

“You’ve never been to an NRBQ show?!! Oh man, and I thought you were hip...” Jack’s look of disenchanted pity turned to demonic joy when he realized I would be having one of the major live music experiences of my life that night, because NRBQ were in Music City. It was the late eighties, and it seemed like the whole world had caught on to them before I had. Sure, I’d heard their name all my life. When I was taking the train in to Philly through my teens to see shows at the Electric Factory, I always saw their name on concert bills. They were just never playing the nights I was there.

Jack, on the other hand, was the quintessential Q fan. He’d seen them many times, various places. Their piano and clavinet genius, Terry Adams, was his idol, though he’s not the kind of guy who talks like that, he’s from Pittsburgh. Jack’s a grown man and quite a good keyboard player himself, built his own recording studio where he makes good records for various Nashville artists. But you’d never have known all that while we waited right up front for NRBQ that night. Because Jack was all wound up like a teenager at his first concert, which was my first impression of what this group does to their audience.

There obviously had been no soundcheck, because the crew were still bringing gear on stage, and it was only minutes before showtime. House lights were dimmed, and I could feel the anticipation all around me. People knew something really cool was about to happen. I looked around and saw some people, grownups, who had expressions on their face like a kid who was about to start a fire or something. I wanted Jack to check them out, but when I got his attention, he was looking at me the same way! He said, “This is the last part. When they bring in the clavinet and screw the legs to it and set it up, the music begins seconds later. Watch!”

Sure enough, the quartet immediately took the stage, and people started cheering. One came in wearing a snare drum, and he was playing that. The other stood by his piano, but then wandered over to the drum set, picked up some sticks, and started playing the tom tom. A third member started playing drums, and a big percussive crescendo was building up. Somebody picked up a trumpet and started blowing it, it was like a space army. Then out of nowhere, everybody was at their stations with their instruments on and all hell broke loose. Holy shit, it was utter pandemonium, and the show had been on for about three minutes. I was in heaven. Jack looked at me the way people used to when you were on an acid trip. “See what I mean?” And he started laughing like the devil. I looked behind, and the whole room was dancing.

There was a huge guy who made his Telecaster look like a ukulele, he was tearing it up so bad I thought the strings were gonna fly right off it. The drummer was an exploding cherub with a big smile and a curly wig. The bass player seemed small in comparison and so nice (he sang like Paul McCartney!), and the demented leader was obviously the keyboard player. He was making faces at everybody like a monkey in a cage and pushing his clavinet all over the stage, pummeling it with his whole forearm, his fists and his elbows, and it was the funkiest, craziest rock and roll I’d ever heard.

They really shook me up by playing so many kinds of music so well. They stimulated my brain with their musicianship, and got to me emotionally with beautiful pop songs, so naive and reminiscent of the best things about romance and love. I laughed all night, their songs and stage demeanor were like the Three Stooges meet the Beatles.

That night began a fascination with the phenomenon known as NRBQ that I hope will be with me all my days. I believe the world needs NRBQ, and I want everybody to know about them. I moved away to CA and then to Europe for some years, and ended up again in Nashville, hanging out with Jack. We're both good friends of Joey's today, the bass player. So I'm gonna do an interview with him. After that, what follows optionally is a very annotated discography of a great band that's been together for over 30 years, made 23 records, and probably played more shows than any group in the history of the world. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Joey Spampinato of NRBQ.

**PM:** So, in 30 years, you've accomplished a lot as a band. What goals do you still hope to achieve, personally or as a group?

**JS:** Well, as a band, it's been an ongoing quest, you might say. We always wanted to put the music first, whether it fit in with the scene or not. From the start, the creed of the band was that the music itself was the most important thing. We feel like we've stuck to that, and if that's how one judges success, then I guess we've been successful. We always felt that if we were going to be a smash sensation, we wanted to get there as we really were, then you could feel that You were a success. We'd rather that than compromise until you get a hit, and then you can do whatever you want. We just never figured it that way.

**PM:** More like a relationship. If you get the girl by being other than you really are, what's the point?

**JS:** Exactly. So, that's been the unwritten code of the band: we always do the music that we like, and don't sacrifice anything for the sake of it being understood. We play whatever we think is good, or fun, and figure that there will be people who agree with us. But we've always followed our own hearts in that respect.

**PM:** In a business where so many acts conform to corporate constraints, somebody's got to do it.

**JS:** We feel that that's what we do. You might say that we're not in the music business, but that our business is making music. We're in the creation business.

**PM:** Is it still fun?

**JS:** Oh, yeah, absolutely. Besides, every once in a while, I wonder, "What would I be doing if I wasn't doing this?" That's kind of a scary thought to me. One could always do something else, I mean, we're men, we could do whatever needs to be done. But we do

all right, and we do what we want to do. And I've done it all my life, it's hard to imagine doing something else.

