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Interviews



Blag Dahlia

by D. House

November 20, 2009

Blag Dahlia is an author, a producer and musician best known as the energetic front man for the Dwarves, a "controversial" kick-ass punk band that he started 25 years ago along with guitarist, HeWhoCannotBeNamed. In that time Dwarves have released 10 records, and continue to devastate with their sheer will to rock. With tongue planted firmly in-cheek, Blag took a few minutes to tell RocknRollDating what's up with the Dwarves and what's wrong with the music industry.

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How's the tour and how are you?

Blag Dahlia: I feel good. I feel strong. We're just touring the West coast right now. We did **Punk Rock Bowling** in Vegas, and went up north to Portland, Seattle, this and that. Showed them how it was done. We need to instruct motherfuckers on the technique of Rock 'n' Roll.

And what do you tell them?

Blag: We don't tell them shit; we just go out and play. Then they stand there open-mouthed, gazing, and they say, 'I thought this genre sucked now. All the other bands I see really blow, but these Dwarves guys, they're brilliant.' It's hard being the best over this long a period of time, but somehow we've managed to do it.

If you're in college and you've got glasses, you're gonna love this record.

I was checking out one of the videos from your new record today, and I was just going "God these guys still rock!"
Blag: And how do we do it with no money, no management, no publicist? It's just raw talent and brainpower.

And you're getting older, and yet you seem to be getting even more visceral.

Blag: And better looking. That's what's so astounding. Often I'll read little reviews from people who obviously haven't seen the band and don't know anything about it, and they'll inevitably say, "they're so old now and they don't do anything." Obviously you haven't seen us. I understand such a criticism because it can be leveled at almost everybody else; it just can't be leveled at the Dwarves. We just keep getting better.

Is the band still comprised of the original members?







Blag: It's comprised of them and a bunch of other people. It's sort of like a Wu-Tang Clan of punk rock. It kind of comes and goes in weird bits and spurts. But me and **HeWhoCannotBeNamed** are basically the core of the organization, and then everything kind of revolves around that. Right now we've got Rex Everything, aka **Nick Oliveri**, one of the greatest bass players in Rock 'n' Roll. People come and they go, but the Dwarves remain.

So you've guys have been around, what, 20 years now?

Blag: Yeah, 25 years actually. Our 25-year anniversary is next year, 2010. 25 years of the motherfucking Dwarves, and again, I have to stress this, other bands suck after 2 or 3 years. If they were ever any good. Yet somehow we've managed to conquer every genre and destroy.

My advice to young bands is don't fuck with record labels, do your own.

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So how many records have you put out in total during that time?

Blag: There's been like ten.



And this latest one is through Sympathy [for the Record Industry]?

Blag: It was through Sympathy. A great, great record label. One of the only really great indie labels ever. He [Long Gone John] is just a totally rad guy, and our idea with this record was that we were going to do every genre for about a minute. You've got your hardcore punk, your pop-punk, but you've also got your death metal and hip-hop, noise and experimental, garage and surf. Every genre's represented.

You need to have expectations
that are not bullshit.



You've got some jazz on there? Smooth jazz?

Blag: I don't think there's any jazz, no. No quiet storm or any of that. That'll be for another album. I just made a record called *Candy Now!*, which is me and this Russian girl singer. That's sort of like this Americana genre: country things, 70's things. But it wasn't

Dwarves. People should look out for *Candy Now!*. If you're in college and you've got glasses, you're gonna love this record.



Looking back at *Blood Guts & Pussy*, being on Sub Pop, that was the record that really brought you to a much bigger audience. Was that a good experience?

Blag: Well, you know, it was an experience. I think they helped us in the early stages for sure, in terms of gaining notoriety and the ability to dove-tail with them when they got pretty popular, but they didn't really know what to do with us. We were like the token hardcore band, token punk band. There was a lot of confusion, a lot of drugs there, a lot of stupidity. The thing that Bruce [Pavitt] would tell me he really like about the Dwarves was that we did everything ourselves. So had we not done everything ourselves, I think a lot less would have happened as a result of Sub Pop. They sat on their ass a LOT, but it is what it is.



I always thought that Sub Pop was like the cat with fourteen lives. They could walk in front of a car, get run over, get up and just keep going.

