

# CROSSING THE THIRD RAIL

**THE RAIN PARADE** emerged in the early '80s when the LA music scene was little more than hardcore punk, hairspray rock and bloated megastars who'd seen better days. As an unwitting component of the celebrated Paisley Underground scene, the band looked to the glory days of the '60s for inspiration and released some of the finest music of the era – barely two decades after the first wave of psychedelia had receded. Their moment in the sun was all too fleeting, scuppered by major label interference and asynchronous bad luck.

As the reconstituted group releases its first album in almost 40 years, **SARAH GREGORY** waits for the sun with guitarist and vocalist Matt Piucci

**W**hen it comes to psychedelic music, we all know the story. Began in the late '50s with the Beats, kicked off in earnest in the mid to late '60s and then went into hibernation for a decade or so until post-punk gave way to the fractured neo-psychedelic movements that are still going strong today. But there's a period in the story that often gets overlooked; a sweet spot in the early '80s during which the groundwork for a new era of psychedelic guitar music was laid, and without which "Madchester", Spacemen 3, Flaming Lips and Mercury Rev would all have sounded quite different. It was during this hazy period (1983 to be exact) that The Rain Parade released their debut album *Emergency Third Rail Power Trip* – a kaleidoscope of harmonious guitar music that was totally incongruous with the times – neither rock nor pop, but so refreshing and enchanting that those who heard it had to sit up and listen. As an integral part of The Paisley Underground movement, the band didn't last long the first time round, with only two studio long-players and an EP to show for their efforts. But they slowly returned from a 30-year slumber in 2012 and are now touring and talking in promotion of "comeback" album, *Last Rays Of A Dying Sun*.

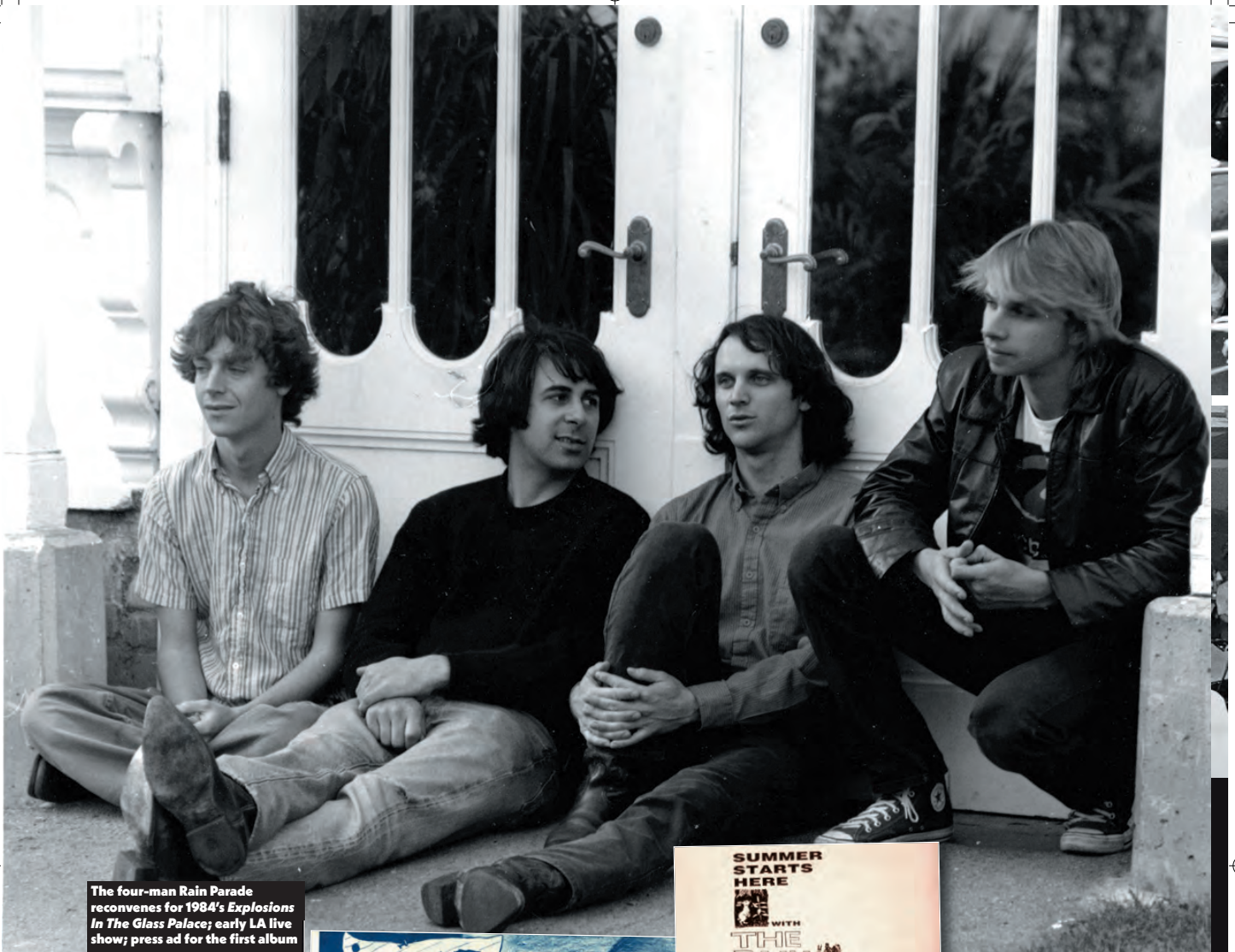
The Rain Parade was born out of a chance meeting between Matt Piucci and his college pal David Roback. "That was kismet," says Matt of the meeting. "David and I both showed up at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota in the fall of 1975. Both of our original roommates were very nice fellows, but let's just say they had different views as to what one should be doing in college. So, the school put David and I together. I recall going to his original dorm room, seeing a huge American flag and a Hendrix poster, and I knew we would get along. We were thick as thieves after that." David briefly disappeared off to The Big Apple and returned waxing lyrical about what he'd witnessed on The Lower East Side. "We decided we were going to have a band together," says Matt. "We had what we thought was a punk cover band, doing Iggy, Velvets, Modern Lovers, Clash, Ramones and Sex Pistols." They even tried their hand at writing themselves, penning the tellingly titled 'Got To Get Out Of Berlin', but this endeavour was soon abandoned.



