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A Conversation with Nazareth's Dan McCafferty

Mike Ragogna: Dan, let's talk about all things Nazareth and *Rock 'N' Roll Telephone*, your twenty-fourth album, right? That's a great achievement. How did you get here?

Dan McCafferty: I think we're just a band that grew up and started to write our own songs and stuff. Coming from Scotland at that time, there were really only four or five big gigs that people used to come and visit. It's not like that now, of course. We started like any other band, doing Chuck Berry covers and Little Richard covers and on through the early eighties and then you start to write your own stuff. We played every place, eventually got signed and made records. It was a gradual buildup, but we always worked. Up until I got sick, we were doing two hundred, two sixty gigs a year. It was that work ethic thing, "It's got to be a proper job." Plus, you enjoy it so much! It just kind of flew by, Mike, I hope to tell you, but it was very interesting along the way.

MR: Dan, how did you guys develop your sound?

DM: I guess just paying attention to what was going on and what we really liked. I found out at a very early age that I preferred people like Little Richard to Cliff Richard, that kind of thing. Pop music was okay, it was better than listening to your dad's music, but it didn't have enough balls. As the years go on you develop, and when I discovered American music, Little Richard and Chuck Berry and then later in life people like Bob Seger and all the Detroit bands, it was just like, "Whoa, what's going on here?" Because at home, we had The Shadows and people like Billy Fury who were all kind of pseudo-American imitations of Elvis and stuff, where you guys were producing stuff that was frightening to us at the time and we wanted to go there. It was like, "Whoa, this is very cool." Except it was very "good" at that time, there wasn't such a word as "cool." "Oh, this is exciting." It was just a fair bit of stuff coming out of there and we got involved. I guess you just get influenced all the way along. My father was a great jazz and blues fan, so once I heard stuff like Chuck Berry I thought, "Yeah, man, my dad's got that stuff." It wasn't Chuck Berry, but the stuff before that had the same kind of vibe and I'm going, "Hold on a minute!" It was a very interesting journey to get to who you want to be. Eventually, we played all sorts of gigs as cover bands and we covered The Beatles and The Stones and everybody else that as running around at the time just to get some work and pay for the equipment, and then we started to write our own stuff, and people actually liked it! It wasn't like a plan, it wasn't like, "We're going to be rock stars, we're shooting for this." I guess it was like going through school, you know?

MR: Dan, all the songs on this album are originals. How did you guys put this album together? Was it any different from the others?

DM: That was pretty much the same. The last three albums Pete and I have written some of the stuff but mainly it's been Lee and Jimmy, and that's been working for us, so if it's not broke don't fix it. There was just so much material for this album, and we ended up with thirteen tracks which we thought were the best tracks and again, it's just a natural thing, "Do youse all like this?" "yes," and if you don't like something it's just so much easier to get it together. That's how this album went, we made it in six weeks. It was incredible.

MR: When you look back at your career, you've had international hits, but who would've guessed one of your biggest hits would be a cover of Joni Mitchell's "This Flight Tonight"?

DM: Right! Back in the day, when we were touring everybody used to have cassette players and you'd play cassettes on the bus as opposed to CDs. You'd make up your favorite tracks at the time of other people's music and we found out that Joni's "This Flight Tonight" used to come on all the time on everybody's tracks. We thought, "We all like this, why don't we try and do something with it?" Obviously, Joni's version is so personal for Joni, it's such a love affair she was talking about, because she's that kind of writer, but for us it was like travel music, "This flight tonight, again?" We wanted to make a rock song out of it. It had the same sentiment, you're leaving people you love, maybe you're making a mistake taking this flight, whatever, but you're always gambling. It was a natural choice. The nice part of it was when the single was released in Britain we were actually in the States starting a tour and Joni was recording Court And Spark at A&M studios, so we went and said, "Hello, we've recorded one of your songs," and she's going, "A rock band?" But we played it and she loved it. It was great. About a year later I'd been all over the world except America, and she was playing in London and she said, "Now I'm going to do a big Nazareth song" and she played "This Flight Tonight" which we thought was rather nice of her.

MR: You also rocked up "Love Hurts."

DM: Yeah, believe it or not I think officially it's the first rock ballad. Somebody told me that, I don't know. But yeah, it was just a song that we had done as kids playing in bars and stuff and we liked it because Pete and I could both sing it. We did a lot of Everly Brothers stuff because they were popular at the time, and always will be with me. When you were making albums in those days you had to record a few extra tracks of B-sides for vinyl and stuff, so we did "Love Hurts." Jerry Moss came over to hear the record and he said, "No, no, no, I want that one on the album." So thank god for Jerry Moss, because we put "Guilty" on the European one.

MR: It shows how awesome A&M was, Jerry Moss deciding to break that record.

