

Fly Me To The Moon

Moondog Three flying high and going deep with Jonathan McCabe

Nowhere to hide. That's what any self-respecting rock journalist thinks upon boarding a tour bus. Going with a band on their bus is better than a backstage pass. On a tour bus, there is nowhere your subjects can go to escape or disappear—a writer's dream.

By the time I climb the stairs of the gleaming, garishly painted chariot that Moondog Three are temporarily calling home, though, I'm fairly sure these guys are not trying to hide from me. Maybe it's because they're still so new to the publicity game, they haven't learned to be evasive yet.

And maybe it's because they're just like that. An open book. Everything they say seems completely on the up and up, if I can overlook the fact that all four of them use stage names. An open book, and this is their story.

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time there were two refugees from music school who wanted to start a band. One of them had been playing in Symphony Hall since he was ten years old. The other one had been on stage in smoke-filled honky tonks at the same age. Their search for a singer took them all over New England, and ended one summer day in front of a fountain on the Boston Common, when a passerby leapt into their set and started singing for the hell of it.

I hear the origin story from each member of the band. The two founders each take pains to try to describe to me why it made sense to them to grab this random stranger and run with him, as if the story isn't good enough as it is, as if what was going through their minds at the time is still a mystery to them, too.

Ziggy, the singer who jumped out of the crowd that day, has it in four simple words. "Love at first sight," he says with a shrug.

CHAPTER ONE

A band on the verge of their big break has a certain edge to them, an almost electric scent that brings hawks like me circling, looking for the real thing. The first time I see Moondog Three live, in San Diego, I know the buzz is justified. They're just the opening act on a cash-in tour for MNB, who are riding the meteoric burn (bright but over in a flash) of a Top 10 single. It's M3 who are hot, though, scorching through a short set with chops rarely seen in such a young band. Or any band. The best comparison I can make is to The Police, both in terms of the band's pure musicality and the difficulty one has classifying what kind of music it is they play. Not metal, not punk, not pop, they're not even on the Venn diagram where those things overlap. Like the Police and U2 and R.E.M., they've hovering somewhere a few inches above the diagram, in their own dimension.

It isn't the band's musicality that brought BNC to the table, though, but the ineffable "it." As when I ask the tour manager a few days later to describe what's so great about Moondog Three, and he responds "These guys just have it." Tread, from headliner MNB, says, "They can bring it." And when cornered, the A&R rep from BNC (who wasn't then ready to commit yet) simply said, "This is it. They are it." Not a week later, he'd signed on the dotted line, and this story went

from a sidebar to a cover feature.

On the bus, Ziggy and Christian, the band's drummer, are playing "Name That Song."

"She floats like a swan, grace on the water," Ziggy intones, giving no hint of the melody.

"Oh, that's got to be some goth s**t," says Chris. "The Cure?"

Ziggy shakes his head. "You want a hint? It was a band with no drummer."

"Well, no wonder I don't know who it is," the drummer says, tearing a page out of a magazine and winging the wadded up ball at the singer.

"Echo and the Bunnymen!" someone shouts from the back. I don't know their voices well enough yet to know who.

It's Chris's turn to stump Ziggy then. "You know I'm a dreamer,


but my heart's of gold." When he gets no answer other than a wince, he goes on with the next line. "I had to run away high, so I wouldn't come home low."

Again he's met with silence, until Daron, the guitarist and main songwriter barrels forward. "For f***'s sake, Zig, it's Motley Crue, Home Sweet Home." When he's greeted with a blank look, Daron shakes his head. "You sang it at that first rehearsal. At Emerson. When we were looking for something with more range than what we'd written, to see what you could do. I thought you knew it."

Ziggy shrugs. "I probably just faked my way through it."

Daron gives me a look that can only be described as long-suffering, and then returns to the back of the bus.

They haven't even been together a year, and already they have history.



I'm not an actor. I'm a performance artist. What you see is what you get.

CHAPTER TWO: ZIGGY STARDUST

Ziggy Ferias refuses to tell me his first name, saying it's "boring," but he has no trouble recounting his childhood for me. His hair is at least three distinct colors, none of them possibly the original, and his almond-shaped eyes are enhanced by a smudge of eyeliner. He could be anything from Native American to Italian, and after making me guess for a while he tells me he's a mutt. His father was from Latin America, but Ziggy didn't know him well. His mother, a

beauty queen with a mix of Greek, Italian, and Turkish, divorced when he was still quite small and moved to Baltimore to raise her son on her own. They continued north to New York City when Ziggy was a teenager.

