



[Home](#) | [Buy Now!](#)

[Contents](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Reviews From The Media

December 2001

MOJO - <http://www.mojo4music.com/>

Remarkable account of the R.101 airship disaster in 1930, featuring Arthur Brown, Peter Hammill, Hugh Banton and 15 others.

An original member of Van Der Graaf Generator, (Chris) Judge Smith describes Curly's Airships as a "songstory". Not quite a rock opera, not exactly a musical, it tells of Britain's doomed attempts to master air travel following World War One. Lyricist and composer Smith sings the part of Curly McLeod, an air service officer recounting the tragic tale of the R. 101 from his grave. Across 2-CDs and 140 minutes, the music embraces rock, old-time dancehall and eerie atmospherics, with repeated passages identifying key characters' appearances. A six-year project aided by a Lottery grant, Curly's Airships is closer to Radio 3 than 1, but never lets its erudition smother its elegant way with language and melody.

David Cavanagh

May 2001

LUNAKAFÉ - the fullmoonthly e-zine! <http://www.fuzzlogic.com/lunakafe/>

This double CD - 144 minutes long and including two thick booklets of lyrics and information - was launched about six moons ago, but it's a one-of-a-kind album that needs time and deserves a review. It tells the true and extraordinary story of the ups and downs (literally) of British airship history, focusing on a grandiose plan to link the colonies of the empire with a fleet of airships. The dream culminated with the destruction of the giant R.101, the world's largest airship, on its maiden voyage to India in 1930.

You might have heard of Mr. Smith earlier. He wrote the lyrics/libretto for the Usher opera that was on our Full Moon 42 menu. In his teens he gave the name to and co-founded Van der Graaf Generator (VdGG) along with Peter Hammill, check out the VdGG Boxed story at the Full Moon 51 menu. He left the band at the time their first single was released in early 1969. Since then he has been involved in other rock, pub, punk and experimental bands, released a couple of CDs, written a Latin mass, operas and stage musicals off Shaftesbury Avenue and songs performed by Peter Hammill and Lene Lovich. Curly's Airships has been his main musical occupation since 1993.

The story is told by Flight Lieutenant George 'Curly' McLeod, a fictional character with his own views, but based on the historical facts. As Judge Smith puts it in his notes: 'Despite his thoroughly one-sided view of events, I have a sneaking and quite unjustifiable suspicion that this just might be - pretty much - the way it was.' To make matters even more complicated, it's not Curly as such who speaks, but his ghost, through an old lady, a medium. Actually, after the final catastrophe that killed nearly 50 people (only six survived), a celebrated spiritualist medium received lengthy messages from deceased crew members who revealed information no one else could have known.

Judge calls his work a songstory, because most of the story is told/sung by one person, as opposed to an opera, rock opera or musical. Judge sings the part of Curly himself and plays most of the drums and bass tracks. An impressive gang of 60s/70s/80s musical celebrities helps him out along with a host of lesser-known names. Hugh Banton takes care of all the organ parts throughout the album, both modern and old ones - the latter recorded in a church and a cathedral near the sites where the story took place. This is his first major

recording project, I believe, since he left VdGG in 1976. John Ellis - guitarist and E-bow master of the Vibrators, Stranglers and Peter Hammill and his K Group - is also contributing throughout the album. David Jackson (saxes and flutes) also of VdGG plays on several tracks as does Pete Brown (percussion and vocals; Cream lyricist and leader of Battered Ornaments and Piblokto). Although Curly is the storyteller, he remembers or imagines statements of other persons of the story, sung by Peter Hammill, Arthur Brown (the King of Hellfire of the Crazy World and Kingdom Come, you know), Paul Roberts (Stranglers) and others. Brown and Hammill impersonate an incompetent governmental bureaucrat and an ambitious minister of air, respectively, who manage to ruin the project by their demands for safety and to keep the work schedule. ['So if they value their jobs, They had better deliver' - heard that one before, history seems to repeat itself, eh?]

The inclusion of the medium is a clever move. The voice of the actress Gwendolyn Gray in her late 80s that transforms into Curly's/Judge's and the ticking of an old clock effectively take the listener back to the times after the first world war. This is strengthened by period slang in the lyrics (explained in one of the booklets). Also the music is interspersed by military marches, air (as opposed to sea) shanties and tango sections of the merry 1920s.

A couple of tracks have sitars, tamburas etc. at the thought of flying away to India. The rest of the music is harder to characterise. John Ellis tells on his homepage that 'It is one of the most remarkable pieces of music I have ever had the pleasure of being involved with'. True! It is mostly rock based, but not in the traditional form. There are hardly any conventional songs - only short segments, no rhyming lyrics, verses or choruses. Instead there are 27 musical themes that is repeated at least once. But the work includes several other themes. The story is divided into 26 tracks arranged in 15 chapters. I guess the music is based on the words and not vice versa. A few times the words seem to be all that matters with hardly any tune at all. Also there are pieces of spoken dialogue between airship crew members and great airship sound effects created by Banton's organs (no synthesizers!) and the guitars of Ellis; to make it sound like a sort of radio play in between. But overall, it's the words and music combined that matter.

