



Supertramp's logical mystery tour

By Jon Pareles

BOSTON

RICK DAVIES IS A LITTLE miffed. Before he arrived at the Music Hall for tonight's show, Supertramp's thirty-four-year-old cofounder had been browsing through the jazz and blues bins of a local record store. He was just settling in when Supertramp's *Breakfast in America* began to play over the store's PA system. "So I had to leave," he says dourly, without offering an explanation.

Dark, paunchy, with a birdlike nose that makes his face look different from every angle, Davies has an unassuming demeanor. Had he left because he'd been recognized?

"No, nothing like that," he says gruffly. "I simply didn't want to hear the album again."

I don't pursue the question; Davies retires to his ritual preconcert game of darts. In the next dressing room, reedman John



From left: Bob C. Benberg, Roger Hodgson, John A. Helliwell, Rick Davies and Dougie Thomson

Anthony Helliwell, 34, has just been handed next week's chart positions for *Breakfast* and its hit single, "The Logical Song." Addressing a roomful of roadies, band members and wives, the blond, bespectacled Helliwell assumes his mock-formal onstage persona and recites carefully: "England, Number One; Holland, Number One; Israel, Number Two; France, Number One; Australia, Number One..." Conversations resume, people drift out. By the time Helliwell reaches "U.S.A., Number One," his audience has shrunk to a polite handful. Not much change from last week, after all. Helliwell heads for the dart room.

Calm pervades backstage. I join bassist Dougie Thomson, 28, as he strolls upstairs toward the hall. Since the 4200-seat theater is the only venue smaller than an arena on Supertramp's U.S. itinerary, the wiry, bearded Scotsman is eager to explore it. We walk up the center aisle past hundreds of Supertramp fans, and nobody gives Thomson a second glance. "I'd hate to lose [Cont. on 14]

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[Cont. from 9] that freedom," he confides.

WITH MINIMAL media hoopla, Supertramp has quietly become one of the world's most popular bands. Their music — self-dubbed "sophisto-rock" — is a carefully arranged, generally medium-tempo amalgam of ethereal art-rock sonorities; power drumming; whiffs of R&B-ish sax; steady jabs of electric piano ("hammer-hands," Thomson calls it); either Davies' bluesy, nasal vocals or Roger Hodgson's reedy, ingenuous ones; and some of the most tenacious riffs in rock. Davies and Hodgson share all songwriting credits, but whoever sings lead in any given song has the upper hand: Davies promulgates straight love lyrics or hard-bitten cynicism, as in "Just Another Nervous Wreck," while Hodgson writes about dreams and the loss of innocence, as in "The Logical Song."

When their third album, *Crime of the Century*, appeared in 1975, Supertramp was frequently compared to Yes and Genesis; their truer antecedents, however, are Procol Harum, Traffic and the studio-whiz Beatles of *Sgt. Pepper* and *Abbey Road*. Supertramp is, deliberately, a band without a frontman. The group's personality is secondary to the songs, and to production values; the two-hour-plus set features clean audio (concert sound engineer Russel Pope is even credited on albums) and elaborate visuals — films, slides and computer-controlled lights.

"There's always been a slight sense of paranoia," manager Dave Margereson admits. "The sound and lights were there as a slight crutch, although that's less so now. You have to take people's breath away."

As diversionary tactics or as effective ornament, the stage production has done its job. When Supertramp first toured America in 1975, A&M had to paper 2000-seat houses; now, the band sells out arenas. At the same time, California-born drummer Bob C. Benberg, 30, insists, "I value my anonymity," and so far he and the other band members have shied away from self-aggrandizement.

"We don't have an image or anything like that," says Davies, with quiet pride.

Supertramp was more than half a decade in the making. In 1969, Davies was living in Munich and playing drums with bands called the Lonely Ones and the Joint. Club dates and a few film scores barely paid the rent, and Davies

was almost broke when, he says, "Someone came by and told us they knew a wealthy man interested in bands. I thought it was a pipe dream, especially when our 'contact' disappeared for a month. Then one night he came back — with Sam."

"Sam" — Stanley August Miesegaes — turned out to be a young, dapper Dutch millionaire who was eager to sponsor the Joint. After that group broke up in 1969, he decided to back Davies on his own. "I had a sort of feeling that he had lots to give," Sam explains by phone from Paris. "And he was a fantastic drummer. When the Joint were doing their double drum solo in rehearsal one day, suddenly Rick's friend packed it in and cried. He said, 'You're a much better drummer than I am.' But when Rick was a drummer, it wasn't sufficient for him, so I encouraged him to go on the piano." Davies began to learn blues and boogie-woogie — "because they were easy to play," he says — and made his first attempts at singing.