**PM:** It's amazing that you're the only band that went the distance playing multi-genre music. I guess the Beatles did it, in their way, but they were 10 records into the game before they started branching out.

**JS:** That was, of course, a different scene. They opened the gate for self-contained groups, singers that backed themselves up musically. Who else was doing that? The Beach Boys, at the time. It's hard to think of anybody else that did it before them. I think the Four Seasons more or less backed themselves up, but it wasn't until the Beatles that it became a self-contained, self-composed phenomenon.

**PM:** Didn't the 50s produce any groups like that?

**JS:** No, there were singers, and producers, and bands that backed them up. There were a cappella groups, the producer would assemble a band, and make a record. So the Beatles opened up a whole new direction, and happened to be the best at what they did at the time, and the cream rose to the top. And they were talented enough to dip into different music, to have a number one with "Yellow Submarine," or play "When I'm 64," or Indian music, or whatever.

**PM:** Did NRBQ ever dip into the Indian music well?

**JS:** We did add a tamboura, the drone instrument, to a track once, but we didn't want to overemphasize it, which sounded passe to us. It got so buried in the mix eventually that I can't even remember what track it was now. It's a music we haven't really approached very much.

**PM:** You do just about everything else.

**JS:** We don't rule anything out. We like everything, so how do you rule anything out? There will be a right time to use it.

**PM:** Bonnie Raitt, one of your most enthusiastic supporters, broke into the mainstream decades into her career. Do you think the same thing could happen to NRBQ? Could they make a CD that commercial, in the positive sense of the word?

**JS:** I can't say enough good things about Bonnie Raitt. She's been around about as long as we have, and has hung tough with the style of music that she wanted to do. She was fortunate to hook up with a certain producer who wanted to do a certain type of record with her at a certain time, and she was in the right frame of mind to do it. All the elements clicked, and it took off for her, and it's just great. She had a couple of big records in a row, and it just shows that it's never too late. You keep doing the music you like, and some door might open. When I went to record with her recently on a record called *Fundamental*, she had a different producer then [Mitchell Froom], who wanted to

take it in a different direction. It didn't have quite the success that the previous two records had, but she wasn't trying to repeat the formula. She was continuing to create music.

**PM:** And you have a tune on that record, right?

**JS:** When I was there, they were still looking for tunes. When I heard that somebody was sending over a song that they were gonna listen to that afternoon, I said, "Well, I have a song you might like. If you think you could get a hold of this, it might work out." I hate the feeling of pressure, you know, or creating a sense of obligation that if I gave her a song, she should do it or something. It bugs me to give someone a tune when that's possible. As an artist yourself, you know, if someone gives you a song that they think is good for you, it doesn't mean that you'll think so, too.

**PM:** And it's an emotionally charged situation, when they're looking for a song, and you have one in your pocket.

**JS:** Right, the pitching thing kind of bugs me. It was more like "If you think you could do something with this, great. If not, fine."

**PM:** You recently married Kami Lyle, another great musician. How has that changed your life?

**JS:** First of all, it's made me really happy. She's beautiful and fun to be around, so it's constant entertainment. Plus, she loves me back, as the song goes. But on top of that, it's really changed my work ethic. She's so talented, and can write many styles. She can write pop, country, and jazz, in a really classy way. She only put out one release on MCA before parting ways, but you're going to hear a lot from Kami Lyle. She's such a hard worker that it's had a big effect on me. Before we hooked up, when I was off the road, I used to actually avoid my guitar as much as possible. Nowadays, if I don't do something in the creative realm every day, I just don't feel right.

**PM:** Naturally, everybody likes their last song and their last record best. Aside from 1999's NRBQ, what's your favorite Q record?

**JS:** Aside from our last record? [laughs] As a total record? That's hard to say. When you make a record, you have favorite songs on it, and every record is like that. Each record builds around these songs, and becomes that album to you. I don't know, it's changed over the years, and I don't listen to the records at home. Every now and then, I'll put something on, to remember it better.

**PM:** *At Yankee Stadium* is awfully strong.

**JS:** A lot of people think that's our best record. I'm not sure why, I guess it's the songs.

**PM:** It's just really consistent. I mean, the Q is so omnipop, the records can go all over the place, in wonderful ways. But I don't want to put words in your mouth.

**JS:** Some people think *Scraps* is our best album, too. It was just re-released by Rounder with a few bonus tracks from that time. But then, our first record with Columbia in 1969 [with original guitarist Steve Ferguson and drummer Tom Staley] was special, and created the mold for all that came afterward. I think Columbia has put out something that includes unreleased bits from that period, but I'm not sure what's on it. The first record has lots of styles represented, rockabilly, and Sun Ra's "Rocket #9," etc. And Steve Ferguson was a great writer, though his material of this time never really saw the light of day. He went off into more specialized areas of blues and R&B.