"In Baltimore, she went through a churchy phase," he explains, "and I sang in the choir. Then we quit going to that church and I stopped. When we got to the city, she tried church again, and I started singing again. This time when she quit, I kept going. In fact, I started going to a bigger church because they had an all boy's choir that was really good. I sang with them maybe six months before they kicked me out for breaking the rules."

When I inquire what rules he broke, his smile is sly. "All of them," he says. "Think about all the things the church tells you not to do. When I was sixteen, that was my 'to do' list."

The day you met Bart and Daron, you didn't leave the house that morning thinking "today I'm going to start my new career as a pop singer," did you?

Hell no. I think the only reason I left the house before sundown in the first place was my housemate and his girlfriend were having an epic fight. I had quit my job as a cashier in a video rental store maybe a week before? Maybe a month. Time flies when you're not doing squat.

What would you be doing now if you weren't part of all this?

I'd probably be asleep at this time of day. Later, when I got up, I'd get dressed and go dancing maybe, or just hang out in Kenmore Square waiting to see what would happen. Or try to hitch a



I come off stage pretty much out of my mind, so who knows? But being out of my mind is good.

ride to the Cape. It's summer. There are always parties and stuff you can find. Rich college girls throw a lot of parties, there and in town.

Soon those girls might not look so rich to you.

Oh, be serious. Even if we go platinum their daddies can buy and sell whole corporations. I'll still be a small fish in that pond.

Have you played that game yet, though, the 'what's the first thing I'm going to buy with my advance' game?

Oh, absolutely. The first thing I'm going to do is move to a better apartment, though. Get rid of the housemates. But that's not a thing and it's not "bought." Al-

though I guess if I'm going to move into a new place... yeah, a bed. A big fancy one with the stereo built into it, and that will come with guys to set it up for me and everything. I don't even know where to get something like that. I'll look in the phone book when we get back, I guess. God, aren't you bored by this? I'm talking about furniture.

Fine. Let's talk about rock and roll. The lifestyle seems to be suiting you.

I can't complain. It's brought me a host of new experiences. It's a lifestyle which encourages experimentation.

How are you liking the tour?

Loving it. I've never been to the West Coast before. LA was freaky, don't you think?

In what way?

Everyone there is like they're on camera all the time. Like their clothes are a costume and they've practiced what to say.

Isn't that what being famous is like?

Yes, but no. I'm not an actor. I'm a performance artist. What you see is what you get.

CHAPTER THREE: TELL THE MOONDOG

My first impression of Daron when I see him backstage in San Diego is that he's a party crasher. He's looking back and forth like he's trying to figure out if it's okay to eat the cold cuts off the party platter, and then he disappears in the crowd.

The next time I see him, he's about to step onstage, and I barely recognize him as the same person. With a guitar in hand, he's transformed. As he takes the stage and slings the strap over his head, the guitar settling low in front of his hips, I have a sudden flash of *deja vu*. The feeling persists all through the set, almost distracting me from how terrific the performance is. Almost. The nagging feeling only grows stronger rather than fading.

It isn't until I happen upon a conversation a few nights later, in Los Angeles, with Remo Cutler, of Nomad fame, that it finally clicks. It's not my imagination. I've seen Daron play before, in Providence, when he was a student at RIM-Con. More than once, in fact, since he used to be a fixture at both the acoustic coffee house in town and at the student center pub.

I make it sound like years and years ago, but no, it was only two. However that dingy basement pub is three thousand miles away, and it feels like it might as well be a different planet, as he pumps his fist and receives a cheer from ten thousand throats. Later, we sit in a dim hotel bar, talking music, and I get the feeling he hasn't come back to Earth yet, and maybe, if things with BNC work out, he never will. Instead, he takes me with him to the moon.

Tell me about your mother.

Jeez, yo're kidding right? Oh thank god you're kidding. You really don't want to know.

Sorry, lame psychoanalyst joke.

Seriously, the best thing about being an adult is that you don't have to have a good relationship with your parents. Or any rela-

tionship, if you don't want.

I take it you don't.

Let's just say I've been financially independent since I was seventeen.

I was talking with Remo Cutler about you the other day.

In Los Angeles? I feel like I barely got to talk to him. What did he say?

Just that you're both from the same town and you used to play with him on local gigs when you were knee high to a grasshopper.

