

## THIS IS RIC PARNELL:

### Spinal Tap drummer makes a life for himself in the Garden City



"Well ... like, personally, I like to think about sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll, you know, that's my life."

*Mick Shrimpton, "Spinal Tap" drummer, played by Ric Parnell*

You might think that a middle-aged man who's gone through "3 1/2" marriages, a one-time rock-star drummer who turned down Journey's Steve Perry, a man whose string of bad luck could be chalked up to an Irish curse, a self-admitted former crack user who now scratches out a living in Missoula and pedals around on an old bike, would be filled with regret.

But Ric Parnell is anything but - or so he says.

"I've enjoyed it," says Parnell, over numerous beers at a pub he frequents. "I'm still enjoying it. I believe life is here for the living. And to be good."

The London-born Parnell, who carries a green card and who's made Missoula his permanent home, insists on this point: He's happy. It's been a kooky life, but he's happy. And Missoula, the town he adopted when he rolled into town three years ago, is the greatest little city he knows.

"I love the hippie-redneck dynamic," he says. "I can sit there with some guy who thinks George W. Bush is actually a good president, and not get punched in the mouth."

It's not like Parnell has a big mouth - mostly it's used for laughing, smoking and telling jokes - but he sure has a big audience. Those who listen to the Trail 103.3 FM recognize him as the co-host of "Spontaneous Combustion," an 8 p.m.-midnight radio show on Sundays in which he spins any old music he wants. And he's also a regular fill-in on the afternoon shift. Listen for the British accent that comes from a gravelly baritone.

Yet it's not all been good in Parnell's life, which he readily admits. And why this amiable bloke, who lives the most meager of existences, is in Missoula, Montana, thousands of miles from his U.K. home and a world away from the glory he's known, is a story filled with lost fame, lost fortune, house fires and free-spiritedness.

But Parnell, 56, is doing well - or so he says as the beer continues to slide down his throat.

"It's just the way things worked out," he says, when asked to sum up his life. "I'm just kind of like that."

Ric Parnell, to those who don't know, he's a fellow Missoulian, was the exploding drummer in the 1984 cult classic mockumentary "This is Spinal Tap," the Rob Reiner film that followed the travails of a has-been British progressive metal band and created a whole new genre in Hollywood. He also appeared in "The Return of Spinal Tap," and recorded two CDs with the band.

Yet while Parnell talks about that bit of fame - he still gets royalty checks in the mail on occasion - he doesn't dwell on it. Instead, he takes a quick detour in the conversation.

"I was a 'Simpsons' character!"

Parnell talks about that with a great deal of excitement, more than his fame with "Spinal Tap," more than his tours with pop singer Engelbert Humperdink, more than his studio sessions with Jeff Beck or Cher or Bette Midler.

"The Simpsons" is his favorite show, and what a honor it was to be part of its history. He was once again, in that 1991 episode, the voice and likeness of Mick Shrimpton, the "Spinal Tap" drummer he immortalized when he blew the hell up.

"The other day my girlfriend and I were watching TV, and it came on," he says excitedly. "Just out of the blue. I pointed and said, 'That's me!' "

It was fame, and Parnell has known plenty of it. But if he let that fame slip through his fingers, you get no sense of bitterness or regret, other than this statement:

"I turned down Journey, and that was the biggest mistake of my life - professional mistake."

At the time, around 1987, Parnell was living in Los Angeles and playing in a studio band - ironically enough, titled Zoo Drive - that was recording tracks for some pretty hefty names, including Midler, Beck and others. Parnell was no stranger to studio work. He laid down the drums to Toni Basil's "Mickey," providing the cheerleader-dancer a No. 1 hit in the early 1980s.

Zoo Drive figured they were about to hit it big, and even had the backing of the heirs to the Progresso Soup fortune, who funded the band to the tune of \$100,000.

Through an acquaintance, he received a call from Journey's lead singer Steve Perry, who was looking for a drummer after Steve Smith left the band.

"I told Steve, 'Can I think about this for a moment?' " says Parnell, wincing a bit while telling the tale. "I paced up and down on the roof of my apartment on Venice Beach. Then I called him back and said, 'Steve, I can't do this to my friends. My own band, we're on the verge of superstardom.' "

What happened next is telling of Parnell's fortunes - or rather, the lack of them.

"The band went to hell," he says. One member went into a diabetic coma. The rest fell apart. Parnell's acquaintance, the one who set up the Perry interview, called him and told him what the tour with Journey would have been worth.

"He told me it would have meant a half-million dollars," he says, turning his hand into a pistol and sticking the barrel in his mouth.

Born in 1951 in London, Ric Parnell was blessed from the beginning.

The son of Jack Parnell, England's most famous jazz band leader, little Ric was a rhythmic prodigy the second he picked up sticks.

"I got it from my dad," he says. "I could sit down at the drum kit and play a beat straight away. I had a band where I was the singer, before playing the drums, and the drummer was a young jazz guy. I'd have to show him rhythm and blues grooves."