Don't burst my bubble.  
The Rain Parade, NYC, 1983.  
Clockwise from top left:  
Matt Piucci, Eddie Kalwa,  
Will Glenn, David Roback,  
Steven Roback







The four-man Rain Parade reconvenes for 1984's *Explosions In The Glass Palace*; early LA live show; press ad for the first album

That is until Matt turned up in LA in '81 ready to reignite the band. And not a minute too soon. The LA music scene at this point left quite a lot to be desired. Punk was going strong in the form of Black Flag and The Dead Kennedys, but so were the long-haired glam-rocking Nikki Sixx acolytes who were flaunting their decadent drug and sex-crazed antics up and down Sunset Strip. Not to mention the first vanguard of megastars that was beginning to swap its cocaine for wheatgerm and an energetic jog round the park. "To me at the time there were some cool bands – Circle Jerks, X, The Last – but a lot of crap that was screaming and yelling over badly played rock music," says Matt of the LA scene when he arrived. "I think people were ready for something new."

And so it was that in a tiny enclave of West Hollywood that The Rain Parade and an assortment of like-minded freaks came together to challenge the status quo. The Paisley Underground – named after a flippant, throwaway remark by The Three



O'Clock's Mike Quercio – was a core of bands that included The Dream Syndicate, Three O'Clock, Green On Red, Long Ryders, Bangles (or The Bangs as they were at the time – Paisley Underground's greatest success) and The Rain Parade – drawn together by a love of melody, harmony, guitars and cool '60s sounds. Their sound was inimitable, and each band was unique. They played together, hung out together and bonded over great music. And it was here that The Rain Parade found its home.

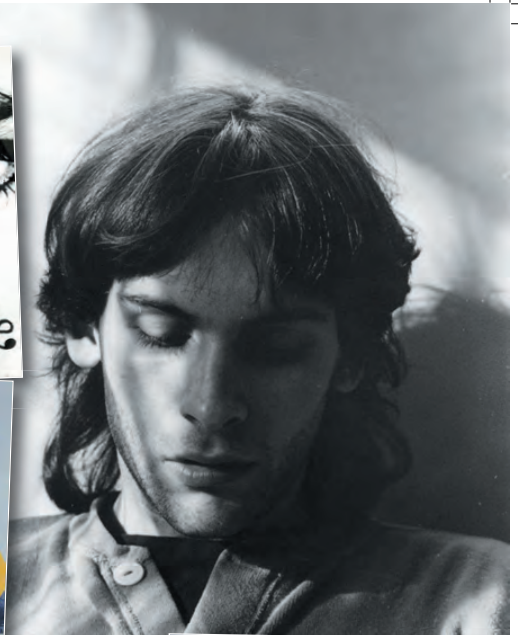
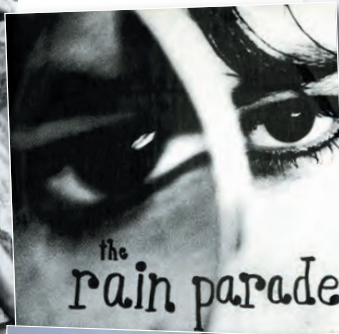
David had already made his way back home five years before and had been amusing himself playing in Paisley Underground forerunner Unconscious

