

## ALL-TIME CLASSICS

# Aquashow

## By Elliott Murphy



## Label

Polydor

## Produced by

Peter K Siegel

## Released

1973

## Musicians

**Murphy:** vocals, guitar, harmonica, piano on "Poise 'N Pen"

**Matthew Murphy:** bass, backing vocals

**Gene Parsons:** drums

**Rick Marotta:** drums on "How's The Family?"

**Teddy Irwin:** acoustic guitar

**Frank Owens:** piano, organ

**Pat Rebillot:** piano and organ on

"Hometown", electric piano on "Marilyn" and

"Like A Great Gatsby"

**Background vocals:** Dennis Ferrante, Jim

Mason, Eddie Mottau, Linda

November, Gene Parsons, Maertha

Stewart, Tasha Thomas, Dick

Wagner

**Tracks**

1 Last Of The Rock Stars

2 How's The Family?

3 Hangin' Out

4 Hometown

5 Graveyard Scrapbook

6 Poise 'N Pen

7 Marilyn

8 White Middle Class Blues

9 Like A Great Gatsby

10 Don't Go Away

MURPHY IS probably the most prolific artist no one has ever heard of, having made 25 LPs containing over 300 original songs, while contributing articles to *Rolling Stone* and other journals, publishing two novels and three short story collections.

He announced his arrival on the scene with 1973's *Aquashow*, an album that combines the romance of Tom Petty and the musicality of *Blonde On Blonde*-era Dylan with a lyrical dexterity all his own. Ranging from jaunty, infectious rockers to poignant ballads, its 10 songs feature an oddball cast of characters, along with social observations that still have relevance today. "Even churchmen are wearing stripes", laments Murphy on "Hometown", about a radical priest who was jailed for anti-war activities. On the whole, however, Murphy's concerns tend to the personal. He has little time for religion – "I've got 2000 years of the Christian blues!" he cries in "Graveyard Scrapbook" – or politics – "Whosever is in the Big House doesn't matter to me", he confesses on "Poise 'N Pen".

Born in 1949, Murphy hails from Long Island, New York. "The only point of excitement for me," he tells *Uncut* today, "was the Music Centre, where I took guitar lessons and bought 45rpm records, including 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. Back in those days you could preview a record on a turntable in the store, and I listened to that record over and over before buying it."

Murphy lays bare his suburban existence on "White Middle Class Blues": "Well you're sitting down for dinner/There's so much food on the table/You can throw away your vegetables/You can eat till you're unable/Your veins are filled with butter/The blood won't run through you/Your kid ODs on goofballs and gives the finger to you/Ain't life a gas/So lowdown middle class/The day you're born you know you never kiss ass".

Murphy's father himself ran an 'aquashow' (a water-based entertainment show), and later opened a restaurant club, booking bands like The Ronettes and Jay And The Americans. Aged 12, Murphy picked up the guitar, and in 1966 his group, The Rapsallions, won a state-wide Battle Of The Bands competition, though a promised record deal fell through and they disbanded. Several years later, after busking around Europe and a stint in San Fran, Murphy returned to New York, and was soon opening for The New York Dolls. He turned down an offer from Mercury to sign with Polydor.

Things started badly. "The first try at recording *Aquashow* was in LA with Tommy Kaye, who'd produced Loudon Wainwright," Murphy explains. "But he was far too country for me, so I walked

out of the sessions." He returned to New York and, with new producer Peter K Siegel, put together a studio band that included ex-Byrds drummer Gene Parsons. As for the actual recording, "I sang live and played guitar most of the time," Murphy recalls, "so not so many takes were needed. I was happy with the sound. When I first heard 'Last Of The Rock Stars' on the radio, it just cooked!"