Someone compared the music to Zappa's more complex works. I don't think so, though maybe that's as close as we can get. The way the music describes the work inside the giant airship sheds, the pompous debates in governmental committees, Curly's eagerness to fly, the lightness of the airship flying through and above the clouds, the hazards of navigating the ship through rain and thunder storms etc. is very appropriate. Hugh Banton and John Ellis in particular must have put a lot of time and enthusiasm into the project. And a challenge it must have been with hardly any repetitions and music adapted to the words. Judge sings better than ever and really distinct, you can hardly misunderstand any word he is singing, as I usually tend to do. The other participants' efforts must not be forgotten. But their contributions are mere fill-ins compared to Judge's Banton's and Ellis' formidable efforts.

Forget all your prejudices concerning concept albums and rock operas. Curly's Airships is a unique work of long durability created by a madman. Well, at least you have to be pretty mad to dedicate several years of your life to the studies required, drag your home recording equipment up and down the country to record it and - when finally finished - release the album on your own label in a first edition of 1,000 copies only. It certainly has nothing to do with fame or fortune! You'll find everything you need to know about the project, sound samples, how to order the album and even more at the specially designed and great Curly's Airships home page.

JP

April 2001

Dirigible - The Journal of the Airship Heritage Trust. <http://www.airshipsonline.com/>

For years we have tried to put across the enormity, brilliance, heroism and fascination of the Imperial Airship Service; yes, and the incompetence, stupidity, and arrogance that went with it. We have been largely constrained in two dimensions: inadequate words, poignant sepia images, scraps of jerky newsreel. Then someone comes along with an idea so off-the-beam

and radical as to appear laughable: that story told through the medium of rock music.

Judge Smith is that someone, and has long regarded rock music as an artform. With his roots in the Sixties and influences such as Bowie, Zappa, Peter Hammill and the Crazy World of Arthur Brown upon him, Judge's songs have helped carve something of a niche of his own. Airships have always been part of his life too. He modestly describes himself as an 'airship dilettante' who, at 13, met Barnes Wallis in that famous Brooklands office: the great man was rather irritated that the boy wanted to know about airships rather than the hypersonic flight then occupying his fertile brain. Twenty years ago he spent an afternoon with Capt George Meager of R100 and learned much about the attitudes of the 20s flying men.

The result of this heady mix is a 2 CD 'song-story' lasting over two hours which has been six years in the making. It is probably the largest and most ambitious single piece of rock music that has ever been recorded. But there are so many other musical influences - classical, shanties, 20s dance bands and Indian ragas - that it defies any specific categorisation. Our guide is a fictitious airshipman, Curly McCloud (Judge himself), as he traces his career from Pulham in 1919 to his death at Allonne (and beyond). He has a robust sense of humour with a sardonic edge - very British - and interacts with great events accordingly. The libretto which brings Curly to life is virtually faultless and very, very clever: it is presented in one of the two highly informative booklets with the CDs. This striking combination of poetry, music and Curly's humanity, flings open a door on our two-dimensional world, flooding it with vivid, surreal colour which, once experienced, is not easily forgotten. There is much humour and great beauty, but be warned that the section depicting the death-throes of R101 has literally left many listeners rigid with horror (the music at this point was actually recorded on the organ of Beauvais Cathedral); and the muffled drum processional which follows is absolutely heartbreaking - it recalls Vaughan William's 'last post' in the Pastoral Symphony of 1920, the 'bugles calling them from sad shires'. Such is the scope of the work.

Not all the music will appeal to everyone, but there are visionary moments which are almost painful in their beauty. Here is that mystical relationship which those who 'fly by the grace of the sky' have with the elements, each voyage 'an intimate dialogue with the wind and sun', of 'theoretical winds in a paper sky'. Yet here too is cosy, rose-hued inter-war Britain - coloured glass in the front door, musty smells in the parlour, and a new Bull-nosed Morris in the motor house 'while the 1920s rattled past outside...'

There is a fascinating website - www.curlysairships.com - telling the story of the work, together with lots of other information making it one of the best 'period' airship websites going.

Nick Walmsley

March 2001

Airship - The Journal of the Airship Association. <http://www.airship.demon.co.uk/>

These CDs are certainly different - one should perhaps best describe them as unique. By using words and rock music, they tell the story, as truly as possible, of the early rigid airships from the 1924 Imperial Airship Scheme through to the R 101 and its tragic loss on its maiden voyage to India in 1930. The sound of the engines, the commands when an airship is withdrawn from its hangar, on take-off, in flight etc. are as authentic as you could hope for, whilst the music fairly shakes you at times and adds to the emotion experienced by both those early pioneers and the listener.

The Songstory took six years to make. When you hear it you can tell why. It has been researched well and is a welcome addition to anyone's bookshelf.

Arnold WL Nayler

February 2001

Traverses. <http://www.multimania.com/traversesmag>

Fin 1967, Chris Judge SMITH avait proposé, pour le groupe qu'il venait de former avec Nick

PEARNE et Peter HAMMILL, toute une liste de noms inavouables et c'est VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR qui a été retenu. Ne vous plaignez pas, le groupe aurait très bien pu s'appeler «Zeiss Manifold and The Shrieking Plasma Exudation» !!

