

ELLIOTT MURPHY

ELLIOTT MURPHY WITH HIS NIGHT LIGHTS BAND, CIRCA 1975.

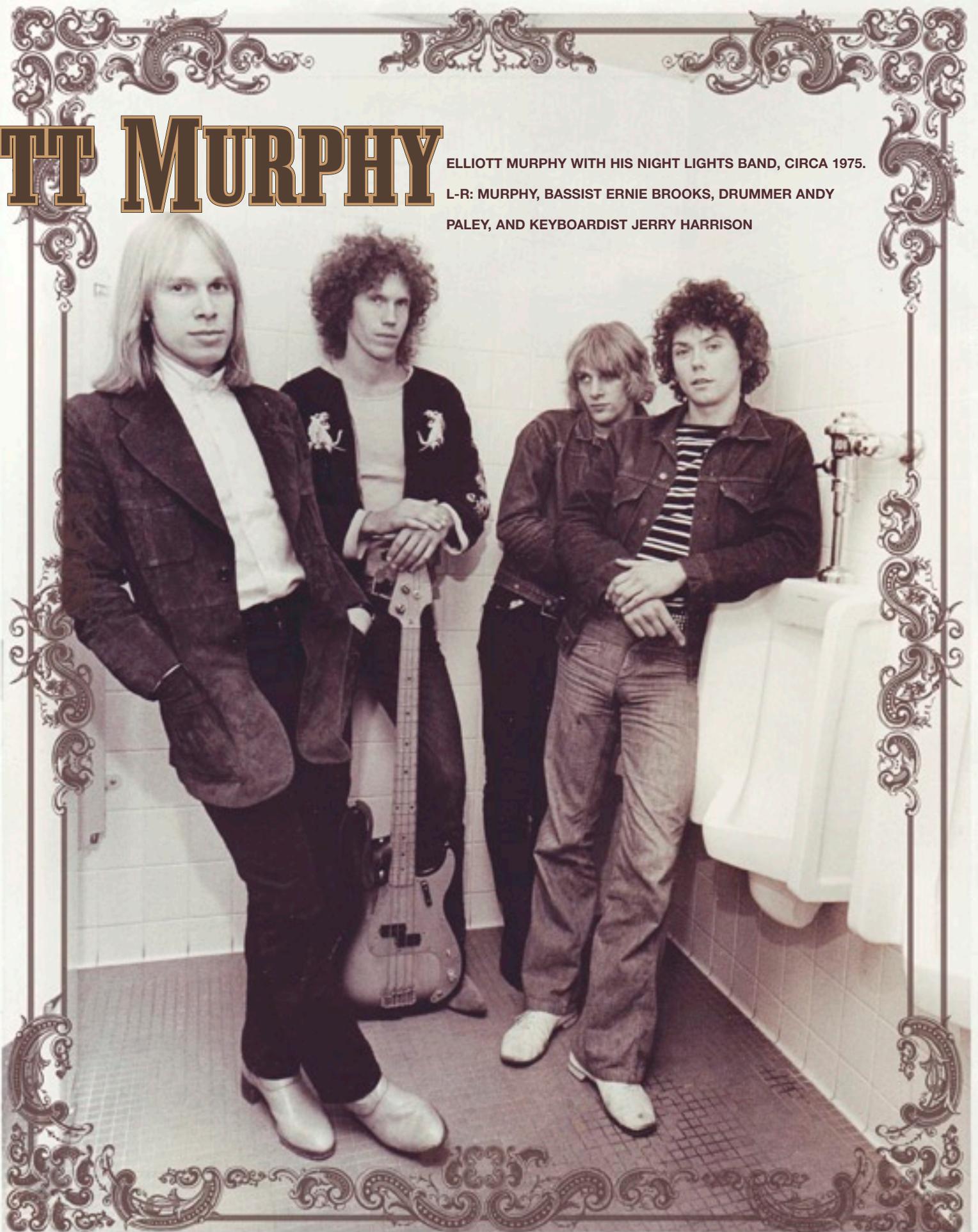
L-R: MURPHY, BASSIST ERNIE BROOKS, DRUMMER ANDY PALEY, AND KEYBOARDIST JERRY HARRISON

Thirty-Five Years On The Road ... And Counting

Elliott Murphy's rock 'n' roll dreams never quite came true, at least in America. He seemed on the cusp of stardom in the wake of his 1973 debut *Aquashow*, an album that prompted rock critic Paul Nelson in *Rolling Stone* to herald his arrival as one of the next generation of rock 'n' roll auteur-heroes, alongside Bruce Springsteen and Jackson Browne. Murphy's early songs sketched gritty scenes of disaffected middle-class New York suburbia, in a lyrical style that was inspired as much by Fitzgerald, Cheever and Kerouac as it was by Dylan, Cohen and Simon. For Murphy, rock 'n' roll was capable of harnessing the redemptive power of literature. "The difference between movies and rock 'n' roll," Murphy wrote in the liner notes for the Velvet Underground's 1969 *Live* album, "is that rock 'n' roll never tells a lie."

