

# James Lowe of the Electric Prunes

## Then and Now



**MuzikMan:** Welcome to you James, and the Electric Prunes return into active status.

Last year *Artifact* made the MuzikMan Top 10 albums of the year and deservedly so. Now there is a new DVD titled *Rewired* that celebrates those great new recordings, can you delve into how the project started and how it reached its fruition?

**James:** We had an offer to do a small tour in Europe and thought it would be interesting to visit some of the same places we played in 1967, kind of like going back to the roots of something.

We never really had any film or video of the band in the past, and the Stockholm '67 album was the only one that existed of our live performances. We had had numerous offers to do a DVD. We were actually working on some animations and live video of our own but the timing never seemed quite right to release it. The UK tour seemed to be the perfect place to capture some of the energy of the band in a live situation and a chance to expose some of our animations and home movies.

I think television is a very difficult medium for rock music. I cannot watch anyone for very long on TV, DVD's or Pay per View concert specials, not The Stones, Dylan, Springsteen...anyone. A concert is meant to be a live event and experienced live. But when you have the option to put some touring episodes in there, show a little bit about the band's recording techniques, and let people know a little more about you, it can work. The sub menu ability of DVD's allows cool little movies to be hidden away in the programming, and that can be a saving grace. Snapper Music in the UK was very agreeable to our ideas as to what we wanted a DVD to be and let us put anything in we thought might be fun to watch. They also let me do the artwork and come up with the *Rewired* title. You run the risk of

breaking the illusion people have of the music when you go visual; but life is about taking some chances. We opted to shoot a small club venue in Brighton Beach as opposed to the Royal Festival Hall in London because we felt it would be more intimate and more like what we had done in the 60's. I still think that was a good decision. Most acts will record a few nights on a tour to select the best takes of the set list. This was not an option for us as it all had to happen on one night and whatever we got was what it was. That, in itself, is somewhat exciting...Play and Record! We decided to put a set that included the songs that people expect from us like "Too Much To Dream" and "Get Me The World On Time," but we wanted to expose some of the new recordings as well. It all boils down to what is fun to play. If you are having a good time, the audience will feel it. The energy you bring to a concert is really, what drives the thing. *Rewired* is about as noisy and confusing as our gigs get. It is a decent representation of the band live. If you did not see us in the 60's this is about what it is and is.

**MuzikMan:** Can you update all the fans that have been enjoying your music since the 60's and new ones that have come onboard with what is going on with the band and what the plans are for the next year?



**James:** We are in the last stages of mixing a new CD that is a little more like our first two albums. It is more song oriented and even has two new songs from the writing team that got together for *TMTD* and *GMTTWOT*, Annette Tucker and Jill Jones. *Artifact* was an album for us to get our sea legs; this CD was more for the listener. While always a possibility, playing live is a question, we are having such a good time recording. Perhaps a tour here in the USA would be possible if we can get the support. The difference this time is we are really having a good time playing and the music is the issue, not being a pop star trying to sell a lot of records.

**MuzikMan:** Let us jump into the way-back machine (remember that cartoon?) What was James Lowe doing during all those years that he was not recording; also did you keep in touch with all the EP members during the band's extended hiatus?

**James:** Rocky and Bullwinkle, one of my favorites! I produced and engineered albums for a few years after the band issue and eventually wandered into television production. I started my own production company, produced and directed television commercials, kid's shows for Disney, corporate image pieces, anything I found some interest in.

Mark and I had spoken once or twice in the 30 years and had dinner together once; but I had no contact with the other members. A band "crash" is a traumatic event and hard feelings can run rampant when everyone is trying to place blame somewhere for a failure. We were not exactly fighting mad but seeing each other would have been a reminder of past issues. Since Mark and I have written together, we always have had a closer relationship and when we had the opportunity to do the *Lost Dreams* compilation album it was a perfect situation to rekindle our friendship. This led to our recording new things together.

**MuzikMan:** What are your thoughts about some of the technology that is available today opposite when the band first started out? What are your feelings on the new Internet technology and marketing strategies eliminating the need for labels and other traditional promotional tools? Although some things are the same, there is quite a bit that has changed good and bad, what are your thoughts and opinions on all of those developments?

**James:** Well the most exciting thing is that a group no longer has to depend upon a studio system to get a decent recording of their material. The consumer market has driven the prices down and quality up for smaller systems that any artist can enjoy at home. We prefer analog but the digital recording systems are amazing. Things that used to take us hours in the studio are now realized the push of a key. If you remember, the recording studio advances of the Beatles era led to some of the coolest music ever produced. I look for things to get even more amazing as talented artists enter the digital domain. I am currently producing a young punk band and we record them live here in the studio. The other day one of them said, "When we get the demo finished...", to which I responded "This ain't no demo....when will you ever record it better? When will it sound any better? This is a real thing so play well!" There are no excuses anymore, no company to blame, just push record.

