

Nazareth

Legendary Scottish rockers Nazareth burst back onto the scene in 2008 after a ten year silence with a stunning album called 'The Newz', a record that saw the band with a new lease of life - it was the first album to feature the touring line up of founder members Pete Agnew (bass) and Dan McCafferty (vocals), alongside Jimmy Morrison on guitar and Pete's son Lee Agnew on drums. The results of 'The Newz' have spurred the band on and here they are again with a brand new record called 'Big Dogz.' With eleven freshly penned originals to check out, James Gaden called up Pete Agnew (far right) to talk about how much bite the big dog has...



Whereabouts are you at the moment?

I'm actually at my house at the moment. We're getting ready to start rehearsals for the European tour, we're off tomorrow. We're going back to Russia as well for a few weeks so we're getting ready for that, and we're trying to figure out which songs to put in from the new album, because we've not had chance to play any of them yet.

Well, I've been playing the new album several times - in actual fact, when 'The Newz' came out in 2008, I voted that my top album of the year.

Really? Good man!

I did, I was blown away by it. In all honesty, I hadn't kept up with your output and that promo just arrived in a batch, it wasn't one I'd specifically requested. It had been ages since I'd heard a Nazareth record so I put it on and was amazed at how good it was. You said in your liner notes that there had been ten years between 'Boogaloo' and 'The Newz' and that you hoped you wouldn't have to wait ten years to do another. And here we are, a mere three years later, with 'Big Dogz'.

Thank you - we loved 'The Newz'. It was time to do something with the new guys in the band and we wanted to do something... not quite retro, but go back a step and allow ourselves the chance to do some different styles of music. It worked, that album - we got some of the best reviews we've ever had, for any album, at any stage of our careers, with that one. We were well chuffed with the feedback.

Precisely - like I said, I picked it as the best album I heard that year...

That puts you on my Christmas Card list!

(Laughs) Well I'm honest, I call it as I see it. I don't suck up to people, I say what I think. But like you say, I saw lots of good reviews for it other than mine, both in magazines, and from fans who were reviewing it on Amazon or whatever, it went down really well. Did that put pressure on you to follow it with 'Big Dogz'?

We were a bit nervous because 'The Newz' was so well received. But we knew after about six months of that being out, the record company said that they definitely wanted another one. That gave us time to get our shit together and try and get some new songs written. To tell you the truth, what we were trying to do was not another 'Newz', but do something a bit more bluesy. This one, we've tried to have as few overdubs as possible, play it off the floor. Obviously we've got some solos overdubbed and stuff, but we tried to keep it basic. I think it works, but we'll have to wait until everyone hears it to find out.

It's definitely sparser than 'The Newz' but I can't compare it properly yet because I haven't lived with it long enough. I like the title track and 'The Toast', they stood out after the first couple of listens. My promo doesn't tell me, but last time you spoke to Fireworks you told my colleague Sue that the band were looking at going to Prague to record the album. Is that what happened?

Aye, that's what we did. We recorded it in Prague,

and we mixed it there. It was a fabulous studio, really good fun to be in there. But we weren't used to being in the studio, and our producer Jan, who produced 'The Newz', he's a Basel boy, and we recorded 'The Newz' in Switzerland. He knows this studio in Basel inside out, and he's in there most of the year. When we got home and listened to the mix of 'Big Dogz', we weren't too delighted. Sometimes that happens in studios, you think it sounds great there, you take it home, play it on your own stuff and you think 'Ah, that could've been a lot better...' So we had finished recording at the beginning of October and eventually decided to remix it. We took it to Jan in Basel in January, where he was with all the equipment he knows. We remixed the whole album there and when we took the new mix to the record company and the people who had had it first, they all said 'Oh yeah, that's it, much, much better.' We ended up feeling pretty good about it. So we effectively it was recorded in Prague, but mixed in Switzerland.

Fantastic, two holidays out of it instead of one!

(Laughs) Aye - although I gotta tell you, it was a lot cheaper being in Prague than it was in fucking Basel! You get a Shepherd's Pie in Basel and it'll cost you thirty quid!

(Laughs) I noticed when you wrote the sleeve notes for 'The Newz' you said you had twenty songs that you cut down to thirteen. Did you use any of the ones you cut on here?

No, no... when you live with songs for a long time, we get bored with them. Going back to the seventies, we'd make an album in two or three weeks. We'd look at the top bands from then, like Yes, who'd be in the studio for six months... we were thinking 'How the hell can it take six months to do ten songs?' I would HATE the songs by the time it was finished! We like to get in, hammer them down, capture them as they were on the day. When it came to working on what would become 'Big Dogz', we had a listen to things we'd cut from 'The Newz', but if we thought they were to be cut three years ago, what's changed? If they were that good, they'd have gone on 'The Newz' - made it a double CD! (laughs) They are good songs, but the guys wanted to write fresh stuff. Start from scratch - so there's nothing at all from that period.

That's a by-product of the way the music scene has shifted - back in the old days you'd have put out a single and maybe stuck a non-album track on as a B-side, but that doesn't happen anymore.

No, it doesn't happen at all, you can't get rock, especially us at our age, on the radio. Nothing like that on radio at all. We do have tracks on the new album that we try to single out and promote, the record company like the song 'Radio' ironically, but... one of the ones we're getting good feedback on it 'When Jesus Comes To Save The World Again'. That's obviously not a single! But it has gotten good feedback. You can't put a single out nowadays, everybody downloads, and not that many people even buy albums anymore! They just pick odd tracks. It's a different world now.