SMITH n'est resté que peu de temps dans VDGG puisqu'il a fait ses valises en novembre 1968, non sans avoir enregistré avec le groupe un 45T. (People You Were Going to/Firebrand) et une trentaine de chansons avec Peter HAMMILL. Certaines d'entre elles seront réenregistrées par ce dernier (Imperial Zeppelin, Viking, Time For a Change, Been Alone so Long...) ou ressurgiront plus tard sur le premier CD de Judge SMITH, Democrazy (Oedipus Recs).

Aussi, même si le passage de Judge au sein de VDGG s'apparente à celui de l'éclair (il réapparaîtra dans le groupe le temps d'un morceau prodigieusement décalé, An Epidemic of Father Christmases, enregistré à la BBC en 1971), son nom est intimement lié à l'histoire du «Generator» et le personnage fait partie de la famille. Du reste, il écrira le libretto de l'opéra hammillien The Fall of The House of Usher...

Il faudra attendre 1994 pour voir apparaître le premier véritable album de Judge SMITH, Dome of Discovery (Oedipus Recs), où le chanteur-compositeur, accompagné entre autres de quatre cuivres, quatre violoncelles, une chorale et une section rythmique tendance cajun, accouche de douze chansons bizarroïdes et délurées.

Depuis, on savait que le «Judge» travaillait sur un opus très ambitieux, opus qui apparaît enfin après six ans de préparation. Entièrement rédigé et composé par SMITH, Curly's Airships est une «songstory», une histoire chantée, une narration mise en musique, qui ne doit pas se confondre avec une comédie musicale ou un album concept. L'histoire est inspirée d'un fait divers remontant aux années 1920 : le destin tragique du plus grand des dirigeables jamais construits, le R101. Conçu à la demande du gouvernement anglais au mépris des normes de sécurité, ce géant des airs s'est «crashé» lors de son vol inaugural qui devait mener ses 49 passagers en Inde et qui s'est en fait arrêté à Beauvais.

Découpé en 15 chapitres, ce roman musical s'étale sur 2 CD dépassant chacun les 70 minutes (!) et met en scène plusieurs personnages, pour la plupart imaginaires. Judge SMITH a ainsi endossé le rôle principal, celui de l'officier Curly McLEOD. C'est lui qui raconte l'histoire, livrant sa propre vision des événements, mais le sujet traité permet d'aborder plusieurs thèmes dignes d'une tragédie grecque : l'ambition démesurée, la couardise morale, la morgue et l'incompétence des puissants, le courage insensé, l'aveuglement face à l'absurde... Curly's Airships, c'est à la fois l'histoire de destins humains sacrifiés et le récit d'un drame psychologique qui a secoué toute une nation dans sa folie des grandeurs.

«Curly» SMITH a ainsi convié plusieurs artistes à prêter leur voix aux personnages. Parmi eux, il y a des «idoles» de SMITH, à savoir rien moins qu'Arthur BROWN en personne dans les rôles d'un président de comité hypocrite et d'un commandant de bord anxieux, et Peter HAMMILL, impressionnant dans son rôle du clinquant Lord THOMSON, personnage qui a vraiment existé ! Dans la mesure où cette «songstory» mêle la réalité et la fiction, on ne peut donc lui adjoindre la fameuse sentence «toute ressemblance avec des personnages réels serait purement fortuite...»

David SHAW-PARKER, Paul ROBERTS (THE STRANGLERS), Pete BROWN (parolier de CREAM) comptent parmi les autres «acteurs» et jouent différents rôles ; on notera également la prestation d'un somptueux ténor classique, Paul THOMSON. Évidemment, le sujet n'était pas propice à la création de personnages féminins ; aussi la seule voix féminine est-elle celle de Gwendolyn GRAY dans le rôle d'un médium.

La «distribution» paraît chargée, il n'en reste pas moins que les interventions de chacun sont sporadiques. Le personnage dominant est, évidemment, celui de Curly. Autant dire qu'on a intérêt à se familiariser avec la voix particulière de Judge SMITH. Curly's Airships étant son oeuvre, on ne peut lui en vouloir de s'être mis en avant. Du reste, Judge SMITH assure également la guitare basse et la batterie, ce qui peut surprendre quand on sait qu'il se définit lui-même comme un «battereur incompétent» (sic) ! On est cependant loin d'avoir affaire à un «one-man show» puisque, là encore, Judge a su s'entourer de plusieurs musiciens de renom.

Parmi eux, il y a comme par hasard des anciens du CRAZY WORLD OF ARTHUR BROWN, des STRANGLERS et de VDGG ! Sur chaque pièce, on retrouve ainsi l'excellent guitariste John ELLIS et Hugh BANTON. La contribution de celui-ci est du reste inestimable puisque, non content d'apporter une grande variété de sons avec ses différents orgues conçus par lui-même, il s'est également occupé de reproduire les effets sonores des moteurs de dirigeables en trafiquant ses orgues. Mentionnons aussi parmi les membres quasi permanents Rikki PATTEN (guitare additionnelle), David SHAW-PARKER (guitare acoustique) et le toujours appréciable David JACKSON (saxophones alto, soprano et ténor, flûtes...).

