



QUITTE A FLIGHT



A true end of an era: having ceased appearing live with **Nazareth** in 2013, the release of their new album *Rock'N'Roll Telephone* completes singer **Dan McCafferty's** (mere) 45 years with the Scottish rockers. Ian Abrahams hears the reminiscences of a genuine big beast of British rock



If it seems like Nazareth have been part of the fabric of British rock music forever, perhaps it's because it's true. Roaring out of Dunfermline at the end of the 60s as a four-piece fronted by the paint-stripping-at-500-yards voice of Dan McCafferty, alongside guitarist Manny Charlton, drummer Darrell Sweet and their now sole-continuing founder, bassist Pete Agnew, they moved to London at the start of the 70s and cut their eponymous debut LP for B&C off-shoot label Pegasus in '71.

Never fashionable, they've survived by eschewing trends in favour of staying true to their brand of bluesy heavy rock, though their catalogue boasts a more varied body of work than the casual listener might anticipate.

A flurry of albums through the 70s slowed in the 80s and though they've continued as a live act, the sudden death of Darrell Sweet during a tour in 1999 put them on hold as a recording band for 10 years. Though they've not been known for multiple line-up changes, members over the years have included Billy Rankin, and The Sensational Alex Harvey Band's none-more-colourful guitarist, Zal Cleminson.

McCafferty stood down in 2013, having been dogged by ill-health in recent years, particularly the chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) that has affected his lungs and prevented him from continuing as a live performer. The much-loved singer makes his swansong with Nazareth on their 23rd studio album, *Rock 'N' Roll Telephone*.

This must be a poignant time for you, Dan?

It's a very strange time. COPD does get worse over the years. I was fine with it for a long time, I was touring and it was OK, but there came a time when I felt I was holding the band back, maybe ripping people off a wee bit because they were paying money to come and see us and I couldn't manage to do the gig. "No, it's time to hit this on the head." You've got to be honest with yourself. I knew I'd have to pack it up at some point, it wasn't a big worry, I didn't fancy mega farewell tours [laughs]. It was a bit unlucky, but there are always bumps in the road, eh?

The new album does a good job of considering that, with talk of hanging in there on *The Right Time*; *Long Long Time* reflecting on a long relationship; and *Back 2B4* looking ahead.

Jimmy [Murrison] and Lee [Agnew] write the songs these days and they were aware of what was going on. I don't know if that influenced the writing, but it felt like it. I think it was done as a way of saying, "We're not going to tell you... you'll figure it out, but we're not going to dwell on it," know what I mean? Maybe it was the boys trying to say goodbye nicely. But the songs turned out great and that's the main thing.

What originally got you excited about making and recording music?

We were all Radio Luxembourg fans, which is where I first heard Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis, and all of that. I thought, "I'm not going to tell anyone about this... this stuff is great."

I didn't want everybody to know! How little did I know! It was my generation's music. There was a lot of music in my house: jazz, blues, Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, the stuff my parents listened to. But this was mine, especially as my dad didn't like it. Pete and I, and Darrell, got into playing in bands, and when Manny joined, we changed the name to Nazareth.

Before Nazareth you'd been a covers band, *The Shadettes*...

We could play blues, and we did a lot of soul music, a lot of Sam & Dave stuff, and Bob & Earl. The pop scene was dreadful at the time, Cliff Richard and all that. God bless him! That wasn't my scene at all; our stuff was far more exciting: US rock 'n' roll and soul. We heard bands like Spooky Tooth and thought, "These bands are really cool," so we started writing and it became really interesting.

Did you record anything as *The Shadettes*?

We never did. Well, a few demos for ourselves on the old four-track reel-to-reel jobbies that always broke down!

How did your distinctive voice develop?

I think it was when we started writing that it began to come to the fore. It evolved. You might be born with it, but until you use it, until you're writing and experimenting, you don't really train your voice. You don't sit there going "I'm training my voice" though, you do it naturally.

At the end of the 60s you were guys who were married, had jobs, but you took the chance and moved to London.