Born in 1949, Murphy grew up on Long Island, New York and played in bands as a teen before moving to Europe in the late '60s, where he led a boho life of busking, even making an appearance in the Fellini film *Roma* in 1972.

When he returned to New York, Murphy and his band made a name for themselves at prominent rock clubs like Max's Kansas City, playing the same art-rock circles as Patti Smith and the New York Dolls. Lou Reed originally was slated to produce Murphy's second record, but when that fell



through, Murphy jumped at the chance to head to L.A. to record and indulge the California pop dream. Paul Rothchild (the Doors, Janis Joplin) did the honors, “Layla” co-writer Jim Gordon played drums, and for a couple of months Murphy shackled up at the Beverly Hills Hotel in true rock star fashion. He returned to New York City for his third album, *Night Lights*, recorded at Electric Lady Studios in Greenwich Village. Session guests included Murphy’s friend Billy Joel and keyboardist Jerry Harrison, who would soon go on to join the Talking Heads.

Murphy’s work was critically acclaimed but commercially ignored, and he shuffled record labels. He tried his hand with Columbia and in 1977 recorded his fourth album in London, with a little session help from former Stones guitarist Mick Taylor and Genesis drummer Phil Collins. Columbia would later drop him.

Three decades later, I ask him why he thinks he never broke through in the States.

“With each new album commercial success always seemed right around the corner,” he reflects via e-mail from Europe. “I had tremendous support from critics and FM radio. I kept thinking a better label was the answer, so I jumped from Polydor to RCA to Columbia over four albums in five years, which might have been a mistake, as I needed continuity and long-term label support. But there was a lot of resistance from mainstream U.S. radio, who thought my lyrics too literate for a mass audience. And my management seemed to take my touring in strange directions (opening for Sha Na Na!) and only cared about their own short-term goals (i.e. what went in their own pockets).

“Management is the weak link of the music business,” Murphy continues. “I was never able to find my own Colonel Parker, Brian Epstein or Jon Landau. All of this, combined with my own personal demons, doomed my initial great expectations.”

Discouraged yet determined, Murphy carried on, touring in Japan and then Europe, where, to his surprise, he discovered that he had a following.

“There was something brewing in Europe, of which I was totally unaware,” he says. “Everything that worked against me in the U.S. seemed to be to my advantage in Europe.”

Murphy acknowledges the precedent of countless American blues and jazz artists who found more sustainable careers playing in Europe.

“The big difference was that Europeans loved and respected art and culture, and rock ‘n’ roll was included in that mix,” he says. “Of course, this has changed due to the pop homogenization of the international music business, but I got in under the wire.”

Murphy continued to record and tour throughout the ‘80s, splitting his time between his home in New York and touring Europe. After a divorce in 1989, he emigrated to Paris, which has served as his home base ever since. Now, with 29 albums under his belt, a devoted fan base, and the opportunity to get paid doing something he loves every night, it’s fair to say that Murphy’s rock ‘n’ roll dreams delivered the goods after all.

I ask him if, all these years later, he still feels the same way about the power of rock ‘n’ roll as he did in his youth.

“If anything, the spirit of rock ‘n’ roll — or at least what I consider that to be — has become much clearer and more precious to me,” he says. “I truly believe the energy of this music is a life force of its own. I’m 58 years old, and last Saturday night I played a 4 hour and 20 minute set of nearly 50 songs. When I was young I got too wrapped up in the business end of it all. I played for the high and mighty in the audience. Now I play for the fans who buy their tickets, and I give the same performance, the same energy, whether there are 50 or 5,000 people in the crowd. Even with all the career disappointments that have come my way, I still feel that I am an incredibly lucky musician because I realized before it was too late that the gift I had was precious, and that it was my job to protect it. It’s been 50 years or more since I saw Elvis Presley on Ed Sullivan, and without making any comparisons, I know that just last Saturday night I felt the same energy and power of rock ‘n’ roll that he did.”

I ask Murphy whether he would do anything differently if he could go back to the beginning of his career.

“Well, I wouldn’t give away my aqua yak fur coat (the one I wore on *Just A Story From America*) to the Salvation Army,” he quips. “My son recently asked me where it was.”

We asked Murphy to share more of his perspective as an expatriate gigging musician living in Europe.

— Jim Kirlin



We carry our guitars in soft bags — mine a black Taylor 612ce and my guitarist Olivier Durand’s a 312ce. We know we shouldn’t because these beautiful instruments deserve better. But it’s the “Airlines Guitar War” that forced our hand. Sometimes it’s a battle at check-in, but we usually get the guitars through by hook or by crook and into the overhead bins where they fit comfortably and we know they’ll be when we arrive. We can’t imagine playing with replacement guitars, so if they were lost luggage we’d be lost too.