Tout a été mis en œuvre pour que Curly's Airships soit musicalement stimulant et évite la monotonie stylistique. Selon les épisodes, on tombe soudain sur un thème de tango, sur de la musique de danse des années 20 (ambiance rétro garantie, avec banjo, mandolin, whistle et accordéon), sur une marche militaire ou encore sur de la musique indienne, avec sitar et tablas. Il n'en fallait pas moins pour retenir l'attention de l'auditeur sur plus de deux heures !

Soucieux de réalisme, SMITH a recueilli une abondante documentation : outre le libretto, un autre livret contient diverses notes sur la production, le contexte historique, une bibliographie, et même un glossaire explicitant les expressions idiomatiques et le jargon aéronautique de l'époque ! Enfin, Judge a aussi eu l'idée d'enregistrer quelques parties de guitare et d'orgue dans certains lieux évoqués par l'histoire, comme le hangar du R101 et diverses cathédrales (Cardington, Beauvais...).

On retrouve ce souci de réalisme dans l'écriture des textes qui revêt une forme narrative non assujettie à la rime. Ce faisant, les chansons sont elles-mêmes affranchies du carcan couplet-refrain. Les lignes mélodiques s'épanouissent au-delà de cette contrainte structurelle, suivent les mouvements des phrasés vocaux et leur flux peut parfois s'apparenter à celui de vocalises improvisées. De ce fait, les 26 compositions de ce double album se démarquent des structures conventionnelles et s'apparentent plutôt à des suites de thèmes, de «leitmotives» liés à un personnage, une pensée, une émotion ou une situation psychologique qui peuvent être récurrents en fonction des ressorts dramatiques du récit. Ainsi, on peut retrouver une séquence d'accords, un riff ou un thème dans plusieurs morceaux sous différentes formes.

Voilà une démarche compositionnelle qui n'est pas loin de celle des musiques progressives et qui, en tout cas, rassurera ceux qui craignaient avoir affaire à de la banale chansonnette. A sa manière, Judge SMITH fait du rock sophistiqué sans sombrer dans le pompiérisme.

De plus, là où le sujet de l'histoire aurait conduit d'autres auteurs à une adaptation larmoyante aux effets appuyés, Judge ne s'est pas départi de ce sens du cocasse qu'on lui connaît. (Cf. la chanson jouée à la radio, juste avant le crash, par les «HUGHIE BANTON'S MAYFAIR AVIATORS» (!) ou cette chaussure de femme retrouvée dans les débris et qui aurait appartenu à Lord THOMSON !) Le résultat force d'autant plus le respect que Curly's Airships n'affiche pas particulièrement d'ambition commerciale et a bénéficié somme toute de peu de moyens. Cela ne l'empêche pas d'être une œuvre à priori sans équivalent.

Curly's Airships, on l'aura compris, n'autorise pas une écoute distraite. Certes, sa longueur peut rebuter, d'autant que l'auditeur français devra suivre le libretto pour mieux comprendre les textes et ainsi suivre le déroulement de l'intrigue. Mais une fois qu'on se laisse captiver, on n'en décroche plus et, comme pour tout bon roman ou film, on retient son souffle jusqu'à l'épilogue. «Il manque juste l'image», me direz-vous ? Plus pour longtemps : Judge SMITH envisage de porter son histoire sur scène, avec «backing tracks» décors et costumes. Un projet de vidéo et de DVD est même à l'étude.

Les dirigeables de l'officier Curly sont prêts pour de nouveaux envols... Cette fois, on veut bien être à bord !

Stephane Fougere

February 2001
Record Collector Magazine.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious projects attempted by any artist for many years "Curly's Airships" is a conceptual song-story by occasional Peter Hammill collaborator Judge Smith. Based on the ill-fated R101 airship, this impressive work was six years in the making and features a cast including Hammill, Arthur Brown, Pete Brown, David Jackson, Hugh Banton and Paul Roberts.

Before you let the word 'concept' put you off, the calibre and ability of the musicians saves the album from becoming tedious. In fact, it's most entertaining. The performances are enthusiastic and well-executed, with the second disc providing the most satisfying moments. Musically, one can draw comparisons with Frank Zappa's more complex work, but that doesn't really do it justice.

Aside from the originality of the music, the detailed historical research by Smith almost justifies purchase alone - a lavishly illustrated 48-page booklet features informative historical background. A wonderful and well-crafted work for which Judge Smith deserves much praise.