**PM:** Is the band in touch with Steve Ferguson today?

**JS:** Oh yeah. We did a couple of outdoor riverfront gigs with him in Louisville recently.

**PM:** Speaking of good guitar players, what's it like playing with your brother Johnny in the group now?

**JS:** That's the biggest kick for me. You know how it is, you have a brother that you've played with all your life. You guys are closer in age. But Johnny is 8 years younger than me, and when we started the band, he was a kid. But he was always a smart kid, and he caught on right away to what the band was, and kind of idolized us. He knew how great both Steve Ferguson and Al Anderson were as guitar players, and was influenced by them as he picked it up himself and started his own bands. And after Al replaced Steve in '71, he was in the band for over 20 years, so there was never an opening in the lineup. I always thought that someday we would play together. When two brothers play guitar and bass, how could you not end up playing together, you know? You just each keep doing what you're doing, and know that someday it might happen. And when Al moved on in '94, Johnny was the natural choice to take over the guitar chair. When Al was busy with another project in '93, Johnny filled in for a couple of gigs, and we saw that it would work.

**PM:** And although Al's shoes were really impossible to fill, the fans really seem to have been won over now by Johnny's contribution.

**JS:** Sure, it was hard at first. Al had a lot of fans and was a very big presence on stage. Those were hard shoes to fill, so you can't try to fill them. It's about a new pair of shoes. Johnny's the right style of guitar player for NRBQ, and it works even better, because I have a real rapport with him on stage that I didn't have with Al. As much as I loved Al over the years, playing with your brother is a different thing.

**PM:** And Johnny's also collaborating on some good tunes.

**JS:** We're still working on that. At the same time that he joined, he and his wife had just had a son, so it's very difficult to leave home in that period. His hands were completely full when he got home. I don't know how he does it, and finds time to write.

**PM:** But I really like the songs from the new record that he co-wrote: "Breakaway to My Dreams," "Housekeeping," and my favorite one, can't think of it...

**JS:** "Blame it on the World."

**PM:** Right. Love that song. Has VH-1 ever been any help to the band?

**JS:** We've never really had a video budget. We did two for Virgin on *Wild Weekend*, the title song and "If I Don't Have You."

**PM:** One of my favorite songs of yours.

**JS:** Thanks. We didn't like the first video, we had a director who didn't really portray us the way we would have liked. On the second video, we had a hipper director, and she did listen to things we wanted to do, and it was a more fun shoot. So it was better, more representative. But by then, the person who had signed us to Virgin was long gone. And without our champion, we didn't have the necessary support, though we still had some fans at the label. We got a few plays at VH-1, but MTV didn't come aboard. We didn't break any glass or weren't rock and roll enough or something. They weren't looking for something that was fun, they were looking for a different, more aggressive or depressive attitude at the time.

**PM:** Surely there a lot of heads like Bill Flanagan at VH-1 that are NRBQ fans.

**JS:** Yes, there are. And we have something possible in the works with them that I can't talk about right now.

**PM:** Where has the band found success outside the US?

**JS:** For the longest time, we never went overseas. We'd see all kinds of bands going over to Europe and doing well, and we'd wonder "how come we can't go to these places?" We never really had the right management, so to speak. But finally in the 80s we got over to London to play, also to a few cities in Germany and Scandinavia. But we didn't get to go back for a long time. Just four years ago, we went to Japan for the first time, and we've been back twice since. We have great fans there.

**PM:** Never been to Australia as a group? I'll bet you have lots of fans there.

**JS:** Not yet. But it seems like wherever we go, we find fans. It's just a matter of lining it up. When you get there, you wonder why you never played there before, but you have to have somebody find a way to do it, and we actually don't. The members aren't inclined

that way. But we do have new management now in the last year and a half, and we think we're headed in a better direction.

**PM:** Your management is Labyrinth in San Francisco, right? Are they young, global thinking folks?

**JS:** Yes, they are.

**PM:** That brings up a question. How well do you think that NRBQ's music is crossing over to the college crowd or younger, and how will that bridge be addressed?

**JS:** It changes over the years. We used to play a lot in colleges. I'd notice that when we did that a lot, we'd do well in that four year span, like a crop of new listeners. Playing the clubs, you're less inclined to find airplay or exposure to that crowd. And yet, the shows always have plenty of young listeners.

**PM:** I mean, it seems to me that somebody should be trying to book some shows with Phish or The Other Ones [the reformed Grateful Dead], right?

**JS:** Well, we did some shows with the Dead three years ago, and we did pretty well. But you still have to hammer it home, and you have to get the blessing of the source, so the fans know...

