodnar on bass and Stephen Goulding on drums had just left the little-known band, Bon Temps Roulee. All five were using the Hope and Anchor studio as focal point — piecing together songs and laying vague plans.

Martin Belmont confesses: "We were a bit directionless at that time. We were just rehearsing and nobody was interested in going out and doing gigs or anything. Graham gave us a sense of direction. He had the songs and he needed to go and play gigs."

Although Parker filled the Rumour's need for a frontman and all-round pushy personality, there were still doubts on both sides. Parker recalls: "We all got together because Dave talked me into it. He had to twist my arm. These were the first really good musicians I ever played with, so I told Dave, 'Maybe y'know, okay,' so the next thing I know I'm rehearsing with Brinsley, Bob and Martin and they weren't sure about me. They didn't know if I was really that good or not."

"I mean they didn't know who I was or anything. But I knew that if I could get the band together, that my songs would cut through and the whole thing would cut through. But they didn't at first."

"So it took a bit of time but as soon as we'd got on tour, man, then it clicked. It all pulled together."

Since schooldays Parker had possessed a vitality, an 'internal energy' he calls it, that he had to let out. "I knew it was gonna come out strongly in some way you know, and there's never been any other way really but music."

Parker's future couldn't really lie in any other direction. In his last year at school, he'd consulted the youth employment office and when asked what sort of employment he had in mind Graham replied that

he'd like to collect rare animals for zoos. The youth employment officer politely suggested perhaps he'd rather work in a supermarket.

The famous job as a petrol pump jockey was one of a series of dead end jobs. As Parker recalls, "Writing was the only thing that was gonna save me in a way. Most people around must have thought 'Well he's gone down the drain. 'But I knew I'd gotta make a go of it now or never, so I was really propelled at that time to get totally into music so I could make a living out of it.'"

The Rumour provided the perfect foil for his songs — a top flight rock 'n' roll unit with the ability to play with both aggression and subtlety. Parker had tried working as a solo singer but admits "only when I met good musicians on a working basis did I start getting it right. I was getting to the point where I had to find musicians who wanted to play songs as opposed to solos and suites that people were writing then."

Parker's songs draw on a wealth of influences — notably Dylan, 60's R & B and the Stones — but as one perceptive Stateside writer noted: "By and large, the influences are almost all American yet coming back at us through these British musicians, they somehow are given a renewed life, and power and a totally distinct style."

The British press were initially sceptical of this unknown runt in shades fronting what no-one could deny was one powerhouse of a band. Others trotted out the superlatives but compared Parker to his influences. As Martin Belmont commented at the time, "We kept a list for a while. We had a table going with the names we'd seen Graham compared to. We had Van Morri-



Graham Parker

son, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Nils Lofgren. Lofgren fell behind pretty quickly. Right now Van Morrison and Springsteen are neck and neck."

Not that Belmont denies the influences — "There's nothing original in what we play . . . it's not without influence obviously. But it seems to me it's like a shot in the arm; it's what I've been wanting to happen. You get fed up hearing the bland pop records on the one hand and the art on the other. I think what we're doing falls in the middle."

The three Graham Parker and the Rumour albums have shown a steady development of the six man outfit into a distinctive unit. Their first album, *Howlin' Wind*, sketched in their influences and showed the strengths of GP's songs. On the second set, *Heat Treatment*, the melodies were stronger, the ensemble playing was