Mark Powell

January 2001

NO WARNING! <http://digilander.iol.it/anewland/nowarn.htm>

Un imponente monumento musicale! Non trovo altre parole per sintetizzare un giudizio su questa ambiziosa opera rock, degnissima erede di storici progetti quali Jesus Christ Superstar o Tommy. Ha impiegato ben sei anni, il buon Judge Smith, per realizzare questa che lui ha voluto chiamare una "songstory", anche perché il gran lavoro svolto non si è limitato al solo aspetto musicale, ma ha richiesto anche una paziente ed accurata ricerca storica per ricostruire la vicenda del grande dirigibile R101 precipitato nel 1930 durante il suo viaggio inaugurale dall'Inghilterra verso l'India. La struttura di Curly's Airships è quella propria di un'opera, con tanto di libretto accluso che guida l'ascolto passo dopo passo, riportando dettagliatamente la sequenza dei temi (l'autore ha pensato infatti anche ad un adattamento teatrale e ad una versione in formato DVD). Musicalmente siamo al cospetto di un riuscito blending di sonorità, che abbraccia le peculiarità dei Van Der Graaf Generator, il surreale universo di Frank Zappa, la musica operistica, la musica popolare degli anni 20/30 e le fanfare militari, il tutto teso a formare un inscindibile insieme (come fu in passato per The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway e Thing Fish) da gustare dall'inizio alla fine lungo gli oltre 140 minuti di durata dell'opera, con l'unica inevitabile interruzione data dal cambio tra il primo ed il secondo disco. Tra gli ospiti presenti, in un cast che conta ben diciotto partecipanti, si segnalano David Jackson, Hugh Banton, Peter Hammill, John Ellis, Arthur Brown e l'ex Stranglers Paul Roberts. La presenza di buona parte degli ex membri dei Van Der Graaf Generator si fa ovviamente sentire, soprattutto nelle parti vocali (e questo anche laddove non è Hammill a cantare) e nelle parti strumentali ad opera di Banton e Jackson, ma non aspettatevi le oscure esplorazioni all'interno dell'animo umano che caratterizzarono capolavori come H To He e Pawn Hearts : la musica è molto "descrittiva" e ben si fonde con i testi della vicenda, dando quasi una resa a visiva che coinvolge l'ascoltatore e lo catapulta all'indietro nel tempo, nell'Inghilterra degli anni '20. Curly's Airships è totalmente intriso di pathos : chiudete gli occhi dopo aver schiacciato il tasto "play" (it's so strange here ...), e lasciatevi guidare dal racconto di questa vicenda di uomini coraggiosi, di ambiziosi politici, di pionieristiche sfide e di ferrei codici d'onore. Tali saranno le sensazioni che ne ricaverete che non potrete non rimanere affascinati da questo racconto. Ascoltate, ad esempio, in quello che è il momento culminante della vicenda (Hastings To Beauvais) come il sax soprano di David Jackson sull'incalzante base ritmica dia effettivamente l'idea di un'impavido e folle volo sotto la furia degli elementi, prima del fatale schianto sul suolo francese. Ci sarebbe da scrivere un mare di parole per descrivere minuziosamente questo capolavoro scritto in forma libera da metriche su innumerevoli temi ricorrenti assemblati con rara maestria, penso che il modo migliore per rendere giustizia a questo disco sia quello di consigliarne caldamente l'acquisto, e lasciare che il lavoro di Judge Smith vi conquisti in breve tempo, costringendovi ad una sua assidua presenza nel vostro lettore CD.

December 2000

New Horizons. <http://www.elrose.demon.co.uk>

Chris Judge Smith was one of the founder members of Van Der Graaf Generator and he has worked on all manner of projects over the years, from rock operas to TV music. Over the past six years he has been researching and working on an ambitious project entitled 'Curly's Airships' which, I have to say, is a truly remarkable piece of work by any standard.

Smith uses a technique which he explains in the accompanying notes as a songstory - rather than calling it a concept album. Space does not permit me to attempt to explain the ins and outs here although he explains it very well.

An accomplished team of musicians has been pulled together to assist in this grand scheme, including former Van Der Graaf Generator members David Jackson, Hugh Banton and Peter Hammill (playing the part of Lord Thompson), as well as the likes of Arther Brown (Crazy World of) and Keith Ellis, to name but a few.

The story is told from the perspective of junior officer Curly McLeod and, although he is fictitious, his experiences are certainly not. Curly tells his story, through a spirit medium, as an ongoing narrative: looking first at the early airship flights, leading to the development and finally the destruction of the R101 itself on 25th October 1930. The relevance of the medium here should not be overlooked since, during the original investigations into the crash, a medium claimed to have been visited by the spirits of some of the dead crew members who wanted to be heard ... and certainly some of the revelations that were made were interesting to say the least! During the telling, other characters appear to play out key scenes, but they do not directly interact with the main narrative.

This attention to detail is breathtaking in that not only does 'Curly's Airships' give a clear and accurate portrayal of what life working on the airships must have been like, but it also examines in depth some of the potential motives of the main protagonists, as well as looking at some of the bureaucratic mistakes that compounded the problems. Human motivations are necessarily complex and open to interpretation by others and, of course, the story has to be cut down to a manageable format but it is clear that the research for this work has been extensive and the result is that we are presented with a very plausible explanation of events.

Musically this work is awesome, mixing classical composition with pure rock, into over two hours of what I can only describe as riveting entertainment. Although the album is split into tracks, there are very few individual songs in the true sense, and really this is an album that deserves to be listened to in its entirety. All of the musicians excel from first to last, but special mention must be given to the guitar work of John Ellis, Hugh Banton's superb keyboard playing and to David Jackson for his sax work.

From the vocal point of view there are aspects of the sound that may initially strike as being a little quirky. Judge Smith's depiction of Curly is very intense and can be a little overbearing at times, but he does an excellent job and gets the most out of the performance. The inclusion of period slang throughout adds considerably to the overall atmosphere, and it is just this attention to detail that helps make this album the masterpiece it undoubtedly is. Again it is hard to single out individual players but mention should be made to Paul Robert's strong contribution and to Peter Hammill's excellent characterisation.