**PM:** You're sanctioned.

**JS:** Right, something like that. Because we're different than the Dead, or Phish, you know. There's another band of that group that like us, and do "Flat Foot Flewzy," from Athens, I think, Widespread Panic. We did some shows with them.

**PM:** Did the R.E.M. tour open up some stuff for you?

**JS:** I don't know, that was more of an alternative audience than the bands we just mentioned. But we made some new fans, I'm sure.

**PM:** What advice do you have for young musicians today?

**JS:** [pause] You know, I don't think I'd give any advice. You have to make your own decisions, and you'll make them. If you really want to pursue the life of a musician, then you will. If you're only in it to make a quick pile of money, then you're in the wrong place.

**PM:** Anything to say to older, or more mature musicians?

**JS:** Not really. I don't like to be told what to do, so I wouldn't presume.

**PM:** What was it like being part of a Simpsons episode?

**JS:** When Mike Scully told us that they were going to animate us, it was the biggest kick. I mean, they've been popular for so long now, if you get animated on *The Simpsons*, you've really arrived. So it was a big thing. And [future wife] Kami was a huge fan of the show, so it completely floored her. We'd watch it every Sunday night that I was home. Maybe that's why she married me! [laughs] We actually played their annual party last year, and got to go to a reading where they do the first run-through of the script. There's a big long table in the middle of the room where the characters are reading, and a seated gallery along the edges of the room. And it's great to see Bart's voice come out of a woman, for example. And when you see this guy throw Homer's voice out into the room, it's a wild experience, kind of crazy.

**PM:** But crazier yet to see a song of yours come out of their mouth.

**JS:** What actually happened was that Castellaneta, who does Homer's voice, sang these lyrics that the writers wrote a cappella, and sent us the tape. They wanted touching music put to these words. So we took this thing that he just danced around and did off the top of his head and preserved the melody intact, and put chord changes underneath it. You know how a melody is different, depending on the changes you put to it, different shades of feeling. So I ended up singing it in the segment, it was wild.

**PM:** And then you also appeared as yourselves, at the end of the show.

**JS:** Right. The tape clip was from a multi-camera shoot at our 30th anniversary show at the Bowery Ballroom in NYC. We had them film us doing our version of *The Simpsons* end theme, which was intended for that show. Originally they were going to animate that too, but there was no time. And they came up with the idea to shoot us doing it live instead. So, I think we're the only non-cartoon characters to ever appear on the show. I've never seen it, but I've been told that there's one other episode where Bart goes through a wormhole or something and ends up for a few seconds on the street in NYC. That's the only other non-cartoon segment, I believe.

**PM:** Over decades of interviews, is there a question that people never ask that you'd like to be asked and answer here?

**JS:** You know, I've never been too extroverted, and don't really crave the spotlight. I'm under it when I do what I do, and that's okay. But I don't like the focus of attention to be on me, and tend to avoid it. So, no, not really.

**PM:** What's your favorite song to play live lately?

**JS:** I like "Blame It On the World," and I like doing "Housekeeping," it's fun, and they're both new.

**PM:** Is there a perennial live favorite of yours?

**JS:** I think “If I Don’t Have You,” one of my songs. When it gets called, it always seems to work, and I don’t get tired of it.

**PM:** Where does that great live number come from “You got the Right String, Baby, but the Wrong Yo-Yo?”

**JS:** I think it’s an old song, but the version we drew from came from Piano Red, if you’re familiar with him. Dr. Feelgood.

**PM:** Read anything good lately?

**JS:** I usually like those Crichton books. He always does his homework, and writes a fast moving story. And I recently turned on to Carl Hiassen, I’ve read a few on the plane. I liked the title of “Lucky You” and picked that up. So I read a couple more, “Skin Tight” and “Stormy Weather,” all really good stuff with great characters.

**PM:** Heard anything good lately?

**JS:** Well, we like your record, and I listen to that lately.

**PM:** Well, that’s nice, but...anything else?

**JS:** No, I want you to write that down.

**PM:** Okay, I will. And lastly, Joey, how important is it to you or to the group to get in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?

**JS:** Important? It’s not really important. I’m not even so sure that any such thing should really exist. It’s antithetical to the whole idea of rock and roll, you know? If you were on some mind expanding drug, you’d think it was ridiculous.

**PM:** So, although some fans are creating a grassroots movement to get NRBQ inducted, it doesn’t really matter to you.

**JS:** No, it doesn’t really matter. It’s flattering if people think you’re great and want to include you in such a thing, but as far as it having any real meaning, I don’t think it does. As you get older, things like that don’t mean much in the grand scheme of things. It’s just my opinion. I’d rather have a hit record.

**PM:** It starts and ends with the music.

**JS:** That’s about the size of it. I don’t like the soapbox, I like the stage.