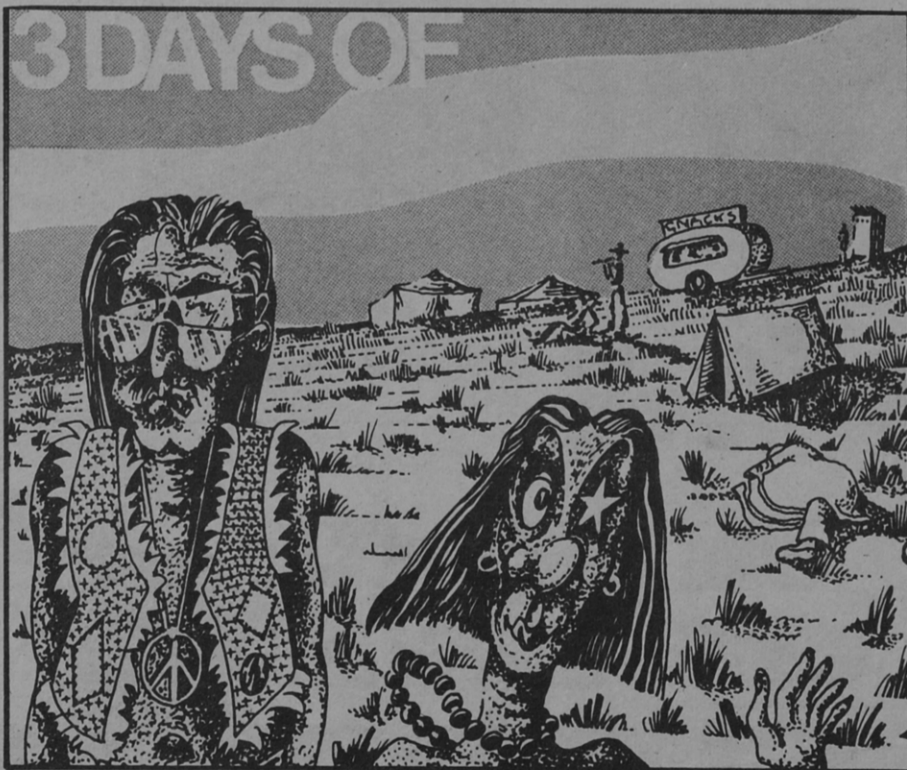
astightasthis and the production perfectly complemented the tone of each song. The latest *Stick to Me*, highlights the development of the Rumour into an even tougher and more aggressive band. World domination is in sight.

Even the future of rock 'n' roll himself, Bruce Springsteen, was heard to mutter after a New York concert, "This guy combines the best of Van Morrison, Eric Burdon and John Lennon . . . he's the only guy around right now I'd pay money to see."

But one last point, Graham, why the ever present shades?

"They're just a bad habit. I started to see too much so I put shades on to cut down on what I see. Someone once said I look pretty cool in shades so I just left them on. I do take them off in the bath though . . . if the lights are dim."

Alastair Dougal



It's history now so I guess anyone who wanted to now knows all about it. But strangely enough, at least for such a large gathering, Nambassa was a very personal event. You hated it/you loved it/you slept/drank/burnt through it. Veterans returned home with enormously varying stories of the organisation and the disorganisation, the excitement and the boredom, the beauty and the squalor. And with an audience of somewhere between ten and twenty thousand which ranged from the Kapiti Christian Centre to the Filthy Few from Rotorua, every tale was probably true.

But from where my sleeping bag lay the most disparate forces seemed to form a un-

ique union which made Nambassa work. In those three days a tolerance, that could well be unparalleled in events of this kind, was established. The Krisna followers, who for years have been ridiculed in the streets of cities, were welcomed at Nambassa and not only for their massive free banquets. Along with most every other spiritual, political and philosophical group represented they added weight to what could have become just another rock concert. Just as Peter Terry, one of the organisers had hoped, not all the preaching was to the converted. The seminars, workshops, and lectures were well-attended by people who had come principally for the music but had

stretched themselves beyond that.

Just as well, for without the 'crafts and alternatives' side of the events Nambassa could have failed badly. I doubt whether even the most ardent disciple came home raving about the music. Those bands who are consistently good were good at Nambassa and those who are bad were boring. But no-one stood out from the big line-up of New Zealand talent. It wasn't that the music was of a generally low level. It just wasn't brilliant. The successful acts were those who appealed to the audience on a large scale — as a mass rather than as individuals. Skyhooks and Living Force were popular because they involved the thousand or so people close to the stage. You could dance, you could chant, you could sing and so the criteria for good music were radically changed if only for a weekend.

Both the smaller Aerial Railway stage and the main stage featured non-musical acts. The audience response to these depended to a great extent on timing and venue rather than merit. And so although Limbs met an excellent response during the day on the smaller stage, when they were slotted to perform before Skyhooks on the main stage at night they came across very badly. This was perhaps one of the greatest flaws in the organisation with only the poet Gary McCormick, managing to overcome the problem of size and movement for a solo act on an enormous stage.

Of course there was lots and lots more than just the music, lectures and craft stalls. There were problems too, although they were surprisingly few and minor. The overwhelming feeling though was of people — everywhere. And each of them saw Nambassa as he wanted to. The arguments will never end because although it may sound corny, Nambassa was very much what the individual wanted and expected it to be. Good or bad — at least it happened.

Louise Chunn