We became Nazareth in '68... and I got married in '69. I was an engineer, Pete worked in an architect's office, Darrell was an accountant, and Manny was a radar specialist in the dockyards for the Navy. We all had decent jobs, but we played at the weekend. We were serious about it. We had our own songs, covered some as well of course, and we thought we'd give it a couple of years and if something happened, then it happened. And if it didn't, it didn't. We toured continuously. Any place that had a pub, we played it three times I'm sure!

You had a lot of support from Billy Fehilly, sometimes that's presented as a straight-forward management arrangement, but he was more a patron in some ways?

Yes, he was. Without Bill, we would probably not have gone to London. He encouraged us to go. Bill wanted to start a management company and he thought he'd establish it with our band, so he signed us and we made a record, and the next band he signed was the Alex Harvey Band. Unfortunately, just as everything was starting to go for him, getting respect because of the artistes he was signing, he was killed in a plane crash. He was a charismatic guy, but when it came to business he was very serious, he told us the facts and figures and how much he would put in until we had success, and then we'd have to pay it back, and it was all done properly. So we worked like hell... and the third album, which was often the case back then, was the one that did it for us.

Before you got to that third album, *Razamanaz*, you had two LPs which seemed to be searching for what Nazareth was going to become with orchestrated tracks, blues numbers, heavy rockers, pieces with a Celtic influence...

That's right, because our tastes were so wide. We liked everything from soul to folk. When we made the first album, it was so exciting because we'd never been in a studio in our lives. It did pretty well, *Morning Dew* was

a huge underground hit in Germany and that opened some doors for us. Then we did *Exercises*, which was a bit vague... well, it was a bit ethnic really, a bit Scottish, a bit electric folk. Back then you'd make albums in about five days.

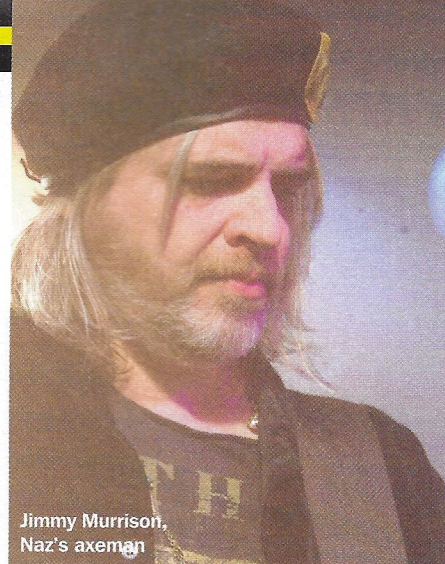
Which would have been good experience, because get to the mid-70s and you released three albums in 15 months, by which time the Nazareth sound had evolved into what we think of today.

There was no hanging about! Not that I'm complaining, that was what I wanted to do! By the end of the 70s things peaked and record companies didn't want that amount of product any more, so you were allowed to slow down. By the time that we did *Razamanaz*, we'd discovered what we wanted to do. But that's exactly what it did – it evolved. We'd kept demos and were going, "Well, we're much better at this than we are at that." We were thick-skinned. If someone said, "I've written this song," we were happy to say, "I don't like it, man." When we started writing *Razamanaz* everybody liked the stuff and got behind it: "This is what we are supposed to be doing." It had a thread running through it.

“None of us were pretty boys”

***Razamanaz* was produced by Roger Glover from Deep Purple. What did he bring to the party?**

Quite a lot. We were supporting Deep Purple, because we had a really good reputation as a live band and were starting to get write-ups. We were playing a lot of the stuff for *Razamanaz*, though we hadn't recorded it yet. Things such as *Night Woman* and the title song, and Roger heard it. "What's that stuff... have you got a producer?" We did it in Scotland, in a big warehouse on the great Pye Mobile with 16 tracks, though we could only ever get 14. There were always two broken! But that took off across Europe, and opened



Jimmy Morrison, Naz's axeman

doors in America where college stations picked up on it.

You were writing your material, but had major successes with distinctive covers, songs that you made your own.

We were always up for covering a song that we all loved, but we had to make it so that it sounded like we could have written it. I thought we'd get slagged for it, but actually it got us a lot of respect, for trying to make a song our own.