Olivier and I play over 100 shows a year, all over Europe, either as a duo or with my backing band, the Normandy All Stars. We travel by plane, train, car and foot. Thirty-five years of touring started to ruin my shoulders, all that carrying of guitars and gear, but ten years ago I started to seriously work out, and now it’s better. The motto of any traveling musician should be “Adapt or Die,” and that’s what we do. But since we started playing Taylor guitars, our lives, or at least our soundchecks, are easier: we plug them in and they sound good.

We don’t like compressors. Usually we drop some hi-mid in the EQ, and then the guitars do the rest of the work. The hardest part is the monitors because when you’re playing an acoustic guitar the monitor

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ABOVE: MURPHY WITH COLUMBIA RECORDS LABEL MATE BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN CIRCA 1976

BELOW (L-R): OLIVIER DURAND AND MURPHY OPENING FOR BOB DYLAN AT THE PISTOIA BLUES FESTIVAL IN ITALY IN 2006. PHOTO BY EVA



Tayles



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system is your amp. We find that wooden monitor speakers sound better, and a separate send for each of us is a must. Yes, we play beautiful instruments, but we play hard and loud, and the pick marks on my guitar bear witness to that fact. I'm open to all kinds of music, but rock 'n' roll saved my life. So be it. My guitar takes the beating graciously.

I've been on the road for over 35 years. A large part of my life has been spent watching trucks and landscape through the window of a van. The ratio is about eight hours of travel for two hours of show. I'm not complaining because I love this life, and it's too late to stop now. Twenty years ago my ears started ringing and they didn't stop. Doc said I had tinnitus and had better turn down the music. Too many years standing too close to a twin-reverb with everything on ten, I suppose. For a while I panicked and started wearing ear-plugs, but that's tough on a singer (which I am), and I felt I lost my contact with the audience, so I started playing acoustics and never looked back. The invention of the piezo pickup (and now the Taylor Expression System) saved my life. By the way, my ears still ring, but it's manageable. No one gets out of this life unscathed.

In 1978, when I was dropped from Columbia Records, I thought my career was over after four albums on three major labels. Then, a year later I was offered a tour of Japan, and soon after that I played in France. F. Scott Fitzgerald said there are no second acts in American lives, so I guess that's why my second act had to take place in Europe. My first show in Paris in 1979 was an epiphany for me: sold-out and six encores. And they knew the songs! No one told me my albums had sold moderately well in France and other places while I was trying to break into the U.S. charts.

Soon I was touring in Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland and Sweden half the year, while still living in New York. In 1989 I was in the middle of a divorce and couldn't bear the thought of finding another apartment in New York. My friend Garland Jeffreys asked me the toughest question in life: "What do you really want?" I thought for a minute and gulped hard. "Move to Paris," I said. "I've got a friend with a place there that he rents," said Garland. Two weeks later I was moving in and a year later my son Gaspard was born. "Follow your passion" is the best advice I



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can give anyone. *Coming Home Again*, my 29th album is testament to that.

Over twenty years ago I cleaned up my act. "Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll" was my motto in the '70s. Now I cut out the middle part completely so there's more time and energy for the other two. Apart from being onstage, my favorite activity on the road is finding a gym where I can lift weights for an hour. Ironically, it takes the weight of the world off my shoulders. I try to work out in the morning, and then I'm in a better mood for the travel. Tell me I've got a six-hour drive in front of me and you'll get a shrug of the shoulders. That's the job. When I'm on the road I miss my family, and when I'm home I miss the road. Robbie Robertson once said it's an impossible way of life. I guess that's what he meant.

But I love my fans. Outside my family they're my greatest treasure. The Rainy Season Fans are from Spain, The Spirit of Beauregard Fans from France. Both names come from titles of my albums. They come to 40 or sometimes 50 shows a year. They tell me what songs I should dig out and play and which ones I should retire. They tell me how the sound is in the venue,

and they help me at the soundchecks. They printed passports for themselves as citizens of "Murphyland" — the place I live, I suppose. Today, all my energy comes from the audience.

When I started out 35 years ago, I was always trying to impress the big wheels in the music business or play for the critics. Now I play for the fans, who pay for the tickets and buy the CDs. I finally got it right. The Internet has been my savior (as it should be for all independent artists), and my website is my headquarters. I always said that if all my fans got together I could play Madison Square Garden, and that's what the Internet is: my arena, my stadium. The capital city of Murphyland.