Blag: Well, to me it was Bruce and John [Poneman]. They were buddies, and then suddenly they weren't buddies anymore. I think that goes to show you that most record labels at their core are pretty bogus and retarded. The people who are part of them tend to be pretty low on the integrity or loyalty angle. And of course, when you come from a band like the Dwarves, it's easy to be like, 'they were so shitty, and so we were real shitty,' but it was more like, "no, you're incompetent and actually we're pretty cool because we're all still friends 25 years later." They did make one record I liked over the past 20 years, that *Postal Service* record I thought was kind of neat. It was a little wimpy, but well-written, well done. I thought they deserved it. I'm sure the first thing they did was bail after that, but I don't know, I don't really pay attention that much.



Do you think all things considered, that being in a band, that the (record) label becomes a necessary evil?

Blag: No, it's an unnecessary evil. I think young bands can use labels for their advances or some of the things they do, but if you're a band like the Dwarves who are already established, you might as well keep the money that you get from the records that you sell. It depends on your competence level, it depends how comfortable you are with record deals, what they say and what they mean. I think a lot of musicians are lazy, and so they need a label to wipe their ass for them. What they generally find is that the label can't even wipe their own ass successfully, so they get a big diaper rash and cry and go home, and they're done. The Dwarves are smart enough to put out their own records or do it through people like Sympathy, who are respectful and cool about things like copyrights. Musicians are also too pussy to talk about money or copyrights for some reason. I don't know why that is, either due to ignorance or fear. Basically what record labels do is steal your copyright in exchange for nothing, so they're largely useless.

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So why are you on a label like Sympathy versus just putting a record out yourself?

Blag: With Sympathy, you give them a record and they put it out. It's like a license. A license is a different story. And he's always operated that way. I operate independently and make my own records; he operates independently and releases records. He makes money; I make money. He's honest; I'm honest. People are amazed at this, but we don't sign deals. I don't have to sign a deal with John, he's honest and I'm honest and we know each other. Wouldn't that be amazing? But you run around Hollywood and every bullshit lawyer will tell you that you need to sign deals with everybody about all these things. You're basically signing something for nothing, and there's a lot of stupidity around record labels. Look, it's no accident that their industry is falling apart. It's no accident that people keep leaving. It's no accident that people keep getting fired. And all that labels are smart enough to do is hire another chick so that the guy that owns it can maybe get to fuck her one night if she gets drunk. So it's fine, show up at 10:30 or 11 in the morning, take an hour lunch, and leave at 4. Then, once a year, they fire all those bitches, and they get a new batch. Labels are full of functionaries and ignorant people who do nothing.



Are you talking about all labels, or major labels versus independents?

Blag: I'm talking about major labels and indies both. The first thing Sub Pop did when they made money off Nirvana was hire all their friends from the bar. All of whom looted their label, and did nothing. What they could have done was started handing out money to bands. Instead, they lost every band because people wanted some money, and they gave jobs to their friends and sat around shooting dope and pretending they were cool.



How about now?

Blag: Again, I don't hang out with them, and I don't know anything about them. Whatever they're doing is what they're doing. But it's more a general point. I signed deals with Sub Pop, so I can tell you their deals are identical to major label deals. They just don't give you any money. So the idea that somehow they were independent or special is a farce. It's bullshit. They operate exactly like a major label, and the first thing they did was sign a major distribution deal. But I didn't come here to shit on Sub Pop. As labels go, they might even be cooler and hipper than some other ones, but that just proves how low the bar is. My advice to young bands is don't fuck with record labels, do your own. If you get in a position where you sell a bunch of records on your own, take a bunch of money from some assholes, like Geffen or Interscope. Steal their money and leave. They're just going to fuck you.



So fuck them before they do you?

Blag: Yeah, absolutely. If I was younger and cuter, that would be what I would do. I say take Interscope's money. They're ignorant: take it. I smoked a bowl with the *All-American Rejects* the other day. You know they're taking some label's money. Good for them. They made a good record, they're having fun, and they're getting paid. I think if you're young and cute, go to a big label and loot it. Take their fucking money. But don't kid yourself that they know something or

could do anything.



So the Dwarves are able as a band to play the mightiest rock on the planet and support themselves and have it be a sustainable living?

Blag: I live good, I feel good. I live in San Francisco, and I eat good food. I fuck cute girls. Sometimes I fuck not-so-cute girls.



So the rock dream is still alive?

