

Five aging preppy rebels find their long-defunct rock band is a cultural icon, its one record worth hundreds, and the demands for a reunion irresistible

The Storm Will Rise Again

Nostalgia by Joseph P. Kahn

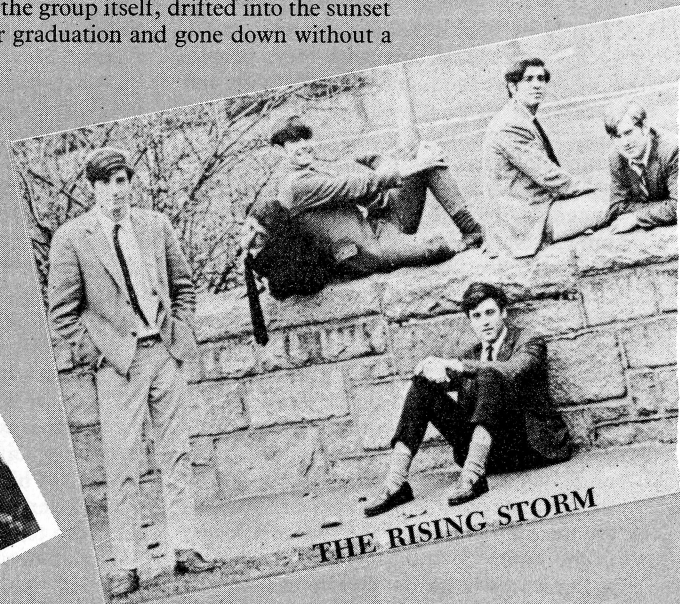
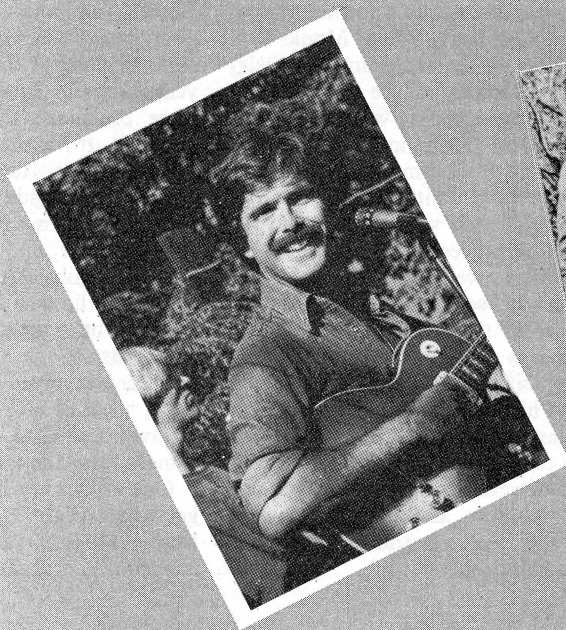
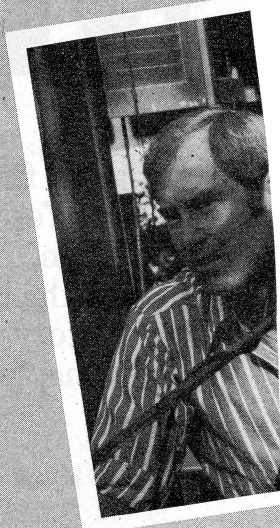
I am not, by nature, much of a collector.

Like combs and ballpoint pens, contemporary cultural artifacts disappear from my grasp with eerie regularity. I've tried to train myself to be more careful, but it never works. The one obsession of my youth, a baseball-card collection big enough to fill a refrigerator carton, vanished forever when I left home for boarding school, in 1963, and my parents subsequently sold the old homestead. Though that same collection would, at its current fair-market value, put my own son through four years of private schooling, I've long since stopped crying over the loss and begun to look upon it as a lesson in choices: Had I been more concerned at age 21 with what I'd managed to hold onto, and less concerned with what I had yet to risk, I might never have produced my son at all.

These thoughts came into sharp refocus not long ago, when I got a phone call from a friend who claimed to have bumped into an old classmate of mine at the Rat, a rock club in Kenmore Square.

"He said his name was Tony Thompson," my friend reported, "and he was there with his old band, the Rising Storm."

I scratched my head. The only Tony Thompson I knew—Andover '67, Harvard '71—was, when last I had seen him, an attorney with the Justice Department, in Washington. Married. Stable. Dedicated to his promising legal career. Thinking harder, I vaguely remembered the Rising Storm, Tony's band, from our senior year at prep school; but the Storm's one record, a "vanity" pressing of limited number and even more limited appeal, had, like the group itself, drifted into the sunset after graduation and gone down without a





The once and future Storm (counterclockwise from far left): guitarist Bob Cohan; group photo from the 1967 Andover yearbook; emblem of Rising Storm alma mater; the "new" Storm in concert at the Landmark Café last September; the now-valuable Calm Before the Rising Storm album; drummer Tom Scheft; Tony Thompson and daughter; keyboardist Charlie Rockwell.

trace. To find them now resurfaced at the Rat seemed rather unlikely. As hard as the Reaganites might be on Carter-era civil litigators, I doubted many of them were launching second careers as recycled rock stars.