I'd hate anyone to get the impression though that this album is heavy going and serious all the way through as it certainly does have its lighter side. One particular favourite of mine happens shortly before the crash; we hear a short song being broadcast on the radio which has a perfect period feel to it, the announcer tells us at the end that this was played by 'Hughie Banton's Mayfair Aviators'.

Incidentally it is worth pointing out that the CD was issued 60 years to the day after the events portrayed, and that one of the recording locations was the airship hanger at Cardington, Bedfordshire where the R101 was built and housed. Also, the church organs at Cardington, the parish church for the Royal Airship Works and Beauvais Cathedral, near to where the disaster struck, are both featured adding a nice touch.

I feel I must also say a bit about the packaging that comes with the CD as it is very extensive and adds a lot to the experience. There are two booklets enclosed, both over forty pages

long. One carries extensive notes about the concept of a songstory, the historical background, and information about the actual composition. In addition there are photos of the various people involved in the project, many taken in period costume, as well as a detailed summary of who does what on which tracks and a full glossary explaining some of the terminology used in the text. This is backed up by a select bibliography, should you wish to know more about airships, as well as some pictures and facts about some of the craft referenced in the story. The second booklet is the full libretto preceded by a section that lays out the various musical themes or leitmotifs that occur throughout the work. If this is not enough for you there is also a superb web site which will give you even more information as well as links to other airship related sites - you can also find some sound samples there to listen to.

Well you can probably tell by now that I am very impressed by this album. In many ways it is a quintessentially English work, but this should in no way diminish its lasting appeal. In addition to being a first rate story portrayed brilliantly to music, it also covers the subject in such depth that it leaves you gasping for more. Even if you come to this with no interest in airships, I can pretty much guarantee that you will not leave feeling quite the same as Curly's obvious passion for the subject cannot help but rub off on you.

I have to take my hat off to Judge Smith and say full marks all around for this album - a great achievement which I heartily recommend to all.

Finally, here's a thought. Even though I am very sceptical about the paranormal, maybe, just maybe, Curly really is giving a chance for the victims of the R101 disaster to be properly heard through the medium of this work ...

Simon

November 2000

Progressive Music Newsgroup. rec.music.progressive

I ordered on Friday and my CD arrived yesterday (Tuesday) - quick, even by BOL or Amazon standards. I was supposed to be 'working from home' on a project appraisal, but thought, "I'll just listen to the first couple of tracks." I ended up listening to the whole thing twice through. Then it was lunchtime.

I was going to start on the project appraisal after lunch, but as I sat supping my coffee, listening to the R.33 being walked out of it's shed, I thought "Sod it." and listened to the whole thing again.

This album is nothing like Usher, Democrazy or Dome. This is truly inspired. From the slick design of the CD package to the choice of participating musicians to the depth and quality of the sound, the whole thing screams "CLASS". I'm not sure if Judge used so many big names like Hammill, Paul Roberts, John Ellis and Arthur Brown for the "fan appeal", but if he did, it doesn't come across like that in the music. The whole thing sounds like they all worked very closely together and there are no attempts to "steal the show" although Hammill's performance as Lord Thompson, the villain of the piece, is particularly outstanding.

I have a sneaking suspicion that this is going to be progrock album of the year once word gets out.

Thanks for flagging this up. Now back to the (late) project appraisal...

K2N

November 2000

PH7 - Peter Hammill/Van Der Graaf Generator List. <http://tile.net/listserv/ph7peter.html>

Well, what can I say... I've listened to it for the second time now, and I still can't find a single boring minute! I actually found myself stopping what I was doing (which in my case is always

at least two things at the same time) and sitting down and listening. Just listening. With all the stuff that's going on in there, the piece deserves to be called a film without the pictures...

In short, the thing has a similar elegance-to-size ratio as one of Curly's actual airships, though not necessarily the stricken R101 itself, as we are reliably informed that she flew "like a pig"... echoes (no, not the song!) of Pink Floyd crop up all over the place, drifting through lemon-meringue clouds that are really "rather good".

I can't say that I was particularly enthusiastic about airships before I heard this (not surprising perhaps as you don't see them around much these days. And for those of us who mistake a blimp for a proper airship, Judge has provided some excellent linkage on his website...), but I came away with a very clear image in my head of what it must have been like to fly, and indeed crash, one of these. Especially the last minutes of the doomed R101 are recreated on the album in such clarity and detail that one wonders how they managed to do it without actually _recording_ an airship crashing. Well, the thunder and rain were recorded on location if I remember correctly, as was the organ of the cathedral nearby... but the actual airship noises are all courtesy of Judge's wonderful band of assorted geniuses and madmen (all very appropriately pictured in the booklet, though sadly misspelled in the case of Rene Van Commenee who's missing one of his many e's).

And yet, the music is best when it's simply being music - airship noises and atmospheric side, the 1920 roar past in a series of charlestons, tangos (the latter all sung by Peter Hammill. Appropriate for an admirer of Piazzolla's :), improbably catchy shanties and jittery marching band tunes interspersed with heavy rifferama, quiet narrative bits, and culminating in what must be the saddest funeral march ever put on record, to be followed by one of the few recognisable "songs" in the traditional sense, sung by an assortment of extremely fine voices. Who is this Paul Roberts anyway? He's got a great voice, and I feel inclined to hear more from him. Any ideas, lads?

