

They took the blues and turned it into something new, raw and vital, in the process becoming one of the greatest British rock bands of all time and a genuine rival to Zeppelin and the Stones. *Mick Wall* talks to surviving members, frontman **Paul Rodgers** and drummer **Simon Kirke**, about the legend that is **Free**...

FREE SPIRIT

THERE THEY STOOD in the street. Smiling from their heads to their feet.

The occasion? The arrival into the UK Top 10, in June 1970, of Free's first big hit, 'All Right Now'. The band's drummer Simon Kirke says he knew they'd hit the big time when their record company, Island, "sent a car to take us to *Top Of The Pops*", then the nation's biggest TV pop show.

Only kept from the number one spot that summer by Mungo Jerry's asinine 'In The Summertime' - "God, I hated Mungo Jerry!" laughs Kirke - Free's now iconic anthem also propelled the band into the US *Billboard* charts for the first time, where it reached number four.

Overnight, Free went from being everybody's close-but-no-cigar second favourites to rivalling Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones as the biggest British band in the world.

Being Free though - "I wouldn't say we were *arrogant*,"

says singer Paul Rodgers, "but we certainly knew our worth" - the band took their time staring deep down the throat of this gift horse. After he'd finished "jumping up and down in the street," Kirke recalls a tortuous debate with the rest of the band - Rodgers, bassist Andy Fraser and guitarist Paul Kossoff - about whether they should actually agree to do *Top Of The Pops*.

"We saw it as a kids' show," Fraser once explained to me. "We thought going on there miming would be a little difficult to pull off."

In the end the band only agreed to do it after the show's producers allowed Rodgers to at least perform his vocals live. "We'd built up a lot of credibility," Rodgers tells me, speaking from his home in Palm Springs in the States. "I just wanted to make sure we didn't blow it all away."

"When 'All Right Now' hit, people went crazy," recalls Kirke when we talk for this piece. "But we

Free captured live in Newcastle, January 1972

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