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Grant Hart

'A Real Musical Survivor' – Grant hart talks us through his life in music, from Husker Du to Nova Mob to solo...



Grant Harts' musical career may have brought him more praise as an innovator and influence to many than it has large-scale commercial success, but many artists whose efforts have swelled their bank accounts far more would trade places with him in a second. Now having a quieter time than a more than eventful personal and professional history might suggest possible, the ex-Husker Du / Nova Mob legend has just released his latest solo effort, "Hot Wax", and hot it very much is. And when you get the chance to have a few words with a man of such artistic stature, you don't refuse – and nor did Subba....

Hi Grant. What has been going on with you recently?

Grant Hart (Vocals, guitar, drums): I've been doing a little bit of touring in support of the new record, "Hot Wax". I took care of the western half of the US – the long mileage half – and I'm leaving Friday to do the eastern half. Then I'll be setting stuff up in other territories such as Australia and Eastern Europe, and getting a grasp on what we want to do for Europe.

Will we see you in the UK as part of that?

Yeah, we're picking through a few promoters at the moment, people I've worked with in the past, who are taking care of that. Don't have any dates for you right now though.

So the new album "Hot Wax" has just come out – how were the writing and recording processes this time round?

It was an actual pleasure to write and record – about half and half Montreal and Minneapolis. Going back and forth to Montreal became a bit dodgy but we did what we could there and then transferred operations to Minneapolis and completed the record here.

So you're still happily resident in Minneapolis then?

Oh yeah, it's my home.

Are there any running themes to this record at all?

I noticed that there's a lot going on having to do with the theme of optics, whether transparency or reflectivity, but there's a lot of light on the record. And there are a couple more biographical songs, which is not something I've done a lot of in the past. Aside from that, the same set of inspirations as ever.

It's been a while since Nova Mob dissolved – do you have any plans to record as part of a band again?

When the offers are – I hate to make it dependent on this, but when the offers are such that it can be an economic reality. I pretty much support myself with music and not the other way round. There's people who need bands more than I do – what I'm bringing people is my songs and my voice. There are times when I'll work up a thing or two with the support group, but there are too many people willing to play for free.

Economics are unfortunately a fact of life for us all – I wish you luck if you decide to go down that route in future but we're enjoying your solo stuff for now. Well, thanks very much.

It would be fair to say that, creatively speaking, the Eighties was a turbulent decade for you – are you glad to be away from that or has the passage of time made it easier to see the good things that were going on then? Away from the Eighties?

Away from maybe some of the things that were happening in your life, like the drug addiction and the difficulties in your creative relationships in Husker Du? You know what? It tends to have had more of an effect on me in regards to the reportage of it rather than the actual animal itself. I don't know, there were three members of that band, three drug addicts in that band, and I received far more than my share of attention in that respect.

It's generally on record that the relationship between you and Bob Mould was pretty difficult at that time...

Well what people are ignoring is the fact that Bob Mould and I had what was the longest musical relationship that either one of us has had with each other. So from a distance, I would have to say that there is more evidence to say that it worked wonderfully than to say it didn't work. But I think people insist that other people, if they find something that works they don't deviate from it. And people saw how Husker Du worked for a good number of records, and Bob was obviously the greatest collaborator I've ever had, but that never gets reported when I mention that in interviews, people like to report on battles rather than non-battles. I have tremendous

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respect for him and when he does good work I try to acknowledge that as vocally as possible.

Are you in touch with Bob or Greg (Norton, ex-Husker Du bass player) these days at all?

Oh, I'm in touch with both of them, quite often.

Am I right in believing that Greg's in the restaurant business these days?

That's right. I've not been to this incarnation. He had the same restaurant out on the country a bit, and I'm glad he moved it more into the city centre because it was – he was too isolated with it, but now I think he's turned it around. But I think he misses music. But he can really plan a menu really well, and it's something where he enjoys the hell out of doing it, so I think that's great for everybody.

Can I ask you about one thing – I was looking at your Wikipedia page today...

I've never gone there! I know from its reputation that it's a bit dodgy.

Well this is why I wanted to ask you because it does say on there that in the Eighties, you were incorrectly diagnosed as HIV positive, is this true?

