

Henry, Is That You?

THE RISING STORM's 1967 album *Calm Before...* is one of the true '60s garage band artefacts; it's been reissued numerous times and remains critically acclaimed. Not bad for a vanity pressing made by a bunch of 17-year-old prep school boys.

JON 'MOJO' MILLS gets inside the moody classic with its creators



While suburban teen bands freely practiced in their parents' garages across the mid-to-late '60s, The Rising Storm, based at Andover, Massachusetts' esteemed Phillips Academy boarding school rehearsed in closets and tiny basements away from the prying ears of unimpressed faculty members who viewed rock 'n' roll as a rebellious distraction. Drummer Tom Scheft remembers, "The Storm was composed of six bright, nice, funny kids. For three years we ate lunch and dinner with each other every day during the school year. We constantly listened to music. We constantly practiced. There was a positive

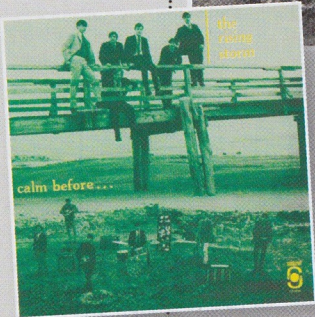
pressure/encouragement we exerted on each other to be better musicians and better writers, and the original material penned by Tony Thompson, Bob Cohan, and Richard Weinberg flourished under this." Performing locally at school dances and "mixers" (carefully monitored events where both the boy's and girl's prep schools mingled) The Rising Storm played covers. "Like most musical-wanna-bes back then, as much as we loved The Beatles, when we tried to imitate them, our inability to do them justice was painfully apparent. As influential as The Beatles were then, it's my belief that the credit for garage-rock should go principally to The Rolling Stones," continues Scheft. "While we and millions of other teens were certainly not on the

same level as the Stones, our imitations of them were clearly passable and acceptable, and it was somehow okay to become a band. During our time in high school, we tried to learn most of the published Stones songs, and they formed a major percentage of our repertoire."

After playing solidly for a year, the band – Tony Thompson: leader, lead singer and rhythm guitarist; lead guitarists Bob Cohan and Richard Weinberg; Todd Cohen: bassist; Charlie Rockwell: keyboardist; Tom Scheft: drums – decided to follow the tradition of the older bands on campus and privately press an album in their final year. During the spring break of 1967 they gathered together at a small studio in the Boston area called Continental Recordings and spent a

week cutting the album, which cost \$1000. Five hundred copies were pressed and sold at dances.

It's that album, *Calm Before... The Rising Storm*, which has become the stuff of legend. The ultimate prep-rock album if you will. Similarly, like others of its kind the bulk of the record consists of youthful cover versions played with atypical teenbeat gusto. What make it so special however are the band originals, which both go beyond and fully represent the youth and innocence its creators possessed. "At Andover, we were influenced in writing our slow, sad songs by bands like Love ('Orange Skies', '¡Que Vida!'), The Blues Project ('Steve's Song', 'Flute Thing'), The Yardbirds ('Still I'm Sad'), The Moody Blues ('Go Now'), The Kinks ('Tired Of Waiting For You'), The Rolling Stones ('Lady Jane', 'As Tears Go By') and, of course, The Beatles ('Here, There And Everywhere', 'You've Got To Hide Your Love Away')," explains Tony Thompson. "We did make some moody music, that's for sure. We admired The Remains and Rockin' Ramrods, two exceptional Boston Bands, and we covered their songs ('Don't Look Back', 'Bright Lit Blue Skies', 'Mr Wind') on *Calm Before*. We also loved the open expressive music being created by celebrated British groups like The Zombies. It's true that, as high school students, we were probably more innocent and vulnerable than most New England bands now recognised as contributing to the regional sound. But producing three



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melancholy originals on *Calm Before* ("The Rain Falls Down", "To LN/Who Doesn't Know" and "Frozen Laughter") was not our purpose. We simply wrote what struck us at the time as most important in our lives. Our music came out of teenage insecurities about relationships with recent girlfriends. The emotions we described, I think, were, and are, common to fledgling lovers everywhere."

Thompson's brilliant 'Frozen Laughter', notable as Scheft says, for not having drums, is a delicate, forlorn song full of moody teenage desolation. That it quotes from TS Eliot's 'The Waste Land' very much indicates where the writer and indeed his band mates were coming from. "We were, in many ways, innocent teens, and we were at a strict boarding school, away from our families, away from girls (to a great extent), in a no-nonsense, pile-on-the-homework environment that wasn't interested in nurturing teens or encouraging individuality," says Scheft. "You can also throw in the New England winters with their depressing dark and cold."


"I was 17 when I wrote 'Frozen Laughter'," explains Thompson. "I originally wrote what became the song's keyboard intro and refrain as a two-part harmony on the guitar, and Charlie took it and turned it into pure magic on the organ."

"My keyboard – a four octave Acetone – was a single manual with preset tones," adds Charlie Rockwell. "I used a flute sound for most of the song, but wanted a fuller sound after the organ lead. I

overdubbed the flute track, in that section, with the reed preset. The idea came from my Hammond envy in that Hammonds had two manuals, and I had heard the two different sounds in other songs. At the time, a B-3 cost two years at Andover, so I had to settle for the Acetone. I felt very innovative."

"There was no intention on the band's part to make psychedelic music though," claims Thompson. "It just came out that way, because we wanted to experiment with unusual musical forms and sounds. Music was changing rapidly in those halcyon days, and we loved much of what we were hearing on the radio."

Fifty years on *The Rising Storm's* naivety, spontaneity and unique haunting melodies define "The New England Sound". *Calm Before...* is an unpolished yet ambitious curio that has deservedly become a major collectable and cult classic – one that has led to band reunions and even a forthcoming movie. "No one in the group predicted or even imagined a fraction of the success and adulation we've received," Scheft chuckles.

"We loved the music, and we worked hard to be a good group, and while we considered ourselves a successful band in our senior year, we never ranked ourselves close to any of the major bands we loved and covered, including two sensational Boston bands – The Rockin' Ramrods and The Remains." 



Calm Before... The Rising Storm is out now on Sundazed

