

## Status Quo Keep It Real

Two men, three chords and 30 years of unchanged melody.

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‘They take a vein from your leg, and chop it up four times.’

Rick Parfitt, the big-haired, blond singer-guitarist with Status Quo for the past 30 years, is reliving his quadruple heart-bypass operation of a few weeks ago. It was a rock star thing, he says, brought about by women, divorcing women, smoking, alcohol, drugs and almost three decades of climbing on stage to ask people if they would, or would not, like to ride in a paper plane.

He’d come back from a tour of Japan and Australia, and he was looking really good. He was tanned. He felt great, at 48. He got a pain in his right arm, but was always one of those people who believed that if you ignore something long enough, eventually it will go away. So he went on tour with the band again, this time to Dubai. When he returned, the pain reappeared.

‘I was making some tea at home, and I was walking up the stairs,’ he says, ‘and this time the pain went across my chest and down my other arm, and it intensified and dropped me to my knees. At this point I can’t move or breathe and I think I’m dying.’ When it eased, he called his doctor in Harley Street, and went to see him at three the following afternoon, and by nine he was under the knife. It took almost five hours to rebuild his heart.

Eight weeks later, Parfitt is able to talk of the incident as an occupational hazard: these things happen when you’re in Status Quo. He’s well again now, sitting in the rainy garden of his publicist’s house in Uxbridge, Middlesex, not far from his own place on the Thames in Teddington. Parfitt’s publicist has produced a list of his life’s work, a monumental catalogue of albums shipped, gigs played, milestones reached. The figures are impressive and ludicrous: 110 million units sold; 51 British hit singles, more than any other band; a cumulative seven-and-a-half years in the UK charts; 4,000 live shows for 18 million people. The band are the only living musicians since The Beatles to feature as Royal Doulton ‘character jugs.’

These figures do not satisfy Parfitt. He must have more, he says. At the beginning of August he hopes to add to the stats by playing a concert with the rest of the band at Norwich City football ground, and in December it’s a British arena tour, and then round the world again in a quest to find a reason to stop. The fans demand their presence, and it would be unfair to them to quit. His two former wives demand the alimony. His soul desires the adulation. These days, Status Quo endures because that is what Status Quo does. It’s its job.

On tour, Parfitt will be drinking red or white wine, which the doctors have said is okay. He’ll be smoking two or three cigarettes a day, a reduction of about 40. After a six week hiatus, his medical team have said it’s all right for him to have sex again. ‘I was useless before,’ he says. ‘I can’t be much worse.’

Parfitt is wearing a blue T-shirt, a cream jacket and black trousers, and a necklace holding a miniature gold guitar. On stage he still wears the uniform – the denim jeans – and says he feels perfectly comfortable in them. Sometimes, he says, the band joke about being ‘old men in boys’ clothes’, but they reason that they’re happy wearing what their fans wear, an association that lies at the heart of their stubborn success.

‘What we do turns us on,’ Parfitt says. ‘I’m under no illusions with our music: we’re not virtuosos, but we have captured a certain corner. We’ve done something that no one else has done, simple as it is.’

As he talks, a friend of his arrives. Parfitt first met Francis Rossi 32 years ago, when they played in different bands in Butlins in Minehead. They formed their group two years later, and had a hit with a song called ‘Pictures of Matchstick Men.’ Advisers had told them that psychedelia was the way to go, and the photographs from 1967 show them with Lulu hair and billowing sleeves. They thought the band would last maybe three to five years. They thought 50 grand in the bank would be fantastic.

In the next few years, they abandoned trends by wearing their street clothes and foregoing barbers, and found that they liked to stand side by side, heads down, legs apart, and to sing into a ceaseless gale. There were other people in the group, of course, but no one looked as good or stayed the distance.

Their best early hits – ‘Paper Plane’, ‘Caroline’, ‘Down Down’ – worked nicely in bathroom mirrors and school discos, and the simple fretwork was well suited to air guitar. Rossi’s nasal whine was as sincere as they came, ignoring the fact that the lyrics were mostly gibberish. Status Quo were even hip for a while, a fact we may need reminding of now.