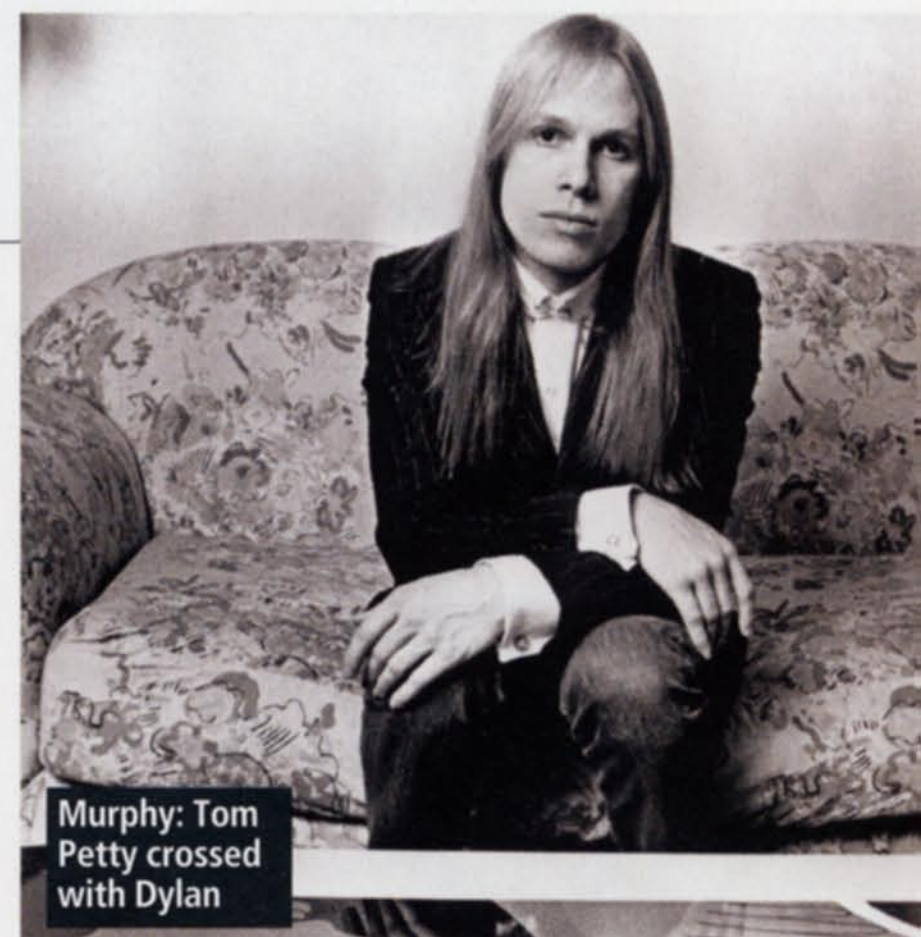
"Last Of The Rock Stars" recounts Murphy's love affair with rock'n'roll, evoking a time when the latest band would be featured on the Ed Sullivan TV show: "Got your axe and you got your group/Your old man thinks it's a waste of loot/And you wait all week for a Sullivan show/And you know that's just where you wanna go/Your homework now is never complete/You don't care, you have got the beat". Bizarrely, the song ends with Elvis being driven into the afterlife by Hendrix, an image taken from one of Murphy's dreams, though the song was penned several years before Presley's death. "When I listen to it now," says Murphy, "it's kind of spooky, I must admit."

"Marilyn" is a paean to Norma Jean ("Marilyn Monroe died for our sins"). He concedes today that the song might be a trifle "overly sincere", although "less maudlin and more direct" than "Candle In The Wind".

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Elvis and Monroe aside, Murphy's subjects tend to be ordinary people leading lives of quiet desperation, such as the couple in "How's The Family?", a bleak panorama of the walking wounded augmented by harmonica and Murphy's plaintive vocal ("How's the wife with the husband/Who doesn't understand/Why she starts to cry each morning/And the coldness in her hands"), or the friend's mother in "Hometown", who "listens to the wind under the door, and the cracks in the floor". They're the sort of people Raymond Carver might have written about. "Most of my lyrical influences – aside from Dylan, Lou Reed, Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon – were coming from writers like Scott Fitzgerald, John Cheever and Kerouac," says Murphy. "I was under the illusion rock'n'roll and literature were compatible. I believed a good song should have the same redemptive qualities as any piece of literature."

Downbeat as some of his work may be, Murphy, like Carver, has obvious sympathy for his



Murphy: Tom Petty crossed with Dylan

characters, and his spirited, enthusiastic vocals, airy, nimble guitar-playing and the overall musical buoyancy of the LP permeate even the most depressing subject matter.

His lyricism is further showcased on "Poise 'N Pen", a tune reminiscent of Dylan at his more surreal, or William Burroughs with its images of "midnight raiders [who] break down the door looking for Anti Society" and its "Pop City dolls who smoke long cigars looking for some notoriety". *Aquashow* has a similar instrumental line-up to *Blonde On Blonde*, and as many of its songs give prominence to Murphy's harmonica and Frank Owens' organ, the sound of the two LPs is not dissimilar. "Actually, I never really thought about *Blonde On Blonde* while making

*Aquashow*," says Murphy. "I was looking to make more of a rock album like *Beggars Banquet*. But most Long Island bands like The Young Rascals and The Vanilla Fudge always included a Hammond B3 organ anyway."

In any case, *Aquashow* is no *Blonde On Blonde* imitation, and Murphy is far from just another Dylan wannabe. Murphy's songs, vision and poetic sensibility are uniquely his own. "I was confident that my lyrics were like nobody else's at the time," Murphy confirms. "So perhaps that self-assuredness came through." That it has. *Aquashow* has stood the test of time well, so that even over 30 years on, its freshness, passion and vitality have scarcely diminished.

"*Aquashow* was me trying to escape from my sad suburban Long Island past into my glorious rock'n'roll city future, and in a way I suppose I succeeded," concludes Murphy. "And everyone applauds a successful escape artist, don't they?" BRUCE PALEY