Blag: Absolutely, yes. The rock dream is alive. You need to have expectations that are not bullshit. The other thing that happens is that success is one of the worst things you can get. It gives you unrealistic expectations about what's there, and the minute it gets pulled away from you, you run off like a little crybaby into your drug haze of stupidity. What punk rock taught me was, 'do it yourself, fuck everybody.' You either stick to that, believe in it and do it, or you're a phony and you don't. Most people involved in music are phonies; they can't do it. And so, they look for somebody to wipe their ass, and 95% of cases they never find anybody and they just quit. The other 5% are the people who find somebody to wipe their ass, it lasts for a year or two, and then they cry and quit. But we're not crying and we're not quitting. We're the fucking Dwarves. It allows you to evolve as an artist. When I heard hip-hop music, I wanted to make a hip-hop track. When I heard death metal music, I wanted to make a death metal track. If you have somebody standing around you telling you what's going to market well and what's going to work, they're always going to try and convince you to do you, do exactly what you've already done. The great example of a great band is the **Beatles**. They made great records, and they changed genres all the time. They were just brilliant. That was back when labels had some connection to reality. At this point, a label is just a place where people with college degrees go to rip off recording artists.



It seems like late-60s and into the 70s, labels were really about finding creative people and nurturing their career.

Blag: Right, they'd let **Captain Beefheart** make a record. And they'd let **Alice Cooper** make three or four records that didn't make any money before they went. The majors now are a joke - they won't nurture anything. You get one chance, and if it flops, that's it. You're done. Now what you see is this phenomenon of all these 21-year-old wash-ups. And again, they go very early to the crybaby stage. And some of them say, "I've seen how fucked the music industry is, so now I'm going to be just as fucked and I'm going to work at a label or be a manager who perpetuates the garbage sequence." That's how they fight back and feel like they're accomplishing something. They think you can't have a band or evolve.



It seems like there's this whole notion, too, where being in a band means it's all or nothing, there's no in between. You can't be in a band and do moderately well and be true to what it is you want to do. You have to compromise what you're doing to "make it."

Blag: Yeah, the funny part is, most people aren't even trying to do anything. They come pre-compromised. It isn't a question of making up your mind and saying, 'I could do something cool, but I'm not gonna.' It never works that way. You'll never have anybody from a label going, 'hey guys, stop doing what you're doing.' It's the same way censorship works in America. It isn't a question of guys with jack boots showing up at your house telling you you can't say what you want, you just get aced out of the publishing world so you can't write what you want. You get aced out of the magazine so you can't get your message out. It's the same with music. If you sell out from the beginning and you just suck from the word 'go' and you don't have anything to say, then there's nothing to compromise. You come pre-compromised.



What do you think of the Steve Albini comment about how 70% of all bands should just break up because essentially they suck?

Blag: It depends what you're trying to accomplish. I'm hesitant to tell people to break up or to quit, but I would say that there are way too many bands now because there's no **winnowing** process. If you look at when music in America was really good, it was the 20s and 30s when we had vaudeville. What vaudeville created was a situation where if you sucked, you got a tomato in your face. There's no tomatoes anymore. Now somebody shows up, and a guy at a record label who's 30 and doesn't know anything about music signs somebody who's 19, dumb and doesn't know anything about music, and says, 'we're going to market this and make it big.' There's no process where they get booed off stage, so they don't realize that they're **Good Charlotte** and that they're incompetent and can't play. They've been told at a very young age, 'hey, you guys are good,' even though they're not. They've been told it by this very tiny segment of the population. If you look at a guy like **Frank Sinatra**, he sang three, four sets a night for several years until he was good enough to sing with **Harry James**. And if he was good enough to sing with Harry James for a couple years, he was good enough to sing with **Tommy Dorsey** for a couple years. Then he was good enough to have a solo career. That's how you winnow out who's good and who's bad. Punk rock did that for a certain amount of time because it was left alone by the music industry. When the music industry decided they could make money off punk rock, they started favoring people who had marginal talent or hadn't accomplished anything yet. That's why there's too many bands now, so I would go along with Albini in that regard. Albini has a lot of smart things to say about record deals incidentally. If you go and look at the **things Albini has said about record deals**, because he's a producer and understands, he's absolutely correct in much of what he says. Where I disagree with him is with some of his production aesthetic. Again, I think he's a brilliant recordist, as he likes to say, but I fall short of saying everybody needs to be in a band and everybody needs to play at the same time and everything needs to be in that format. A lot of great music has come out of the whole production format. Why does everybody need a band? Suppose you're just a chick and you're a good dancer and you've got something to say, why can't you get a produced track behind you? I think a lot of the best records that are coming out now are like that, like **Amy Winehouse's** record. She had **Mark Ronson**, who's a brilliant producer, and made a great track. She wrote great lyrics, but that's not a band. I guess I disagree with him on that level; I don't think everybody needs to be in a band and everybody needs to get in the garage. But I agree with him that most bands are really low quality and most record deals are draconian and bizarre. I would certainly work with Albini if he had any interest in working with me, but I doubt he does.