DM: Yeah! When Jerry signed us, they only had one other rock band at the time because it was all The Captain & Tennille and Joan Armatrading and that kind of thing. I think they were trying to get into the rock business, so he decided to sign Nazareth. I could see Jerry's thinking: "Well this will get on--" at the time--"AM radio."

MR: You must have been ecstatic when Guns 'N' Roses covered your "Hair Of The Dog."

DM: Oh yeah, sure! It was brilliant, it was great. We met the guys a hundred years ago, we played some shows in California and the boys were fans so they came along. They're great lads, they're really good boys. They've had a few problems but they're great. I'm sorry they've split up actually. In fact we were recording Big Dogz and Axl was playing in Prague, so we went to see him. Kid's great. He hasn't got a watch and he doesn't know what time it is, but he's a real performer. "The show starts at eight, Axl. Eight. Not twelve." [laughs] He's a nice guy.

MR: Speaking of "Hair Of The Dog," that became an American classic. I think it got renamed "Son Of A Bitch" over here.

DM: The thing is initially we wanted to call the album *Son Of A Bitch* and A&M said, "Oh, you can't call it that," and we said, "Why not?" and they said, "Well, Sears won't sell it." We said, "Who are Sears?" We're from Scotland, we had no idea who Sears & Roebuck were. So we called it *Hair Of The Dog* which in a way is "ear of the dog," which is "son of a bitch." It was just twisted humor, I suppose. We couldn't understand this false morality in America. "You can't sing 'Son of a bitch' on the radio," but John Wayne, who is the nearest thing to a pope America's got, surely, says it on the movies.

MR: Selective censoring.

DM: [laughs] Whatever. It doesn't matter because music will find a way to do it anyway I always feel. If it's good and people like it they'll play it anyway. They'll play in the jukebox or they'll go out and buy it.

MR: What are a couple of your favorite tracks on the album?

DM: I really like "Boom Bang Bang." Actually, the opening track, because it's kind of a rude and dusty old man, which I kind of like. I like "Rock 'N' Roll Telephone," of course, and I love "Speakeasy." I like this album, I really do, because it'll possibly be my last album with Nazareth anyway, because I have COPD and I can't tune anymore.

MR: I'm sorry, Dan.

DM: It's a hellish thing, but hey, you've got to get something, I suppose. I'd love to complain and bitch and whine but who the hell is going to listen? But I'm really so proud of this album. I really am.

MR: Dan, what's your advice for new artists?

DM: This is going to sound really old, but do what you like. If you don't you'll get talked into something by people telling you what you should do and you'll end up not liking yourself very much and being pissed off by what you do. So enjoy what you do, and if it's good and people like it, great. If it's not good and people don't like it, you're enjoying it. It's like saying to a painter or a guy that's a good car mechanic; do something you like. Don't be trendy, don't really listen to establishment votes. And get a lawyer. Definitely get a lawyer. Definitely. And get a lawyer to watch the lawyer.

MR: Now that you're going to be taking it easy from Nazareth, what are you going to be working on?

DM: Well I can sing two or three or four songs in a row without having to have a break, so I'm going to do a thing in January, "Rock Meets Classic" it's called. I've done it before, it's really good fun. And there's a guy I know who's writing an opera and he wants me to sing on a song in it. But I can record anything! I can record for anybody. I'm looking for a job here, if anybody needs a singer to make a record I'm your man. Apart from that I don't even know, I'm just waiting to see if anything comes along.

MR: Can you believe you sold thirty million albums worldwide?

DM: No, I can't. It's like a telephone number to me. I've got two managers to should be in jail. It's the rock 'n' roll story. If you've not been ripped off twice you're not a proper rock 'n' roll band.

MR: I love that the name Nazareth was inspired by a song by The Band of all things.

DM: That's true! That's actually true. When The Band came out for us we were just getting our start, we were looking for a name and all that. Big Pink was such a good album. We'd heard Ronny Hawkins and the Hawks and all that, but this was a whole different side of the coin. And we heard them backing up Bob Dylan who'd went electric. We came to think we knew what the guys were about but we didn't at all. It was just a stunning album.

MR: What a classic. "I pulled into Nazareth..."

DM: It works for me!

MR: Are you going to be on the road with the guys at all, supporting this album?

DM: No, I don't think so. They have a new singer, a guy called Linton Osborne who's very good. I'm really glad, because I would've felt kind of bad if the band stopped because I'd left. I'd feel bad, some kind of Catholic guilt or something.

MR: [laughs] Do you feel guilty that so many Doctor Who fans are going to be very upset with the cover photo of an exploding telephone booth?

DM: Well, you know, no. Not at all. You know The Doctor will come back as another person...

Transcribed by Galen Hawthorne