Still under Sam's sponsorship, Davies returned home to London and placed an ad in the music papers announcing a "genuine op-

Manager Dave Margereson: There's always been a slight sense of paranoia. The sound and lights were there as a slight crutch.

portunity" to form a band that was to be called Daddy. One of the answers came from a youngster fresh out of boarding school named Roger Hodgson. "My mother was getting sick of having me at home," says Hodgson, "so she saw this ad in the paper and had me answer it."

"Roger was the catalyst," Sam says. "I was saying to myself, 'At last Rick's found a match.' They were very independent from each other; they came from different worlds. Rick came from the

Supertramp

workers, Roger came from private school. But after they had a bit of time to feel each other out, Rick and Roger found their synthesis."

Hodgson, 29, is Supertramp's flowerchild. Longhaired, clear-eyed, wispy bearded, dressed on- and offstage in sandals, Indian cotton pants and peasant shirts, he seems guileless and unworldly even in the middle of a rock tour. He and Davies are oddly complementary; on Supertramp's albums, Davies' cynicism anchors Hodgson's optimism. "Musically and on a deeper — sensitivity — level, we are very close and we know what each other is thinking," Hodgson observes. "Yet we just don't communicate very well on a verbal level. You know, I took acid and he didn't. And I turned from a naive schoolboy into a naive life cadet."

Paradoxically, Hodgson is also the band's resident "perfectionist." "We're known for that," he shrugs, "but I quite agree with the criticism that we are at times too polished, that there's a human quality that you lose by being too polished. Our very first album is our most naive; it's probably my favorite of all. I just love the innocence."

Neither Hodgson nor Davies was responsible for the band's moniker. Daddy was renamed by original reedman Dave Winthrop, who was a fan of the garrulous *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* by W.H. Davies (no relation to Rick). Supertramp and *Indelibly Stamped*, recorded in 1970 and 1971, were formative LPs; Davies and Hodgson hadn't assembled a cohesive band, and their well-constructed songs ended up in derivative arrangements.

After *Indelibly Stamped*, Sam says he and Supertramp "quit each other." As a parting gift, Sam absolved the group of about \$100,000 in equipment and recording costs. "I'd been wondering when that was going to come down," Davies says now. "When the telegram came saying we wouldn't have to pay it back, it was one of the happiest days of my life."

Meanwhile, he was broke. *Indelibly Stamped* fuzled and the band fell apart; once more, Hodgson and Davies started auditioning musicians, hanging on to the band name.

"I knew one thing," Davies says, "I didn't want to go back to the real world."

THE OLD BAND WAS so tired that I wouldn't have given them a penny if they'd

asked for it," says Derek Green, managing director of A&M Records in England. "A year or so later, they were down to starving level — but there was a gleam in their eyes..."

In that year, 1973, Supertramp established its current five-man lineup; wrote much of the material for *Crime of the Century*, *Crisis? What Crisis?* and *Even in the Quietest Moments*; and — out of nowhere — formulated a highly unusual *modus operandi*. Bassist Dougie Thomson passed an audition, and almost immediately took charge of Supertramp's business affairs. Thomson tapped Helliwell, who played saxes beside Thomson in the British R&B band Alan Bown, and drummer Bob C. Benberg came from the pioneering pub-rock group Bees Make Honey.

"It was hard to be enticed out of that band," Benberg says, "because the Bees were real popular, and Supertramp wasn't doing very well at all. But they had this philosophy: they weren't going to slog around and try to build it up from the club syndrome. If it didn't happen on the level they wanted, then they wouldn't do it. I thought that was an excellent attitude."

A&M's Green: They wanted to create the state of Supertramp — their own laws, customs, morals. It's the hippie concept gone crazy.

A&M set the band up in a seventeenth-century Somerset farmhouse called Southcombe. It had roses around the doorway, a fireplace, adequate rehearsal space, a few rumored ghosts and no distractions. "It was the cheapest way of preparing an album," admits manager Margereson, who was then working for British A&M. "The rent was only forty dollars a week, which is also what the band members were getting as salaries. But there was a certain sense of magic there."