

The Rising Storm

Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, is not the place you would expect to breed one of the most revered cult garage bands of the '60s. The prep school counts among its graduates George Bush, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. It's a place where the affluent send their offspring to prepare for careers as respected doctors and lawyers, not to play rock 'n' roll.

The Rising Storm, who graduated from the institution in 1967, *did* go on to the professional careers for which they had been so assiduously groomed. Before they left, however, they found time to cut one of the most esteemed garage records of all time. *Calm Before*, pressed in a quantity of 500 and distributed primarily to fellow pupils, friends, and family, now fetches over \$1,000 in mint condition. The revival of interest in the band has now become something of a story in itself, with National Public Radio reporting on their reunion gigs, and—unbelievably enough—serious interest from a major studio in filming the band's life story.

Somewhat lost in the shuffle is the music itself, which largely lives up to its reputation. The Rising Storm were not the only band of their ilk in the mid-'60s; there were enough vanity pressings of the sort, at Phillips Academy and similar places, to generate a mini-genre of "prep school rock" among hard-core collectors. Usually these LPs were jammed with cover versions of hits, and half of the Rising Storm album indeed features renditions of songs by "real" bands. It's the half devoted to self-penned songs that truly elevates this record from the pack, particularly the delicate, haunting folk-rock originals. These songs radiate an aura of innocence as mysterious as the cover, which shows the sextet perched on a rickety bridge over a desolate beach.

Tony Thompson, lead singer, rhythm guitarist, and leader (as he is described on the back of the LP), sets the scene: "We were all boarding students. We were away from distractions that most kids our age had, although we wished we weren't. We weren't around girls, it was a boys' school. We weren't around family. Our weekends were, for the most part, ours. Life was pretty simple.

"We used the time to practice our music. We would eat all our meals together and talk about music. The tables at school in the dining hall were perfect for our band, because they would seat six people in a fairly small space, and we would just talk music the whole time. My roommate was the bass player, Todd Cohen, for two years. He and I just thrived on putting the needle on the vinyl and working out the parts together. There was music always playing in our room, and other band members were also nearby, so that we would visit with each other. It's kind of hard to describe how integral music was to our lives. We were in classes together and walking between classes together. Every spare moment

we had, we were talking about what song we were gonna practice next, what music we were listening to on the radio, what we liked, and what we didn't like."

The term "garage" band is an anomaly in a situation where there were no garages to be found. "We even had to be somewhat surreptitious about practicing. It was almost as if we were the bad boys. The kids who were in rock 'n' roll bands were not appreciated by the faculty, the administration. The music building was not set up to allow us to practice in any profitable manner, so to speak. We had to kind of scrimp and save our money for equipment, and we weren't allowed to make a lot of money—\$50 a dance was the maximum. The school, I think rightly, was not interested in having us make a lot of money and become



Rising Storm, posing for the cover of their only album. Credit: Courtesy Erik Lindgren

popular outside the campus. They wanted us to concentrate on our studies. Can't blame 'em for that—that's what we were there for.

"But, as a result, when we wanted to practice, we found ourselves in closet-sized spaces, basements. We often were stopped from practicing by faculty members on Sunday mornings or on Saturday afternoons, or when they discovered us and we weren't supposed to be there. It was really very much part of our lives, practicing on the fly, finding a place to do it, and wheeling our equipment there and doing it."

Fueled by the Beatles, Stones, and more esoteric faves like Love and the Mothers of Invention, the Rising Storm were just one of several bands at Phillips Academy. It was, according to Thompson, almost a rite of passage for the groups to make a vanity pressing before graduating. So during spring break of 1967, the group gathered in the Boston area to record their one shot at immortality. It was cut for \$1,000—out of funds the band had saved from their \$50 gigs—in a mere week.

Calm Before, however, would be remembered as more than a mere vanity piece. Even as they prepared their (successful) applications to such hallowed institutions as Harvard and the University of North Carolina, they were determined to do something out of the ordinary on what unkind souls might call a class project of sorts. That's apparent even on the covers, which largely opt not for three-chord standards like "Gloria," "Hey Joe," or "Satisfaction," but for little-known tracks by Love, the Remains, and the Rockin' Ramrods, the last two of whom were primarily known only to Boston-area residents.

But it was the original material—to which the whole band contributed, but which was largely penned by Thompson and lead guitarist Bob Cohan—that was most memorable. "I'm Coming Home" and "She Loved Me" were acceptably R&B-tinged stompers, but the melancholic folk-rock cuts were something else altogether in their dreamy, melodic haze. As you might expect from adolescents on the verge of a massive upheaval in their somewhat insulated lives, there is a pervasive sense of about-to-be-lost innocence on Rich Weinberg's "The Rain Falls Down" and Cohan's mysterious "To L.N./Who Doesn't Know." Most mysterious of all is Thompson's "Frozen Laughter," which quotes from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," backed by a mournful acoustic, drumless arrangement that winds down with a swirl of backward tapes. Apocalyptic is not exactly the word—it's more like a soundtrack for someone gazing out of a deserted seashore house that's inhabited by too many painful memories.