As far as a band being able to promote itself, cut its own CD's, realize its own artwork, create the image they want for the audience, there has never been such access in history. I can sit at home and communicate with a distributor in Germany, a concert promoter in the UK, a radio DJ in Yugoslavia or Poland in the same 15-minute period, and all free! The bonus is you can also communicate with people that like your music thru emails and website messages. This was impossible in the past. The internet is amazing, and as I see it as the only link to any semblance of diversity, we will have in the future. The radio stations today are controlled by a few entities; computers play the music that is programmed. There is not much chance for a feeling or expression there. In a business that is characterized by people clawing their way in to get an audience share, the internet is at least a crack of fingernails. Airplay is something else...it is still an "in-crowd" thing.

**MuzikMan:** What and who would you consider to be your strongest influences, both personally and professionally, when you were starting out in the recording industry?

**James:** The Who's: You can never forget the people that help you realize something about your music. Images: Todd Rundgren at 17 writing full orchestra parts for "A Beautiful Song" in his hotel room the night before the session for Nazzy, he had never done it before and completely blew the studio players minds!

Van Dyke Parks playing the most disconnected notes and sounds to achieve absolute masterpiece. Often we would be recording for 5 hours before I knew what the hell we were doing, amazing.

Russ and Ron Mael of the Sparks and their great sense of humor and musical irony, I thought that were what rock was supposed to be about, free expression. Manager, Albert Grossman always had an open ear for music and I saw him fall into his "goo filled" swimming pool trying to show me a fancy Ry Cooder having me mute a fantastic slide guitar solo on "Alimony" because he thought it too focused and flashy, a class dude.

Randy Newman acting incredulous when he played "Mama Told Me Not to Come" in the studio between songs and I said...that is a hit! He said someone named Three Dog Night was going to record it.

If your eyes are open, you can learn a lot.

The What: Someone telling me to get over it, the past is past and unless you learn from the mistakes you are doomed to making them again, good advice.

**MuzikMan:** I know you have worked as producer (on the other side of the glass), that is entirely different experiencing than being the artist that is actually recording, how have those experiences benefited you over the years? Who are some of the most enjoyable people you have produced?

**James:** Well, it really seems like it would be fun to be in the position



saying yes, no, let's go this way or that, it should really be...but you have to get your shit together to be able to do these things with confidence. It all boils down to listening. Most people are easily distracted and do not really listen.

If you have ever been in the other guy's shoes, you have a little more sympathy. When I used to record vocals there would always be 10 people

sitting behind the glass in various stages of disinterest. One was sleeping, one frowning, and one eating a burger and so on. This would drive me up the wall, as my performance was always dependent on watching how they responded. Guests in the studio get bored quickly, as they show that it is time-consuming repetitive work. Since I have experienced this firsthand, I protect anyone I work with by kicking anyone not involved out of the studio. This hurts when they are cute, but we get better recordings!

You really need an overall view of the thing from 50 feet up. This helps you avoid the obvious and develop some strategies to make things unique. I have always preferred to try to understand every phase of any project I have been responsible for, the only way you can do this is to experience the duties of each person involved. Want to be a director? Learn lighting, sound and editing, your job will be better for your understanding of each area, and the attendant problems each department faces.

Most enjoyable people to work with: Sparks, Ananda Shankar , Todd Rundgren, Hunt and Tom Sales, Grapefruit, Terry Melcher, Van Dyke Parks, Mark Tulin

**MuzikMan:** Is there anything else you would like to add James? The floor is all yours!

**James:** Our mantra remains the same...Dreams do not give up on us, we quit on them. Paint the wall, write that poem or song, play that guitar, and play it loud! Damn the neighbors! The 2003 tour showed us our music is as relevant now as it was in the 60's. I think people are tired of artificially created bands, perfectly synthesized voices and computer quantized and generated music. Everyone is still looking for a little passion in their lives and music. We come from a musical time when everything was in flux; there was nothing you could not try. There is a power and aesthetic derived from being there and going through it. That energy cannot be faked or simulated. We hope that we are carrying forward that same spirit and energy into the music we are making today. I mean, truly, the past present tense.

My favorite part of the *Rewired* DVD? The easter eggs...can you find them? There are six or seven. Thanks for listening...and now looking.

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James Lowe was interviewed by MuzikMan from 6/4/03-6/6/03.

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