He had one lesson with his dad - one that didn't go well. Young Ric, it seemed, just wanted to do things his own way.

"I practice by playing with people," he says. "Over the years, I've built up a technique. I get drummers saying, 'How did you do that?' I say, 'I have no idea. I'm just hitting.' I wouldn't know a paradiddle from a flam-doodle-head."

By 16, Parnell was on tour with Engelbert Humperdink. In 1970, he joined the prog-rock band Atomic Rooster. Both gigs ended with him getting fired, though he did reunite with Atomic Rooster for an LP.

Later, he would join the Italian prog-rock band Ibis. And in 1977, Parnell moved to the U.S. with the band Nova ("Chicago without horns," he describes them), which had an Arista Records contract. The band settled in Boulder, Colo., and later moved to L.A. to do an album.

It was in L.A. that Parnell began studio work, and later formed the studio band Zoo Drive. And it was also then, in 1980, that he auditioned to be Mick Shrimpton of "Spinal Tap."

Through a friend's "personal manager who had been married to this wardrobe lady who was working with Rob Reiner," Parnell showed up to the audition.

"The first question they asked was, 'What do you think about a movie that's going to tear your career apart?' " says Parnell. "I said, 'You should have made this movie about 10 years ago.' "

"They then asked me what other bands I'd been in, and I said, 'Well, I was in a band called Atomic Rooster,' " he continues. "They looked at each other and said, 'Yep, that's it, you're our man.' "

"Spinal Tap" was a huge cult hit, so big it led to two actual recordings, a sequel and a reunion tour. In the meantime, however, Parnell's life went south.

"Three weeks after filming ("Spinal Tap"), my house burned down, they invented the drum machine, and everything just went to hell," he says.

Asked how his house burned down, Parnell pauses.

"It just burned down."

It wasn't the loss of his possessions that hurt him most, though. Sifting through the burned home, he found his two dogs, dead, lying underneath the bed as if poised to escape the smoke and flames.

"I dropped to my knees and cried."

### **The road to Missoula began in California**

His career killed by the drum machine, his house torched, his prospects in L.A. waning, Parnell moved back to England in 1990.

He moved back to the states in the early '90s - mostly due to the "Spinal Tap" reunion tour and movie - and moved to Long Beach. Working with a lot of bands, he eventually hooked up with Joe Houston, an old blues player who took him on a tour of the West, including Missoula.

Four times Joe Houston played in Missoula, Parnell as the drummer.

"I'd really fallen for Missoula at this point," says Parnell.

Joe Brown, sound engineer at the Top Hat, remembers when he first met Parnell when he and the Defrosterz (Houston's band) rolled into Missoula.

"I was running sound for him," says Brown. "I remember he was a really smackin'-ass drummer, and I was very impressed with his playing."

Due to a screw-up at the Canadian border on the last tour (it involved paperwork, nothing illegal), Parnell found himself back in Missoula, eager to live in the place that he'd grown to love.

By then, he'd made friends with Missoulians, and found one who was willing to put him up and let him start a new life outside the rat-hole of L.A., and far from the wives and lives he'd had in other parts of the world.

Since essentially being dumped off here three years ago, Parnell has injected himself into the Missoula scene by drumming with anyone, anywhere he can find a gig. He's played with Hog Wild, the Grand Poobahs, Eden Atwood, Ship of Fools, the Hermans and currently plays with the R&B band Zeppo Montana.

And, of course, he sits in with any band that will have him. "Oh, loads and loads of those," he notes. "Basically, anybody who wants to pay me to hit things, I'll play with them."

I've played with Parnell on many occasions over the three years I've known him (and let this serve as full disclosure), but it was my first run-in with him that I remember most.

It was three years ago at Liberty Lanes, where he was gigging with the blues band Hog Wild. I was frankly freaked out by the man's drumming, his intricate work on the set, his uncanny rhythms that seemed destined for a train wreck until the cymbal crashed squarely on the downbeat.

"I hit things for a living," is how Parnell puts it.

He hits them well.

Ric Parnell says he will die here. He'd adopted this town as his own, because it's sort of hippie-ish, sort of redneck. When you talk to him, you realize that there's a bit of both in this old soul.

"I'm not leaving here," he says. "Ever."

Missoula has adopted him. He's landed a gig on the Trail 103.3 FM as a radio host, a job he says "saved me" and renewed his sense of purpose.

"I can't thank the Trail enough for the opportunity they've given me," he says.

In between the radio show and gigs, Parnell golfs - mostly at his beloved Highlands golf course, to which he pedals his bicycle - and can be seen, well, in a bar near you, whether at the counter or on the stage.

Golf and beer occupy a big portion of his life. That, and the opportunity once again to be a celebrity, if only on a minor scale.

"I'm happy to be a small-town celebrity," he says. "I don't want anyone to know where I am."

Even his musical ties are mostly severed, as are his Hollywood ones. The only thing he wants is a place to call home, and he's found it here. To the end.

"Scatter my ashes on Highlands," he says. "Let me be a little bit of the mulch."

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