Musically, nothing much has changed. When your life is block-chord boogie, concept albums do not swerve you from your course. Parfitt and Rossi were not attracted to glam or punk, in the same way that punks were not attracted to them. New romanticism, ska and acid house flashed by while Status Quo tended to their roots. They were tempted by trip-hop and jungle, naturally, but decency prevailed. Parfitt remembers their first big tour, travelling the country by coach with Gene Pitney, Love Affair and Marmalade. He notes that none of these other artists made it to Live Aid, which Quo opened with ‘Rockin’ All Over The World’. But is Status Quo revered for it? Parfitt sighs – enough of an answer.

‘Everyone gets knocked down in this business,’ he says, ‘but with us it has become absurd. We were darlings for a week, but ever since it’s been years of, you know – every song sounds the same, our fans are thick, we’ve got dandruff, we’re thick.’

Does he care? ‘Up to a point.’ He smiles. ‘Actually, not at all.’

It becomes the duty of all those who have never played rock guitar on an elevated stage to ask old pop stars why they still do what they do, and why they do it in the same way, for a little less acclaim.

‘Look,’ Parfitt says, ‘You’re two-thirds of the way through the concert, and the place has built up, because the Quo set builds and builds and doesn’t let up, and you look around you, and some 15,000 people are dancing indoors – it’s a great sight, and I’m one of the people creating this. A marvellous feeling. I’m going goosepimply now just thinking about it. Most people go to work, and the best they’ll get is: ‘Morning, how are you?’ When I go to work, the lights go down, and before I’ve even played a note this bloody roar goes up. I am

being adored. Nobody in their right mind would turn round and say, “Nah, I’ve had enough of this.”

He says that when he and Rossi tried a 10-month break a few years ago, they went spare. ‘Why do we keep having sex?’ Francis Rossi asks. ‘You’ve done it enough by now, so leave it. But you can’t, can you? I thought this morning, “I don’t want to do this any more, this interview, this touring.” But by lunchtime I think, “Yes, I do,” and then we get talking about tour venues and dates, and everything is like the feeling I got at the very beginning.’

When Rossi is at home in Surrey, one of his youngest children will occasionally put on a videotape of father playing to thousands of people. Rossi watches through narrowed eyes, and begins to sweat. He thinks to himself, ‘God I look such a prat, doing that thing,’ and he swears he’s not going to do it again, but he climbs back on stage and finds he can’t resist. He concludes: ‘What a lucky person I am.’

Rossi is a few months younger than Parfitt, but looks years older. His hair is thinning and greying, and his skin looks not so healthy. For years he has been on a strict diet, ever since a period in the late Eighties when he began feeling ill after gigs.

He once pulled a muscle on stage and had to complete a tour on a walking stick. He went to see Fred Street, the former England football team physio, who recommended eating less meat. Now he eats only fruit in the morning, no coffee or tea, and endeavours not to mix carbohydrates with protein. He has found that this enables him to do six nights in a row as opposed to three. ‘I’m a very fit man compared to what I used to be. In my thirties I thought I was dying.’

He does, however, still have a hole through the inside of his nose. ‘No one else has one but me,’ he says proudly of this legacy of his cocaine habit. Once, about a decade ago, he added up his weekly expenditure on cocaine, and it came to £1,400. ‘How did I get like that? I used to think cocaine was the most disgusting thing I’d ever seen. The times I said things that I’d never do... I said I’d never be a drinker. I had a half-bottle of tequila in the break before the encore. I said I could never marry a redhead. My first wife was a redhead. I said I’d never marry a Yank. I married one. I said I’d never have any more children. But now I’ve got eight. Now, when people say, “Would you go back on coke?” I say “I could do.”’

The drugs – which dominated both men’s lives for the best part of a decade – drove Rossi and Parfitt apart. Parfitt draws a curve in the air with his hand – a roller-coaster defining their relationship. ‘It would go up and up through the Sixties and Seventies – me and Fran conquering the world, best mates, women throwing themselves at us. But then it just disintegrated.’

The two friends barely communicated. Even their favourite three chords didn’t sound so good any more. ‘We just blew it all,’ Parfitt says. ‘I thought that everything that he did was wrong. As far as I was concerned, Francis was going very soft. I wanted to carry on with the whole headbanging hard rock thing, and Francis was totally losing the plot, going over to bloody country. I went round to his house to hear some stuff he’d recorded with the band that I didn’t even know about, and I told him it was crap. I told him I wouldn’t play on it. We went out to his driveway, and we nearly came to blows.’