"I understand the Rising Storm cut an album," my friend went on. "You don't have one lying around, do you?"

"Well," I replied, "I guess I *used* to. But you know what happens to old records." I heard him groan. "Why the interest, anyway?"

"Because," he whispered hoarsely, "those albums are selling to record collectors for 400 bucks apiece."

Lord have mercy. With trembling hands I dropped the telephone and tore through my record rack like a fevered prospector. Downward I swam, like Peter Gimbel to the *Andrea Doria*, through layer upon layer of New Wave music, country, psychedelia, and soul. Up to the surface popped mil-dewing discs by the forgotten likes of Earth Opera, Vanilla Fudge, the 13th Floor Elevators. I overturned closets and ransacked the basement, emptied two steamer trunks, even found my old Andover diploma, but nowhere in my frantic digging (Four hundred dollars! More than the cost of my stereo. More than the blue-book value of my *car*) did the Rising Storm arise.

Numbed, defeated, I finally abandoned the hunt and called the offices of Benjamin Thompson, Cambridge architect and Tony's father. His secretary heard me out politely and said that, yes, the Rising Storm had been at the Rat—and would be playing one last reunion concert at Faneuil Hall Marketplace that afternoon. I composed myself and caught the T.

Here we must backup a bit, to get the proper sequence of events leading to the moment of resurrection. Last March, the *Boston Phoenix* published a piece by Howard Litwak on the fantastic sums of money being fetched by certain obscure "garage band" albums of the sixties. Litwak led off his piece with the saga of the Rising Storm. He wrote:

Calm Before the Rising Storm is not by any stretch of the imagination a well-known album. Recorded on the Remnant label, sometime during the psychedelic era, *Calm* represents the entire output of the Rising Storm, a rock band comprising Phillips Andover students. . . . What makes *Calm Before the Rising Storm* particularly interesting is not its music (which I'm told is pretty good) but its current market value.

A copy of the piece found its way to Linda Cohan, sister of Boston attorney Robert D. Cohan, ex-Storm guitarist, and she wasted no time in calling her brother.

"Sit down, Bob," she warned, "because you're not going to believe this."

Cohan grabbed a chair and listened, eyes growing wider. Then he got a copy of Litwak's article for himself, ran off several copies, and mailed them, along with an emotional cover letter, to the five other band members, who, according to Andover's alumni office, were now scattered from Illinois to North Carolina.

His missive touched off a sustained round of "I-don't-believe-this" long-distance phone calls and nostalgia-drenched chain letters. Tony Thompson, former lead singer, wrote back from Washington:

I was delighted, of course, that we are now famous and potentially millionaires many times over. I floated on air for a few days, got quite angry at Mady [his wife] because she didn't immediately start considering me to be in the same class as Paul Simon, told everyone at work (especially the secretaries, who naturally think I'm quite terrific now) . . . and then I listened to the album again. That, I'm afraid, brought me right down to earth.

Thompson's skepticism was healthy and natural. With or without the distance of more than a decade, it was hard to reconcile the humble efforts of one preppy garage band with the cries from the collectors that here was the greatest thing since the opening of Tut's tomb. Indeed, the album had its charms: five original tunes, some pleasant Simon and Garfunkel-like harmonies, serviceable cover versions of such staples as "In the Midnight Hour" and "Baby Please Don't Go." But could antiquity, however abbreviated, really have added that much value to their art? Thompson, for one, expressed some doubt. For him, the romance was not in the replaying (or reselling) of the record, but in the retuning of old friendships. The chance, so rarely given, to forget the law books and the medical charts and the mortgage statements and be, somehow, 18 again. Eighteen, and careerless, and full of rock 'n' roll.

But the vision kept inflating itself. There was sudden talk not only of reuniting for old time's sake but of live performances, even a new album. Pumping up the band members at every turn were a pair of rare-record freaks from the Boston area named Erik Lindgren and Ron Fantasia, two men who fairly swooned at the notion that the Rising Storm could be lured out of retirement by the right combination of fortune and flattery.