Yes, that's something that was going on towards the end of Husker Du. For about six months of my life I was living under that shadow.

You would have been about 25 at that time, and this was back in the Eighties when a lot of the drugs which have been developed to deal with HIV then weren't about.

Right, it was a death sentence back then.

I can only imagine that it must have been. How did that news interact with all the other things that were going on in your life?

Well, I decided that I was going to put my own wants and needs and desires first. I made fewer compromises, and I think the end result, I think Husker Du was kind of drawing to a close anyway. Instead of looking to the future for inspiration, we started dredging up songs that we hadn't played for five or six years, and I wasn't going to do a reunion before breaking up, as it were! But we started looking to our own past, and I didn't really feel that that was where I wanted to go, whether I had ten years to live or ten months. As a pal said, make it new.

Good advice! Turning to the future now, another thing on Wikipedia mentioned that you were doing some work with the guys from Godspeed and I wondered if that had got to the point where there's something you might put out in the future? That's "Hot Wax"!

Oh, I see!

Yeah, the studio that most of the Godspeed fellows are associated with contacted me and said that they would love it if I became a client of theirs, so I checked it out and saw the similarities in our approaches, and I think it worked very well. It's just that it's very bloody complicated going back and forth to Montreal for recording sessions. It made the moment that much more critical, where there's a lot of weight on the moment. You've got to be able to do it or let it be. You can't always approach it with that intensity that "this has to be done today" because it's never going to work under those circumstances. You completely shut yourself off from your own intuition. You need the time to breathe, the room to breathe.

I can certainly say that the results seem to be well worth it, though I can equally appreciate that it must have been very logistically difficult to do all that travelling, as you say.

Yeah, but the nice thing about that was that on the train, you had quite a bit of time to line your ducks up in a row, as it were.

What are your best memories from your life as a musician to date?

Well, I would have to say, something that really sticks out is that I've always been an admirer of Patty Smith, and to have spent the birth of the new millennium onstage with her would have been about the best way I could have imagined starting it. She does concerts every year on the 30th and 31st December, and that year... I'd sworn that the last place in the world I was going to be was New York City, because of the whole Y2K thing, and, you know, even before the terrorist strike there was something in the air that the shoe was going to drop, and it took a little longer but it struck indeed.

If you got the chance to change one law on the US statute books, which would it be and why?

One law on the US statute books... Oh, I think perhaps our immigration policy. American artists travel around the world virtually unmolested by immigration authorities in other countries, but we don't react the same way to artists coming to our country. We are very exclusive in that regard, and I think it's time that that be addressed.

Interesting that you say that because I personally can't get into the US because of a little legal difficulty I had a few years ago...

Was it a cannabis thing?

It was, yeah...

That is the most ridiculous prejudice in the world. You can advertise pharmaceuticals on the television but people can't use something that is 100% natural. They found that the human genome – it's something to do with the brain, the way it develops we have a natural relationship with cannabis because man has been using it for aeons.

That's correct – I did a lot of research on this subject as a student. There is a receptor (series of specialised brain cells onto which the molecules of various substances or foreign bodies "fit" so that they can interact with the brains' function) for cannabis in your brain which allows you to get high but has no other function. Unlike the receptors which allow you to get high on every other drug you can name, the one that is for cannabis, the only thing that actually connects onto it is the cannabis molecule. So the only explanation is that we have, exactly as you say, is that we have evolved smoking or infusing cannabis and perhaps even using it as a tool for our own evolution in some ways.

Yeah, well it definitely lends itself to invention. When I'm in London we'll have to break some laws together!

Certainly! So, just to finish, if you were asked to headline a festival and you could have any five musicians or bands from the past or present to play with you, who



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would you choose?

White Stripes, Patti Smith, for the reason that Chester Smith has married Meg from the white Stripes, so I think it would be a very festive celebration, and if we're having that little family reunion we might as well invite the remaining members of the MC5, and, oh, Ween, and let's see, the Elephant Six collective, and my mates from Montreal I think. And we'll throw in Keanu Reeves band Dogstar because someone has to open!

Thanks Grant! Thanks also to Craig Grossman for setting up the interview. "Hot Wax" is out now on Weinerworld Records. Keep up with all the latest on Grant Hart here

Eddie Thomas

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