with brother Steve and future Bangle Susanna Hoffs. When Matt arrived, him and David shared guitar and vocal duties, while Steve joined on bass. "We liked all the '60s classics, I was weaned on double LPs by Creedence, Dylan, the Stones, The

Beatles, The Allman Brothers, the Dead, The Band," says Matt. "And then all the NYC bands of '75 – misnamed 'punk' in my view – and the punk bands from the UK that followed." When Will Glenn was recruited on keys and violin alongside Eddie Kalwa on drums, the line-up was cemented.

The Rain Parade's debut came in '82 on the single 'What She's Done To Your Mind' with 'Kaleidoscope' on the flipside, issued on the band's own Llama Records. The label wasn't active beyond this, with the exception of '84's Paisley Underground collaboration *Rainy Day*. The record itself, however, signalled exactly what the band was all about and





Framed in 1984; '82 debut 'What She's Done To Your Mind'; *Emergency Third Rail Power Trip*; David Roback makes his exit in '84; *Explosions In The Glass Palace*; 'You Are My Friend' '45



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made no bones about its influences. “The Byrds, Love, Pink Floyd, The Beatles. But also more obscure things like Beat and punk poetry, which shows up more in the lyrics.” And it was a real breath of fresh air. The Rain Parade (and indeed The Paisley Underground as a whole) never tried to recreate the wheel. They took old music and blasted it into the now. The soft psychedelia, the harmonies, the melody, the druggy ambience, the '66 Rickenbacker 12-string: it's all there – all the fragments that we love turned on their head and presented back to us in one beautiful slab of vinyl. ‘What She's Done To Your Mind’ is a paean to The Byrds and The Beatles, while ‘Kaleidoscope’'s slow psychedelic slush brims with woozy guitar and tuneful bass – a true precursor to The Stone Roses, The Charlatans and a sound that would begin to ferment on the other side of the Atlantic later in the decade.

Both tracks feature on *Emergency Third Rail Power Trip*, which followed on Enigma offshoot *Restless* in mid-83 and which picks up right where the singles left off. Opening with the uplifting and ultra-melodic ‘Talking in My Sleep’, the album flows straight into the *Revolver* / ‘Strawberry Fields’-inspired ‘This Can't

Be Today’, with the ghost of Syd Barrett watching over. ‘Carolyn's Song’ introduces the smacked-out torpor that David eventually took and ran with when he created Mazzy Star. While it's almost impossible to pick a stand-out here, the epic ‘Look At Merri’ has it all: defiant drone loop bass, a languid vocal and lysergic guitar effects. Special mention is reserved for ‘Look Both Ways’, which closes the album and is pure British Invasion, *Aftermath*-era Stones. Different in tone to the rest of the album, it's a beast. Keith Richards would be proud.

When it came to writing songs three members of the band – David, Steve and Matt – had a seat at the table, working together and solo in various permutations. “All combinations were tried,” says Matt. “When I wrote with David, and it was just a few songs, he would add a section to something I started, like ‘What She's Done To Your Mind’ and ‘Talking in My Sleep’. I think the same for Steven and David. Steven and I have probably written a hundred songs together and every possible combination of starting, finishing and working together has happened.” And when they arrived in the studio, they knew what they needed to do. “We rehearsed a lot and figured out pretty

early on that we were good in the studio. We were very proud of it and made adjustments right up until the very end,” says Matt of their preparations. “So, yes, it turned out how we wanted. We were impressionists, not expressionists. It was mostly planned, although there was some improvisation with studio techniques, but almost never the actual music.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some people just didn't seem to get it. “The wimpy singing, wispy tunes, unsure drumming, repetitive guitar effects, and naïve world view,” wrote Robert Christgau in *The Village Voice*. Matt isn't that bothered. “Christgau embodies everything I loathe about music criticism, it's almost always about him... I don't remember what Christgau wrote, so I can't say what he was thinking, other than it was snarky.” But he does appreciate that the apparent novelty and ultra-originality of the record wasn't for everyone. “I think we were just out of time, we could have come earlier, or perhaps later.” A fact that is palpable when you listen to *The Rain Parade* – a first-timer would find it near impossible to place the timing of this music, the template having become so entrenched in our psyche. Happily, the brilliance of the record finally started to trickle down.