"The music was fairly unusual," notes Thompson with pride. "It was not copycat kind of lyrics, or copycat kind of chord progressions, for the most part. We tried to make statements about what was going on in our lives at the time, and how we felt about the world. The originals [were] for the most part slow, melodic music, and the lyrics were important. I think that was what distinguished it from other bands at the time." "Frozen Laughter," with its enigmatic

references to orange shadows in the nighttime, “was very much about a state of mind that was not healthy, really. It was a drinking song. It was about having a relationship that went bad and what that does to you, how it makes you feel when you want it to end.”

The Rising Storm took their music seriously, but took their budding professional interests much more seriously. No one expected to make a career out of music, and upon graduation, the band scattered to four different colleges, keeping in touch to varying degrees. And that was that for *Calm Before*, until 1981, when the group became aware of how hot an item the LP was among '60s collectors.

“When I first heard about garage music,” laughs Thompson, now an attorney in Washington, D.C., “it was the late '70s, and I didn't know what it meant or what it was. I frankly thought that there was a misspelling and it was really ‘garbage’ music. And I'm not kidding. I thought people were making fun of it.”

As for the revival of interest in the Rising Storm, “We didn't believe it, really. We thought that it must be some kind of mistake. There was a lot of skepticism about whether this was all cynical enthusiasm or real enthusiasm. On the other hand, as we began to realize that there were people who really were taking our music seriously, we decided to go with the flow for the most part and started bragging to all our friends about it.”

The group even reunited for a class reunion in 1982, with Andy Paley (now a successful producer) on bass, even though by this time the members had long settled into careers in law, journalism, academia, medicine, and ski instruction. That reunion gig was released as an album, rather to the band's embarrassment, as they hadn't practiced much and weren't expecting the show to be recorded. Still, all six of the original members reconvened for a short “Ain't Dead Yet” tour in 1992, which included another class reunion at Andover, some new studio recordings, a feature story in the *Washington Post* magazine, and, in the strangest twist, the stirrings of interest from a classmate who had become an independent film producer.

Warner Brothers has now purchased an option on the band's story. Thompson tells me that the producers are considering such modifications as changing the character of Erik Lindgren (the producer who instigated the Rising Storm reunion) to a woman who becomes romantically involved with two of the band members, marrying one of them. Apparently, Hollywood treats the '60s garage band phenomenon with as much attention to accuracy as it did in such rock docudramas as *The Buddy Holly Story*.

Thompson, though “euphoric” about the latter-day acclaim for the band, keeps his expectations in perspective. “The kind of stuff that we were doing was very similar to alternative music now. I've always felt what has not shone through this for the most part, in all the publicity surrounding the Rising Storm since we were ‘rediscovered,’ is the music. People aren't focusing on the music. They're

focusing on the story. It's kind of a snowball effect—we're famous because we're famous, not because of anything else.

"Warner Brothers wants to do a movie because, gee, this is a neat story about a band that was rediscovered. Not because the music's good, but because it's a neat story. It's kind of a circular, very weird phenomenon, where success breeds success, and relates very little to the music."

What's it like, then, for a group to start playing together a good 15 years or so after they thought they'd played their last note? "It's very difficult, I should tell you, at this stage in our lives as a band, to get together and to do something good. Musically, we're all fine. I feel that I've gotten a lot better. I think others in the band have gotten a lot better. But musically, it's been so long since we were sitting around that table, talking together and being together day after day, month after month, year after year. We're not there anymore. We're all leading different lives, and our musical tastes have diverged, our philosophies about life have diverged, our goals in life have diverged. Our closeness and our willingness to put up with each other's quirks, our patience with each other, our tolerance for each other, has dissipated.

"I don't mean that to sound like it's a bad thing, or an unhealthy thing. It's a very natural thing. I think we're all smart enough that we can put those differences aside to a point. But we don't have the congruence that we had in 1967. I don't think there's any way we ever could have that again, unless suddenly we were back in an environment where we really were playing and communicating on a spiritual level again all the time. That's what makes bands good, is that there is that philosophical oneness, that group sense. We all would love that to be possible, but it's not realistic."

Recommended Recordings:

Calm Before (1967, Arf Arf). After years of floating around only as a collectible with a sky-high price tag, or as a French bootleg, the legendary 1967 album is now readily available on CD. The disc also includes their 1982 reunion show, *Alive Again at Andover*.