Erik Lindgren, an advertising-jingle writer by day, moonlights as a one-man studio band called the Space Negros. An avid sixties anthologist, he also produced *The Boston Incest Album*, a recorded celebration of homegrown musical junk food that brought a measure of notoriety (if little money) to the Hub's underground rock scene. Ron Fantasia's reputation is some-

what slipperier to define. Basically, he is known as a guy who will pay—and has paid—almost any sum for Rising Storm relics. A career post-office worker with a wife and three children, Fantasia grew up in East Boston, where, after having gotten booted out of Boston Latin (“My grades were good, but I was a little, uh, rebellious”), he sang in another forgettable sixties garage group, the Renegades. Always a little eclectic in his musical preferences, he once adored such schlock-pop masters as Bobby Rydell and Frankie Avalon, later upgrading his tastes to the likes of the Beatles and the Moody Blues. Then drugs and psychedelia hit. For Ron Fantasia, the Golden Age of Music was 1964–69.

“Once I got into head music,” he says, “I used to go into record stores and pick out the albums with the strangest covers and the weirdest song titles. You know, like if an album had only one cut on the whole side or a title like *Philosophy of the Universe*, I bought it immediately. By the early seventies I’d pretty much stopped listening to all new music and concentrated on keeping up with what I’d missed from the sixties. When I bought myself a new stereo system, in 1977, I decided to replace as many of my old favorites as I could. And that’s when I discovered how much these strange records of that era were actually worth.”

Keep in mind that Fantasia, having never played squash for St. Paul’s or been to a Concord Academy prom, still had no clue as to who (or what) the Rising Storm was. On his modest federal salary he did, however, begin to buy whatever he could afford of the “most wanted” sixties stock (“My wife still thinks I’m soft as a grape,” he confesses), and what both the foreign and domestic collectors most wanted was any of the 500 extant copies of *Calm Before the Rising Storm*. Thus, just as surely as Boswell found his Johnson did Fantasia find the Storm.

“I heard their record once,” he says, “and said to myself, This is it: this is the greatest album of its kind ever made.” His words, like his sentiment, are simple and heartfelt. “There are other garage bands who made albums back then, even other Andover bands, but not one can touch the Storm. I think of their style as restrained punkers. Kids who had it all inside them but know how to keep it under control.” The fire comes into his eyes. “I *had* to have that record. It took me two years to find my first copy, and that one cost me \$200. I guess you might say that one purchase more or less established me as a free spender. The second and third ones cost me \$350 apiece. It seemed like a lot, but I traded one of those to another collector in Detroit for \$400 worth of credit.”

Up and up the bidding went on *Calm*, until the news leaked out through Litwak last spring that small fortunes could be made off the sweat of some forgotten brows. This kindled the reunion talk, and Ron Fantasia got in on that, too.

"I called [ex-drummer] Tom Scheft's sister, looking for another copy of the album," Fantasia says, "and through her I reached Tom and spoke to him about doing an interview for a collectors' magazine. He was in a state of shock about the album's value. Right then, out of the clear blue sky, he mentioned my helping them get back together." His eyes glaze over now. "The best analogy I can draw for you is of a rabid Beatles fan being asked by Ringo Starr to help with their reunion plans. It was probably the greatest moment of my life."

It was also very probably doomed, for reasons both logical and psychological. Richard Weinberg, guitarist, instructor in gastroenterology at the University of Chicago Medical School, was in playing shape, having gripped frets with a bunch of fellow MDs only the year before, but at the last moment he found a mid-August rendezvous impossible. Charlie Rockwell, keyboards, ski instructor at Killington, Vermont, had certain commitments to the Army Reserves. Scheft, associate professor of English literature at North Carolina Central University, had the urge but no drums (his wife, sensing in Tom the sudden inflammation of some primal nerve, surprised him with a gift of drum lessons, just in case). And Todd Cohen, bassist, journalist in Raleigh, North Carolina, felt—well, as Thompson phrased it in a letter to the others:

Todd feels the "Star Trip" aspect of this whole thing has gotten out of hand. He wants to get together simply to play, without the strains of having to perform, or trying to avoid making fools of ourselves on stage, or of having to make money in order to foot the bills. . . . He also thinks that everybody's lack of personal contact over the years will cause tensions in our relationships which will be reflected in our music.

So they had to boot this thing around for five full months: when to come, where to meet, what to play, whether to bring families, how to pay for it all.

"It got very discouraging," Thompson told me later. "I mean, we're all serious professionals, working in other fields. Bob and I have kids. Rich is on a grueling schedule. I hadn't even laid eyes on Charlie since 1968. It occurred to me that the whole thing might be getting out of control. After all, when you only have a week's vacation a year, you hesitate to spend it reliving the past."

"Do you remember," Bob Cohan was asking me, "where the name of our group came from?"

I shook my head. We were sitting at a table at the Flower Garden Café in the Landmark Inn, waiting for the rest of the band to finish setting up, and enjoying a beer in the bright sunshine.