Live in Rimini in 1985; the 2012 awakening; first and last major label album *Crashing Dream*, '85; 2018 Paisley Underground celebration 3X4



**“We were luckier than some – of the six bands Island signed, ONLY THE LONG RYDERS AND THE RAIN PARADE ACTUALLY HAD LPS COME OUT on Island”**

“*Emergency Third Rail Power Trip* is not only the best album from any of The Paisley Underground bands,” wrote Jim DeRogatis in *Turn On Your Mind: Four Decades Of Great Psychedelic Rock*. “It ranks with the best psychedelic rock efforts from any era.”

At this point The Paisley Underground was still going strong and relationships between the different bands was solidifying. “Our friendships with members of other bands were still developing, as we played with all of those groups – Green On Red and The Long Ryders mostly (US and Europe), but also the Three O’Clock and The Dream Syndicate. Less so with The Bangles because they got ginormous quickly. There was great music everywhere. In the Sacramento area, there was True West, Thin White Rope and 28th Day. In the south, there was REM, Love Tractor, The Windbreakers and Let’s Active; in NY there was The Feelies, Winter Hours, Certain General.”

It felt that The Rain Parade had found their groove, but all too quickly they were faced with a stark predicament when David announced his departure from the band. There were to be no hard feelings. “David was a brilliant artist, and he wanted to run his own show,” says Matt. “Nothing wrong with that. It’s very difficult to have three songwriters in the same band, and we were lucky to get one album out.” Hey, even The Beatles struggled. David went on to join Paisley Underground collective Rainy Day for its sole album before hooking up with Dream Syndicate vocalist Kendra Smith to form Opal, who managed one album before Smith departed to be replaced by

Hope Sandoval and the band morphed into Mazzy Star. David passed away in 2020.

With their largely carefree approach to making music, The Rain Parade were not thrown off course in the slightest and immediately recorded the EP *Explosions In The Glass Palace* – considered something of a psychedelic masterpiece in the same league as – if not better than – their debut. “We are very proud of that one. Steven and I hit it off very early on as far as songwriting goes, so by the time we got to ’84, we had a bunch of material. It was easier with David gone, and I’m sure David felt the same way. There were only four of us and we argued a lot less.”

Across the five tracks on *Explosions*, the band preserved the beautiful, dreamy psych-pop that had infused *Emergency*. ‘You Are My Friend’ plays it comparatively straight; ‘Prisoners’ is a slow, languid, drone that eventually became the go-to for the likes of Spaceman 3, Ride and proponents of the shoegaze genre; ‘Broken Horse’ is an epic builder and the Parade’s first real focus on acoustic guitars. Closer ‘No Way Easy Down’ is probably the highlight – wall-to-wall malevolent, gothic psych. Organ and guitar trail throughout as the band channel Floyd and The Doors at their most menacing; the introduction of the violin in the closing stages is a flash of genius.

Then it was all change again. Kalwa departed to be replaced by Mark Marcum, and John Thoman joined on guitar – The Rain Parade were back to a five-piece as they ploughed on with their second album *Crashing Dream*, for which they finally succumbed to big label pressure,

signing to Island and leaving the indie world behind. The psychedelic influences are certainly less obvious on their sophomore record, and while the shadow of the ’60s is never far away, *Crashing* feels much more contemporary. The music is still at the highest level, but there’s a palpable shift towards the musical trends of the day. ‘Mystic Green’ is The Smiths meets Love with a hint of The Records’ ‘Sad Eyes Kill’ has the subtlety of non-Cale Velvets; ‘Fertile Country’ is a lovely simple melodic guitar ditty, as is album closer ‘Only Business’. ‘Don’t Feel Bad’ is a jaunt into earlier Rain Parade territory, with its backward-looping and strong bassline. There’s no doubt that the production levels have gone up a notch. The Rain Parade’s had music always benefitted from its slightly washed-out sound – the upgrade to Island and relative increase in money and technology may have been what stopped this album from being quite as enthralling as the first. That’s not to say that the songs aren’t great, but a little bit of the magic has gone. Matt agrees. “We like the songs on that record and I think they hold up. We did have one member who was not really prepared and it shows – you figure that out. But mostly we made a mistake signing to Island. We should have stayed with Enigma and our producer Jim Hill. The guy Island foisted upon us was a nice man, but in over his head and absolutely not the right guy for us.” The curse of Island was not limited to The Rain Parade either. “We were luckier than some – of the six bands Island signed, only The Long Ryders and The Rain Parade actually had LPs come out on Island. All nice folks, those groups, but not a single



Matt and Steve brave the weather for their unplugged 2023 tour with The Dream Syndicate

one of them had anything to do with this new movement.” And sadly, that spelt the end of the band. Just two albums and one EP to their name – their contribution to music far greater.