Anyway, I feel I'll have to listen to the whole thing a few more times before I can pass any qualified comments, but let me just at this point say that it's even better than I had anticipated it after hearing snippets back in 97, and I was pretty amazed even then... a huge "well done!" to Judge (best vocals from you ever, mate!) and his merry band, and let's hope he sells enough to keep going on to the next project, whatever that may be...

...and yes, we're all airship...er, persons :)

Dagmar 41

November 2000

PH7 - Peter Hammill/Van Der Graaf Generator List. <http://tile.net/listserv/ph7peter.html>

Before I'd even played the CDs I've been absolutely bowled over by the completeness of the package...for twenty quid you get 2 and a half hours of music and two thick booklets which are jam-packed with readable stuff. All the libretto of course and a useful 'who's who on each track' breakdown... but also: an explanation of what the project is (a Songstory apparently - well I won't argue with that); a run-down of the history of the Historical facts and their relationship to the story here; a précis of the musical processes behind it; a glossary of some of the obscure RAF terms used in libretto (and a few which are just plain English ones ie. completely incomprehensible idioms to the rest of the world); a bibliography; photos and specifications of the major airships featured in the piece; a silhouette drawing displaying just how insanely huge these things were (a Tri-Star airliner is dwarfed by the R101); and a schematic showing the recurrence of the main leitmotifs (representative themes) within the piece. And not to forget: several pages of photographs. Genuine ones from the time; recreated ones from the present, showing the full cast of performers. Thus David Shaw-Parker is shown staring intensely at a design chart of the airship as he often plays a Government Committee member and an airship officer. And the photo of PH is a classic - he's done up to look like his character, the suave and sophisticated - but utterly ruthless and somewhat unsavoury - Lord Thomson. Love that hat!

David Jackson produces some fine noises too... and that little Lemming is a rather

accomplished musician too. The real stars of the music are, for me, Hugh Banton and John Ellis, who contribute on every track. Just incredible stuff - and it's real Rock. No synthesisers at all - and even the drum-machines are used to good effect for most of the time (no real-life drums could re-create the sound of propellers in quite the way Judge manages it here).

Judge himself does an incredible job. He has a fine voice; as well-enunciated as PH's and just as suited to dramatic roles. I'm sure that at times this project must have seem as mad as the doomed venture which is its subject matter...but ironically there are more positive parallels. Curly as a character is a man who is obsessed with flying; he is single-minded and brave in a way which most of us can scarcely comprehend these days perhaps. It's also a very old-fashioned kind of British bravery...which most other people would label 'insanity' in that a reckless regard for 'duty' is a major cause of the disaster. But Curly's love of airships (- beautifully richly conveyed in the track 'Curly in the Clouds', especially in the section which rapturously describes what it is like to see and fly into a cloud...and which is then leant a humorous and endearingly British bit of bathos by his comment "clouds are rather good...") is so convincingly portrayed because there's a similar passion behind this project. These were at some stages both, as Sean puts it, "unimaginable creations".

Don't be daunted by all the written material though - the story is simply related through the Songstory itself. There are a few genuine songs - notably in the form of the various recurrences of sea shanties (sung by the Church Tenor - Judge says he hates the "bellowing" of the operatic kind - Paul Thompson) and in the final track. But largely this is a sung *story*, with no rhyme as that would have interfered with the natural patterns of speech. But it's certainly not "difficult" to sit through - I was riveted. And as the organ of Beauvais cathedral thunders against the noise of the stricken R101 (the sounds of which were also created by Hugh Banton's - er - incredible organ... well, there really is no other way of putting it!) I felt shivers up and down my spine.

PH sneers his way through 3 tracks, obviously enjoying himself. Especially when he gets to spit out phrases like "those bastards in Yorkshire" and "ignorant peasant". What a villain! And I'm left with a nasty impression of exactly what Lord Thomson was doing with that woman's shoe. No, I'm saying no more about that one...

...you'll have to buy it - for that reason, even if you're not convinced by the glowing comments from Sean and I.

Charlotte Hendry

November 2000

The Official Paul Roberts Web Site. <http://www.paul-roberts.co.uk>

The long, roundabout way to explain this, is to dip into everyone's childhood. When you were young, you heard music. It was everywhere. Mum's music, dad's faves, it was all around. Then you went to school, and it was there, too. People talking about this band, that band, this singer, that guitarist. Then, one day, out of the blue, you hear IT. You know IT, IT is that stuff that sounds like music, but IT isn't. IT stirs you far more than that music stuff. IT has edges, ideas, twists, turns. You might not even understand IT, but something pushes you to try.

Judge Smith has tapped into a rich vein of IT. Curly's Airships is superb.

From the outset of receiving this new album, you can see that you are in possession of something special. The whole package is beautiful, from the silky look of the cover, to the impressively well produced books. The CD's go on, and the books come out. Just like the old days of music and album sleeves - things are not the same now.