"We used to be called the Remnants," he

said, "because most of us are Jewish and we all had to take the eleventh-grade Bible course that featured a book called *Remnants of Israel*. Unfortunately, our band was so bad we had trouble getting booked for dances; when we *did* get booked, people were always putting on records instead." He smiled. "Then came senior year and the infamous American-history course. We took our name directly from the course syllabus: 'The Rising Storm,' which was the name of the period immediately preceding the American Revolution. We practiced real hard and got our big break when the other school band lost a member to academic probation and had to cancel from the Abbot mixer. We featured about a 45-minute slow song, and everybody loved us."

I closed my eyes and nodded at the freshness of the memory; and then I was gone. Adrift. No longer at the Flower Garden Café in 1981, but at Kemper Auditorium, in Andover, circa 1967. Sipping not on a cold bottle of Molson's Ale but on a warm Dixie Cup full of vile fruit punch. And feeling on my palms just the faintest sheen of sweat as the girls came through the door—Abbot girls, Dana Hall girls, Pine Manor girls, each one gawkier and more miserable-looking than the last. The Storm was on the bandstand (were those really Marimekko floor samples covering their amps?), coolly tuning up. The girls were arranging themselves in firing-squad formation, giggling wildly among themselves. And there we stood, smelling heavily of Old Spice and testosterone, waiting for the solemn ritual of sex and chivalry to begin. Asking ourselves questions like, How many fast songs could the band get through before I ditch my date? And, What exactly *are* the grope possibilities on a 45-minute slow song? I never did have all the answers. Neither did the Rising Storm. Nobody did. It was just, you know, an excuse for everyone to play.

I opened my eyes. Cohan was gone. Ron Fantasia, in worn blue jeans and a faded orange T-shirt, stepped to the microphone and blew on it lightly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said proudly, "the greatest band ever to come out of Boston—the Rising Storm!"

Tony Thompson, wearing the bottom half of a gray chalkstripe suit and a paisley necktie, nodded to his old friends, and they began to play Chuck Berry's classic "Around and Around."

Well the joint was jumpin',
Goin' round and round,
Reelin' and a-rockin',
What a crazy sound.
And it never stopped rockin'
Til the moon went down.

At first the band sounded tentative, as if the joke were suddenly over, the wild bluff called, and it was really time to *play*. Thompson's voice was raw and a little weak. Rockwell's organ chords disap-

peared into the drone of a distant jackhammer. But pretty soon they all began to warm to the task, and the crowd, a mixture of relatives and innocent bystanders, warmed with them. As the Storm rolled on through its dusty repertoire of Young Rascals hits and early Stones covers, the beat got slightly bigger, the melodies somewhat sharper. Weinberg in particular showed no ill effects from his surrender to lower-intestinal-tract pathology, rifling off lead-guitar riffs unrivaled by anything heard at Andover. If, on the whole, the guys were not the Yardbirds reincarnate, well, they were decent and determined. More important, they seemed to be having an awfully good time. Hannah Thompson, aged 16 months, climbed into her father's lap for a duet on "She's My Girl." Lillian Kaplan, 81, grandmother of young Doc Weinberg, bustled among the autograph-seekers wearing a smile a mile wide and a "Rising Storm World Tour 1981" T-shirt.

Sitting there before the same band that had serenaded me a whole lifetime ago made me feel pretty damned nostalgic. When I joined Tony Thompson on Lower Cape Cod a few days later, he was feeling pretty nostalgic, too.

"Why all this interest in us?" he asked rhetorically, sipping at a scotch. "My guess is that it's the juxtaposition of two totally unrelated things. One is the punk-rock phenomenon and our band's links to its roots. The other is this whole preppy craze, which personally drives me up the wall, but I'm sure it's a factor.

"They want us to make another record, you know," he continued. "Lindgren and Fantasia, I mean. We're told there's a group of collectors in Germany who'll automatically buy 450 copies of anything we put out. I don't know." He stared off into the sunset over the Pamet River valley. "The idea of making another album is as appealing to us as it was 14 years ago, but we're also told that it would be successful only if we stuck to the old type of songs we used to do and not try to get too 'contemporary.' But I've changed—we've *all* changed. I like softer music now. I'm not into rock 'n' roll much anymore."

He turned to greet his wife and daughter as they completed a late-afternoon stroll around the house.

"Part of me loves Fantasia's kind of adulation," he finished up, "and part of me can't relate to it at all. He's a very sweet, very sincere guy, but I feel like he's in a completely different world from the one I live in. I'm a lawyer now, not a rock star. Hell, I never *was* a rock star."

As I helped pack Thompson's daughter into their sedan, it occurred to me that the beauty of Peter Gimbel's daring dive to the sunken corpse of the *Andrea Doria* was that he had chosen not to open the salvaged safe right away. All the money, all the jewelry, all the cash-in stuff could wait. That the safe itself was simply there, intact, full of promise, was miracle enough for the divers themselves. □