Despite going their separate ways, The Rain Parade personnel never abandoned music-making. “We never really left music, just slowed down and were quieter about it.” Matt released the album *Can't Get Lost When You're Goin' Nowhere* under the name *Gone Fishin'*, then decided to can it for a few years while he went back to school and started a family. He was coaxed out of retirement in the mid-90s by Steve and his band *Viva Saturn* formed with fellow Rain Paraders John and Will. “*Viva Saturn* was Steven’s songwriting vehicle and there are three or four albums of that, I’m on most of it. Also there are two *Hellenes LP*, my songwriting vehicle, which Steven and John are on as well.” He also joined *Crazy Horse* for a spell. After joining David Roback in *Mazzy Star*, Glenn sadly died in 2001.

As with all great things, The Rain Parade refused to die. “We got back together about 10 years ago, because of a terrible car accident involving our pal Bobby Sutcliff from The Windbreakers. His partner Tim Lee, with whom I made an LP in '86, and who is a dear friend, suggested a tribute LP. And then a gig came up in Atlanta and we decided to do it.” A year later, they were playing with Paisley Underground alumni The Bangles, The Three O’Clock and The Dream Syndicate, which organically led to

compilation album *3x4*, on which the four bands covered each other’s songs. “That got our studio juices flowing and Steven and I started to write together again. I’d say the pandemic helped, not hindered our process. What else was there to do?” Indeed. And here we are, on the verge of the first proper The Rain Parade album in nearly 40 years, the wonderful *Last Rays Of A Dying Sun*.

*Last Days* hopes to journey back to the old days. It’s Matt, Steve and John reunited, as it was in '84. They’ve been joined by Stephan Junca on drums and Derek See, who featured on *3x4* and has played with numerous reformed acts. How did it feel writing together with Steve again? “We’ve always felt comfortable in the studio, and working with Jim Hill [*Explosions* producer] again has been a pleasure,” says Matt. “We have a vast lifetime of shared experience, and we trust him a great deal. He may as well be in the band at this point. Our dear friend Mark Hanley (from *Boatclub* and The Billy Talbot Band) plays on at least half the songs. Our producer Jim Hill plays on several and added things to most of them.” They also invited a few friends along. “Vicki and Debbi Peterson of The Bangles sang on a couple of songs, the Moore brothers (Greg and Thom) also sang on three songs – they may be my favourite group. Also, Darian Sahanaja and Rob Bonfiglio from Brian Wilson’s band sang on a few.”

And as for the album itself, “We did not want to let our fans down,” says Matt.

“We are in our 60s now, not our 20s, so that’s different. In some ways, I think we are better. I don’t think our influences have changed much at all.” And that seems a reasonable assessment. They haven’t. It feels like they have picked up where they left off and that can only be a good thing. Released on Enigma Records’ Bill Hein’s new Flatiron Recordings imprint, there’s more softness in *Last Rays* – this is a gentler The Rain Parade, but the weight of the past is never far away. ‘Share Your Love’ is lilting and Dylan-esque, ‘Sunday’s Almost Gone’ ultra-harmonious and heart-breaking, as is ‘Other Side Of You’. ‘Couldn’t Stand To Be Alone’ is the Stones’ ‘Lady Jane’ with *Meddle*-era Gilmour on guitar, not to mention the relaxed slow-burn of ‘Forgetfulness’ and ‘Green’. ‘Bring It Back’ offers pop at its finest and ‘Angel Sister’ an absolutely cracking opener.

With the album’s release bubbling in the background, Steve and Matt have been touring as support for their old pals The Dream Syndicate. “That was a blast, love all of those guys. Vicki Peterson, as well, was subbing for their regular guitar player.” Playing live is something that the boys want to continue doing – hopefully once *Last Rays* begins to pick up accolades. And how about a follow-up? “I think we have at least one more album in us,” says Matt. Far from being the last rays, this feels more like a rebirth. ☑

**Last Rays Of A Dying Sun is out on 26th May on Flatiron Recordings**