Do you usually work with engineers or producers, or do you typically work on your own stuff?

Blag: I've gotten to work with **Eric Valentine**, who is just that much better than Steve Albini. He's simply just the best pop producer that there is. I just lucked into him by going into his studio randomly because he had a **Neve** board in the mid-90s, but after spending a week with him it was like, fuck, I'm sitting next to **Mozart** here. And again, the difference between me and a lot of other people was that I said, 'you're capable of doing pop stuff that I'm not as good at and won't be able to pull off, so can you help me with this?' A lot of people encounter a guy like Eric and jealousy kicks in immediately. It's like, 'oh shit, this guy, he's not me, he doesn't wear my kind of bandana.' I've been very fortunate in getting to meet Eric Valentine and getting to work with him and getting to make four records with him.



How much of the year do the Dwarves spend on the road?

Blag: As little as possible. A lot of what kills bands is that they get into the aesthetic that this band has a successful record, now let's just put them on the road for six months. That's not necessarily conducive to sanity or anything. It's just conducive to moving more units. For me, I enjoy touring because I'll do it for four or five days at a time. I mean, if I got to Europe or something, maybe I'll do three weeks or a month. I also enjoy it more now that I'm older and I appreciate what's cool about it. I spent a lot more time fighting and bitching and freaking out when I was younger, but I really have a great time touring. And it's the only way that old guys like me get young pussy, you know? So it's really great in that regard. And it's great to bring your music directly to people. Again, this is what a lot of young bands can't accomplish because they don't play well and they don't really electrify crowds. Minus all of their hype and marketing, playing live doesn't give them

anything. When you see this band live, I feed off the energy of the people that love us. It is very fun, and it's very satisfying too to look back 25 years later and say, 'this is my friend; we're on stage together, here we're doing something.' And then I'll look out and see a lot of young people that I don't know, that I have nothing in common with, and I've obviously connected with them. And they're loving it. People need this now more than ever. There are just no bands that do what the Dwarves do.



There's got to be a few. What do you think of Turbonegro?

Blag: I love **Turbonegro**. I think they're one of the great, great bands. They're amazing, but a lot of it is the chaos element. I came up in really hardcore, it was chaos, and you didn't know what was going to happen. I was around when they invented slam dancing and shit like this, and we were just blown away. We couldn't believe it. So I don't know how to operate any other way. Whereas in the earlier days, where it was like, 'wow, you guys are a pretty wild band,' now it's more like people regularly come up to me just wide-eyed saying, 'I've never seen anything like that.' Same way if you saw an old dude playing blues on a porch, 70-years-old, and he was bringing you a piece of Americana. We do the same thing, we're showing you a piece of Americana that you can't get anymore. It's legitimate, and it's not publicist driven, it's not bullshit driven, it's reality. It's very gratifying and satisfying. It's a great thing to do. And to get paid on top of it, it's rad.



Any last things to say?

Blag: Thank you for listening to me ramble on. The Dwarves are rock legends. We're making another record. It's going to be out in late 2009.



On Sympathy?

Blag: I don't know what John is doing now. He moved up to Olympia in Washington, and I don't know if Sympathy is operating in the same way. I have a label called **Greedy [Media]**, and I work with these guys, **MVD [Entertainment Group]**, who have a great DVD label, so probably it'll be on Greedy and it'll go out through this MVD thing. But I hope John wants to get involved or do something. I haven't spoken to him about it. There's going to be another Dwarves record, and it's going to be more hardcore. For the 25th year anniversary, we're going to go back to that. We've gone more and more in the direction of keeping the hard shit but also doing really heavily pop shit and hip-hop shit and all kinds of shit. Now, I think this record, the way it's feeling, is going to be a cool hardcore record. Looking forward to that and just knocking it out of the park. Dwarves forever, rock legends.



D. House was bass player in proto-grunge band, Skin Yard, and spent fifteen years as the president and owner of Seattle based C/Z records, where he worked in every capacity including A&R and marketing. He moved to L.A. in 2003 and was responsible for the launch of one of the first genre-specific digital music download sites, DownloadPunk.com. In 2008 he launched RocknRollDating.com.

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