From Joni Mitchell for *This Flight Tonight*, for example...

We met her once; she made us a cup of tea, which was really Canadian of her! We were in America, at A&M doing that "come and meet the artiste" thing, and Joni was recording *Court And Spark*. She was with her producer, and the A&M people said, "The boys have recorded *This Flight Tonight*," and she was [incredulous], "What, with a rock band?" But she played it and she thought it was great. "How did you think of doing it like that?" When she was in London, she introduced it as a Nazareth song, and we thought, "Aww, we always loved you... But we *really* love you now!"

There's a little section towards the end of *This Flight Tonight* that almost sounds glam-rock, but you steered away from that?

We were very aware of trying not to get an image, because we were surrounded by guys who we'd played with such a strong one – like Slade, who we'd done shows with – and I always thought that was a dangerous thing. None of us were pretty boys. We didn't have any stars in the band, put it that way!

Though you did *Top Of The Pops*, you were practically *The Old Grey Whistle Test*'s house band at times!

OGWT was much more fun to do. Mike Appleton was the producer and we did a billion things for him, *In Concert* and *OGWT*. This was a guy with a budget of about thruppence. It was all on a shoestring. We used to go up to Maida Vale studios in north London to record and they had stuff that looked very Dan Dare, with big levers, all battleship grey colours. How they managed to



Jimmy, Pete, Dan & Lee: Nazareth 2013

get it all to work was incredible. It seemed as if every time somebody cancelled it was, "Can you guys get down here?"

Singles success for Nazareth was patchy. You'd hit with *This Flight Tonight*, but then *Shanghai'd In Shanghai* wouldn't trouble the Top 40.

Broken Down Angel was the first [charting] one, and that was kind of a country rock song, and then we did *Bad, Bad Boy* which was full-on rock'n'roll and then *This Flight Tonight*. We were [musically] all over the place and that's why people had difficulties categorising our sound.

Love Hurts was your most successful cover, but it nearly didn't happen?

When Pete and I were in The Shadettes we used to do a lot of Everly Brothers stuff [laughs] because it was popular with the girls. I mean, I was 17... We used to do *Love Hurts*. What made us think of it again? We listened to a version by Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons and, of course, they did it differently to the Everly Brothers. We decided to do it, and in those days the label would want two sides of 17 minutes and three or four tracks for B-sides. Pete and I went to a wedding in Scotland and when we got back Darrell and Manny had done the guitars and drums for the backing track, but they'd done it in the same key as Emmylou. I managed to sing it, and thank God I did! Jerry Moss, for A&M [he was the "M"] said, "Great album boys, but what are the B-sides?" When he

heard *Love Hurts*... "No, no, no, I want that on the album." It could have been the one that got away, but it was a big hit in America and then here.

Which of the covers would you most like to have written yourself?

Love Hurts, because it was the most successful, but I'd have been quite proud to have written [Tomorrow's] *My White Bicycle* as well, and *This Flight Tonight*. We thought they were great songs that hadn't had a proper break. We thought we could make them ours; we believed in them.

Was that the thinking with your choices on your first solo album, *Dan McCafferty*, from 1975?

They were ones I just fancied doing, songs that I really liked. It has a lot of the Alex Harvey band on it, Roger Glover played bass on it, Manny produced with John Punter, who we'd worked with a lot, and there was such a quick turnaround because everybody knew the songs.

You didn't cut another solo LP until *Into The Ring* in 1987.

I didn't have time! We used to do 250 gigs a year. But that one came from an opportunity to do one song! A German guy got the album out; he wanted me to do a song for the soundtrack of a film, but then they wanted an English version of the soundtrack album, and asked if I'd any songs, so that we could make an album rather than just do the soundtrack. So I did one side, which is the soundtrack from

the movie, and the other was songs that Pete and I had written, one that Manny had written, stuff that couldn't be used for Naz.

You talked about not cultivating an image, but you defined a visual image by using a Frank Frazetta painting, then famous for his Conan paperback covers, on the sleeve for *Expect No Mercy*. You were one of the first bands to use his work, before moving on to similar sword-and-sorcery artwork from Rodney Matthews.