The songs range from quirky sea shanties, to comedic pieces, from the instrument induced airship noises to the hypnotic sitar of an Indian theme. I have a penchant for Thompson's Tangos myself. And the way the different strands are dragged together is unique. To try to explain this, you have to understand that each "track" is made of multiple parts. There isn't a song, as such. Each song has 3 or so songs within it. And then there is the question of

whether there are any songs at all.

The individual performances are staggering. The guitar work of John Ellis and the vocals of Paul Roberts are well known to the readers of these pages, but perhaps the fact that both performers sustain this over the entirety of this album is something new. Paul's performances as "Colmore" particularly are as good as he has ever performed.

The tracks that include Paul Roberts vocals are superb, but that is just the tip of this iceberg.

The shock for me came with the rest of the cast. These people are good. From the soaring heights with Paul Thompson, to the fabulous vocals of The Judge himself, there is not a single duff performance. One of the best performances, vocally, is The Night Before, where Paul Roberts, Arthur Brown, Paul Thompson and Pete Hammill reach vocal perfection.

But more than anything, it's Judge Smith's writing that is astonishing. It isn't in a standard song format - in fact Judge himself expounds his ideas about what he has created in one of the two booklets contained within the CD box. From singing, vocalese, narrative, tenor, harmony, time signatures, free form, there are no limits to this album.

How this album developed, I can only guess at. There must have been moments where Judge Smith didn't think he could finish the work. Thank God he did, though.

This is such a dense work. It will take forever to unpeel every layer.

If you do not own a copy of this album yet, I strongly recommend that you get one. This is an album of immense proportions, to the point of not being one album at all. There is so much in this.

Chris Lammiman

June 2000

The New Red Archives. <http://www.newredarchives.com>

This curious project sounded intriguing. I was already a fan of early Van der Graaf Generator, particularly the seminal "Pawn Hearts" LP including the atmospheric song chronicle "Plague of Lighthouse Keepers". Likewise Peter Hammill's very personal solo album "Over" was an essential landmark at the close of an extraordinary innovative period of British music. At the core of "Curly's Airships" are ex-Van der Graaf members Peter Hammill (vocals), Dave Jackson (sax) and Hugh Banton (organ), and [it] was written and narrated by Judge Smith, himself a founding member of the embryonic Van der Graaf Generator. Augmenting the ensemble are veterans Arthur Brown (from the Crazy World) and Pete Brown (from the Battered Ornaments). The musicianship is beyond reproach, from the marvelous use of the drums, to the outstanding performance by John Ellis (Vibrators, Strangers and Peter Gabriel). John Ellis is without doubt a master craftsman of the guitar and manages to excel without ever degenerating into self-indulgency.

His crisp and precise execution plus astute perception of the spirit of Curly's Airships is the musical glue that binds this eclectic masterpiece together. Peter Hammill's distinctive voice is perfectly utilised in the role of the arrogant Baron Thompson, and contrasts marvelously with the classic tenor as the helmsman singing a wonderfully realised sea shanty. The real star of the project though is the story as told by crewman Curly (Judge Smith). The Story of the R.101 - the world's biggest airship, and the folly that led to its demise and death of most of its crew. The story is compelling, and Smith's lyrics absolutely draw you in. The normally boring facts become tantalising bursts of momentum in the midst of Smith's skilful narrative. Throughout he strikes the perfect balance between statistics, poetry, story development and imagery. Add to this an attention to detail, convincing placement of sound effects and dialog, an Indian music ensemble, a military brass band and you have a recording [of] incalculable value. As yet unreleased, "Curly's Airships" is destined to become the accepted masterpiece of a prototype genre "the songstory" or a treasured oddity for discerning collectors.

Nicky Garratt

July 1999

WightOnLine. <http://www.wightonline.co.uk/>

The special guest at July's 'Friends at Home' evening was Judge Smith: the first word is his Christian name, not his profession!

Smith, a founding member of the 60's rock band Van der Graaf Generator, went on to form a band with the architect Maxwell Hutchinson, and to write some successfully performed rock operas, as well as songs for the TV show 'Not The 9 O'Clock News'. Only a year before, in the same room, Anthony Minghella had told me about how Van der Graaf were his favourite rock musicians.

As well as signing copies of his various CDs, Judge Smith gave a world premiere of part of his one-man show, 'Curly's Airships'. With the aid of a reel-to-reel tape straight from his home studio, and donning a captain's hat, he was transformed into the pilot of an airship, brought back from the dead. The results were startling, with Curly's expression reminiscent of the gentle bemusement of Alastair Sim, and transported the audience to a time when airships were competing with aeroplanes as the future of public transport.

A memorable evening for all who attended, which also included new poems and original songs by others present. Judge Smith joined in with great gusto on the concluding musical jam - grand piano and five guitars - on 'Hey Joe'.

[Navigation](#) - [Specifications](#) - [Ship's Manifest](#) - [Meet The Captain](#) - [Flight Plan](#)
[Joyrides](#) - [Flight Debriefings](#) - [Crew's Quarters](#) - [Curly's Snapshots](#)
[Chart Room](#) - [Passenger List](#) - [Ship's Log](#) - [Purser's Office](#)

[Home](#) | [Top](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)