He did not say knee high to a grasshopper. He's folksy but not like that.

You're right. I'm paraphrasing.

But yeah, down the Jersey shore, and a



Moondog Three is a dinner party at my house... and you never know what's going to come out of the oven.

g r i l l
going in
the back,
and you
n e v e r
k n o w

bar in town where they played every week. I'm thankful there are no photographs from then.

It looked like you were going to join back up with Nomad for a while there, but you didn't. Wanted to do your own thing?

You could say that. Nomad is great and Remo is great. Don't get me wrong. But they're sort of like barbecue. I love barbecue. But I don't want to eat it every night.

So if Nomad is barbecue, Moondog Three is...?

Uh. A buffet. No, not even. Moondog Three is a dinner party at my house, pot luck, with the

what's going to come out of the oven next.

OK, so to stretch that metaphor until it breaks, you're the chef but the other guys bring side dishes? You write the lyrics but...?

I write most of the lyrics and a lot of the music, but some of the best stuff comes with collaboration. My weakness is in the chorus, honestly. I write kind of minimalistically. By which I mean the lyrics I come up with tend to be on the spare side. I write a bunch of stuff, and then I look at it or sing it, and anything that makes me cringe, I cut it out.

Sometimes that doesn't leave a lot left.

And Ziggy fills in the rest?

Zig tends to liven stuff up a lot; he's got a way with choruses that I don't. Maybe it's just that he can belt them out with such conviction. Maybe after I've been writing with his voice in mind for a while I'll pick up the knack. He picks up where I leave off a lot.

What's that like? It must work, or...

I think we used to be kind of distant and there was some tension as we got to know one another, which actually kind of helped in songwriting sometimes. Now we're getting to know one another onstage better.

A live show and recorded music are two totally different talents.

Yeah, but if you can't write songs, nobody wants to come see you play. So we work on that a lot. I write a lot, figuring if I throw away most of it, what's left will be good.

To me all song lyrics look like either doggerel or haiku on the page. It takes a good singer to give them life.

Amen to that. I didn't want to end up like Robert Smith.

What do you mean?

He never intended to be the lead singer for The Cure, you know that? But after auditioning a bunch of guys, I think he called them "utterly useless 'frontmen,'" he gave in and just sang the songs himself. It works for him, I guess, given that he's got that mournful, broken voice and sings these emotionally confessional songs. I don't think I could do it. I'd come off stage every night wanting to kill myself.

You're kidding, right?

Well, yeah. I think. I don't know. I come off stage pretty much out of my mind, so who knows? But being out of my mind is good. People want to escape,



you know? A song does that. It takes them out of their head if it's good. When I play, I get to take them with me. We all get to escape together. That's what they want, isn't it? People crave that. To be entertained, to escape and forget, whether its music or movies or books.

Or sex or drugs or alcohol.

That too.

For the record, Daron does not smoke, and he's drinking club soda on the rocks during our interview. A few nights later I watch him ignore a groupie come on, and brush off another with brusque efficiency. I don't have to guess what gets him off or what gets him high, because I've already seen it, on stage, with a guitar in his hands.

CHAPTER FOUR: BARTHOLOMEW CUBBINS AND THE OOBLECK

Bart's last name isn't Cubbins, but he tells me it's the name of the main character from his favorite childhood book.

"Which one?" I ask. I know my Dr. Seuss. "The one about the hats or the one about the Oobleck?"

"Oh, the Oobleck, of course! Have you ever made it?"

Wait, made it? This goes beyond Seussiana. The next thing I know, we've been to the convenience store and back, and are in the thankfully spacious bathroom in Bart's hotel suite. He has emptied a container of cornstarch into the sink and is adding water. Only a lab coat would make him look more like a mad scientist than he does already.

He pokes at the wet, white mass in the bottom of the sink with a kind of glee. "Check it out."

I poke my finger at the quicksandy stuff and find it remarkably stiff. I am then regaled with an explanation of the physics of non-Newtonian fluids.

"Let me guess," I say, as he sinks all of his fingertips into the surface, as if he's playing Salvador Dali's piano. "You took some physics at Brown while you were at RIMCon."

He laughs. "No, but I learned this from some stoners at a frat there. Drugs make this even more fascinating, or so they tell me. There's another one you can make from Elmer's Glue and Borax, but it's nasty and hard to clean up."

This is patently not what his parents sent him to music school to learn, but Bart isn't that concerned. Bart has been trying to