In the early '90s I was touring solo but it was getting to me. I found myself talking to myself more than I ought to and having conversations with people who were not in the room. So I started looking for a guitarist, and thanks to a French rock critic, I was introduced to Olivier Durand. Olivier comes from Le Havre — a port town on the English Channel. I call it the Liverpool of France. Le Havre produces rock musicians like Bordeaux produces wine. Olivier came to visit, and although he's nearly twenty years younger than me, our musical tastes are as if we were from the same generation. He loves Dylan, the Stones, Van Morrison, Bruce and the blues. As a guitarist he adores Ry Cooder, Sonny Landreth and Keith. I guess the only difference is that when I was 16 I was listening to the Beatles and

when he was 16 he was listening to ... AC/DC! Anyway, I love the way Angus moves — reminds me of Chuck Berry.

I like to move onstage, too, and cringe when I think of the old days when you had to stand in front of a mic to amplify your acoustic guitar. I'd like to go wireless and probably will some day. Hope I don't start picking up Moscow radio stations. The biggest technical problem we have is with grounding our instruments. If the electricity of the venue and the lighting system are not aligned correctly, then I get a buzz out of my guitar, and I have to keep my lips glued to the microphone on the quiet songs. We change strings nearly every show, which is costly and timely but necessary. Many nights I play for nearly three hours, and I hit those strings very hard. I use a thin pick so I don't break strings. Olivier and I don't carry spare guitars, so if I have to change a string on stage I hand him my guitar and he graciously puts on a new string while I lead the audience in a hip-hop version of "Like a Rolling Stone." Works better than you might think.

My typical day on the road goes something like this: Wake up just in time for the last 10 minutes of breakfast, ask for a late check-out, go online (free wi-fi should be mandatory in all musicians' hotels!) and answer all my emails, of which there are sometimes 100 a day, repack my bags (when people ask me what I do for a living I say pack and unpack my suitcase), and meet Olivier and the band down in the reception area. Then we start to drive and don't say much. For a couple of years we listened to Dylan's *Time Out of Mind* for the first hour of the drive, then it was Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* or Aimee Mann's *Bachelor Number 2*. If I have a tour manager, sometimes I sit in the back and listen to audio books on my iPod and if we're driving ourselves I like to drive in the morning until lunch. When we stop for lunch, we try to park the van where we can see it. It's the only time I leave instruments in a vehicle. Rule #1 of the road — never leave your guitar in a car! I swear I know every restaurant on every major highway in Europe. After lunch Olivier takes over the driving and I try to siesta. We finally hit the town we're playing and search for the hotel and venue. I am nearly always late for sound check. Next Christmas I'm buying myself a GPS.

Soundchecks can be heaven or hell. We always do our Taylors first. The guitar play between Olivier and myself is the basis of our sound. Olivier uses three or four pedals with his guitar, and the variety of sounds he gets is incredible. Usually I have to ask the soundman to turn it up — this ain't folk music. Then we do the voices, drums and bass. My voice is on top, but the guitars are right below that. Our stage monitors are loud. I have a theory:

the longer you do this job, the rehearsals get worse and the shows get better. These days I hardly rehearse at all. There have been times when I wrote a new song in the morning and we played it on stage that night. Doesn't happen often, but when it does I believe all is right with the world. After soundcheck, we rush to dinner and get back just in time to change our clothes and hit the stage.

Olivier and I begin with a duo number so the soundman can fine-tune our guitar and voices in the PA. On the second song the band joins us, and for me it's like a 747 taking off down the runway: once it starts flying it doesn't stop. I try to make the audience as crazy as I can, as crazy as I feel myself. Our Taylors become part of our bodies, they fly with us, and the music gives wings to the words of my songs. Olivier's solos are not to be believed. Honestly, I think he has gone places with an acoustic guitar where no man has gone before. He is nothing less than a virtuoso on his instrument. The old guy (that's me) takes one or two solos himself each night — that's enough. I love playing rhythm guitar — very underrated occupation in my opinion. Just ask John Lennon, Lou Reed or Keith Richards.

And then, after some encores, it's over. Reluctantly, I leave Murphyland and, still drenched with sweat, go out and sign CDs for the faithful. Fans tell me amazing things (they named their newborn baby Elliott), heartbreaking things (a dying brother listens to one of my songs over and over), unbelievable things (an 80-year-old Belgian grandmother has seen me perform 20 times). I feel blessed and undeserving of their adoration. When I get compliments I feel like they're talking about another musician. Still, I try to live in my moment of glory and to own it for that brief, wonderful time. Then back to the hotel, where I find out the latest I can eat breakfast the next morning.

It all comes down to guitars. I love them and am convinced they are mystical objects with a vast musical knowledge waiting to be discovered within their modest wooden frames. If I see a nice one I want to play it, and when I start playing it I want to write a song, and when I write that song I want to record it and perform it before an audience. That's the magic formula. I don't question it. I just hope it never ends. It's been working for thirty-five years and counting ...
www.elliottmurphy.com. ■