We got Frank's phone number and rang him up. His wife answered and we explained we were a band called Nazareth and we wanted to use *The Brain*, which is what the picture is called, on an album, and could we speak to him. "Oh, Frank doesn't like phones." But he said, "Yeah, that'd be great, thanks very much!" and that was it. Our label had to contact Frank's lawyer and pay him, but it was that simple.

Was there a time in the 80s when you tried too hard to be relevant to the scene of the day? *Party Down* on *The Catch*, for instance?

Aye, there was a bit of that going on. Manny, at that time, I'm not saying he was always like that, but at that time, he was often the one for saying, "we need to get something like this..." Nothing was happening for rock'n'roll in the 80s, it was definitely on the back burner. And, of course, you have to remember how music was becoming increasingly visual and we were too ugly for MTV! We made a few mistakes; *Party Down*

From left, Pete Agnew, Dan McCafferty, Lee Agnew, Jimmy Murrison



I don't think is a bad track, but it isn't Nazareth. It was a bad time for rock'n'roll. People would still come and see you, but they didn't necessarily want to buy your records. Then the 90s came along with Guns N'Roses, and they liked us, and it all goes round again.

How do you feel the catalogue has been treated over the years and which are the landmark albums for you?

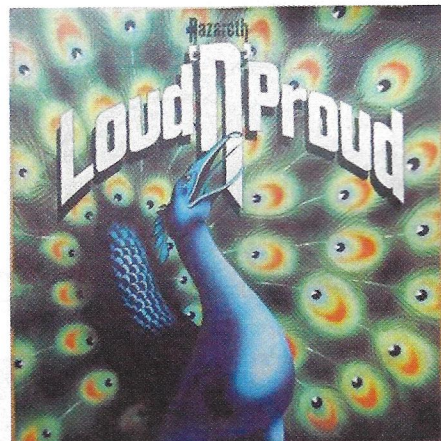
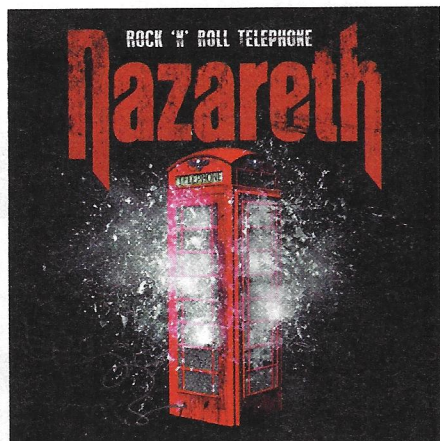
I'm quite happy with how the companies have handled our catalogue; most did it pretty well. If they're going to take over the canon, they tend to work it and I can't complain about how it has been handled, I really can't. There are steps in the Nazareth career. The first album was a baby step, learning how to work in the studio, and

fortunately the engineer was Roy Thomas Baker, a young kid who was hot to trot and telling us about this band he'd found – Queen. He taught us a lot. *Razamanaz* was the next step, because that defined Nazareth. Then *Hair Of The Dog*, because of the US connection, our first really big success over there. They're all good records, man. The one we did with Jeff Baxter, *Malice In Wonderland*, was great. When we got back to recording again [2008's *The Newz*], rock bands our age didn't make new stuff; there was supposed to be no point. It's said people just like the old stuff, but if you don't give them a choice... We said to hell with it and did that one in Switzerland with Yann Rouiller and it was well-received. We were taking a wee chance, taking a punt, which was great. I'm just so

proud of them, they tell the story of the band really well.

What will you do next? Is there an archive of unreleased material to sift through that may see the light of day?

We don't do things like that. If a song doesn't make it onto a record, it seldom raises its head again. We're kind of like, there's only crap, and great. I'd like to make another solo album. I really wanted Naz to carry on. There's been personnel changes before, and I know it's different when it's the singer, the voice of a band... I'm not saying that in a big-headed way – it's a fact. But it can be done. AC/DC with Brian, for a start! It was up to the boys, but once I'd said my piece and left, it was up to them to get someone else. I'm glad that they have. **RG**



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