Parfitt remembers a distant Saturday night in the West End, in a club with his coke, ‘which had now turned into my best friend instead of Francis. I got

home at 10 on the Sunday morning and went to bed. At about two in the afternoon there's a knock at the door, and it's eight people. My wife asks me who they are. And I've got no idea, but apparently I had asked them all round for a Sunday lunch. Life carried on like that for a decade.'

Parfitt says that the drugs have petered out over the past six years. He doesn't like parties now, and visits his local maybe once or twice a week. He says that Rossi is virtually a recluse. Like several other reformed rock stars – Elton John, Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend – the desire now is to simplify. At the moment, Parfitt lives alone in a flat with beautiful river views, and after a messy divorce, feels free of responsibility. 'These days I only have guests in my life,' he observes.

He used to own a large house in Surrey on a hill 560ft above sea level. When the clouds were low, his place rose above them. He kept his Mercedes there, next to his Porsche, his Range-Rover, his Studebaker Hawk and his Corvette Stingray. There was a jukebox, a swimming pool, a sauna, a pinball table – the rock star pad. All that ground to look after, all those expensive gardeners.

His daughter Heidi drowned in the pool in 1980, a thing he feels he will never get over. He says he thinks of her whenever the band play 'Rockin' All Over The World'. He has two other children – Richard, 22, from his first marriage, with whom he is close, and Harry, from his second, with whom he is not. 'I'd like to see more of Harry,' he says, 'but his mother tells me he doesn't want to see me. She says, "He's never any good at school after he's seen you." So I leave it out. The acorn never falls far from the tree. When the time is right, I'll see Harry. He's a nice little boy.

'It's taken me a long while to see, and it's brought me near death, but I've now realised that I have to do what I want when I want. It might sound selfish. I have no one to answer to, and there's no one to nag me. And that gives me peace. I need it now, and at last I've found it.'

He has found peace with Rossi, too, and says they are talking as adults as they have never done before. When he visited him in hospital, Parfitt noticed a caring side of Rossi that he'd never seen. I wondered what they talked about apart from music. 'Women.'

Their next album will feature the traditional 30-year sound tinged with Rossi's country passions. ('It'll be all right,' Parfitt says. 'We'll Quo it up.')

'Some people say what I'm doing now isn't manly enough,' Francis Rossi says. 'Manly? How can music be manly? Music is just a bunch of piddly little notes.' Rossi says he likes current pop: he mentions the Seahorses, the Wallflowers, and 'that woman who sings at the piano with her legs apart – I always appreciate that – Tori Amos.' He plays 'Gangsta's Paradise' by Coolio in his car CD, though he professes not to be interested in rap because he fails to see how the street culture of Los Angeles 'has anything to do with West Drayton'.

Understandably, he feels there is no place for elitism or ageism in modern music, which was one of the reasons his band sued Radio 1 last year for refusing to play their records. According to their barrister, Status Quo deserved at least a few plays for their new singles in return for headlining the station's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party, and for all the band's goodwill over the years. 'We never expected saturation play,' Rossi says. 'But we thought that if we worked to get into the charts, and did all these poxy promo things that you don't want to do – then at least they'd play it. But no, they kept saying we weren't right for their new audience.'

Status Quo lost their court case, and Rossi now concedes that the action may have been a mistake. 'But Matthew Bannister (Radio 1's controller) has given a lot of us older acts a place to go – Radio 2.'

Rossi meets people who frequently say to him, 'Oh, I love your old records.' He says, 'Do you? I don't.' They say, 'Oh, it was so...' He says, 'Was it? It wasn't.' 'They want you to go backwards, but I'm not 19 any more. And I can't pretend to be an angry 25 year-old who hates old people. I am what you would think of as old people.'

His realism extends to his position in the world. 'With us, we can sell a few million and we think, "Yes, that's so great!" and still 52 million think we're shit. The truth is that most people don't like Status Quo. To six billion people in the world, Status Quo are dreadfully insignificant. I'm sorry, but it's just music and bull. A bunch of insecure show-offs on a stage trying to show you how good they are.'

Rossi says, 'God, please stop me.' He thinks about what has said. 'You better add that when we're good, I really do think we're bloody great.'

After our conversation, Rossi groomed himself for a BBC television interview about the forthcoming 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Radio 1. Payback time, I thought. 'Nah,' Rossi said. 'I'm a professional. Just watch me play the game.'