Quite right - there were a couple of people I

used to work with and they would buy an album by some manufactured mainstream pop artists, like Britney Spears or someone like that, and if they liked three songs on the album, they thought it was good! I was staggered by that - I'm disappointed if I buy an album and I don't like eight or more of the songs! Take 'The Newz' - thirteen songs and I loved them all. There wasn't one on there I didn't like, or thought sounded like filler. Same goes for the new Whitesnake record, the second Black Country Communion album...

That's what a band wants, that's what we hoped to achieve and it's great to hear that. I know myself, back in the days when I bought records, I used to hear maybe one track and buy the record on the strength of it. Sometimes you'd like the whole album, sometimes you'd only like a couple. Nowadays though, people just buy that one track they liked in the first place.

Yeah, you miss out on those gambles - there's few things better than buying a record for one song, and liking the whole album and finding you've just discovered a new act you like. For all the gambles I've taken on buying records because of one song, I've had far more hits than I have misses. I'd have a lot of good music missing from my collection if I'd just bought the ones I liked in the first place from iTunes.

Aye - with this one, we've put it out on vinyl as well. It's great to see it in a proper gatefold sleeve, you know? There's also a version where you get the vinyl! and there's a CD in it as well, so you have one for the house and one for the car. It's great to see it like that - you can see the photos and read the lyrics! I get CD's these days and I have to put the big light on to read the words! (laughs)

On about lyrics, that leads me nicely to one of the songs I highlighted, which was 'Lifeboat'. I thought lyrically it followed a similar theme to 'Liar' from 'The Newz' with that slightly political slant, commenting on governments and things like that...

Aye, it is a bit like that. 'Liar' was actually Lee who put the lyrics together for that, but 'Lifeboat' was more down to Jimmy. I think it was fairly up to date, reflective of the way things are going at the moment. I like that one myself actually.

I think that's maybe why it jumped out at me - arrangement wise it was a bit different, and lyrically it sent a message but without being too inflammatory or overly political. I didn't really expect it from Nazareth to be honest.

We've always liked to try and make songs into stories if you will. We've always been like that, but we don't profess to be Bob Dylan... we're not gonna change the world with our stuff, but it's nice to make comments while still being tuneful about it.

That's what makes me prefer Nazareth to Bob Dylan - I never got him at all! I can only listen to his songs when somebody else is performing them! (laughs)

(Laughs) You're probably too young, we were about

seventeen when all that revolutionary stuff was going on! (laughs)

How many songs did you guys write for this new album then - did you do the same again, write a bunch and pick from the best?

It's kinda funny - when we got to the studio, and this happens a lot once you start recording... the studio we were in had a hotel as part of it, and Lee would be up in his room waiting for his turn, or Jimmy would be, and they'd come down to the studio after a couple of hours and say 'Hey, I've got an idea for a new song...' So we'd hear it, and what happened is we went over there with about twelve or thirteen songs and probably wrote another four right there on the premises - and we liked them and they were brand new and fresh. So we started recording some of those along with the ones we already had that we knew we definitely wanted on the record. We'd try a new one out and it was really good fun going in from scratch. We did some that we called the 'Kitchen Sessions' - there was a kitchen where we used to hang out and sit with guitars and a keyboard, trying ideas out there in the kitchen! It was right next door to the studio so if we had something, we'd go in and lay it down. So by the time we got through them all, we knew we had enough - and we didn't want to put something on if it reminded us of something else, you know? We wanted things to sound different and that's how we got to the eleven on the album. It was exciting because we never knew what we'd be working on the next day.

I asked that because the songs were credited to you all equally, so I was curious how a typical Nazareth writing session went. I didn't picture you all in a kitchen though!

(Laughs) We always put everybody down as the writers, because when a song is finished, everyone in the band has put in their tuppence worth. It never gets recorded exactly how it was written, someone will always say 'Why don't we do this...?' As long as the guy who was the main writer behind the song agrees, we go ahead with it. We've never really fallen out about that stuff, everybody always offers something to somebody's song, whether it's a lyric change or an arrangement tweak, whatever. It really is all four of us writing.

We were speaking earlier about the gap between 'Boogaloo' and 'The Newz', which was ten years, yet there was only three between 'The Newz' and 'Big Dogz'. Do you think that we will start seeing a Nazareth record every two or three

years, or do you have to play it by ear?

No... what happened after 'Boogaloo' was that came out in the late nineties... afterward, we couldn't even get ourselves arrested as far as record companies were concerned, let alone signed! They didn't wanna know about anybody who had been around and they weren't interested in putting out a record. So there was nothing coming in offers wise... when we eventually recorded 'The Newz' it was different, we were approached by people who were very excited about there being a new Nazareth album - which means you get excited about making it. We thought great, somebody cares, after ten years perhaps this will be our swan song, y'know? Of course, that album was so well received, the record company came back pretty much straight away and said they wanted another one from us. But it wasn't just them - after 'The Newz' we got several other offers for a follow up. But as far as we were concerned, those guys showed no interest in the last ten years, so we'll stick with Edel who showed faith in us with 'The Newz' and who really wanted a new record. They really love the new one, they are absolutely ecstatic with it, so I hope they'll want another one after that - as long as they sell enough of this sucker to cover their arse! (laughs)

I think you've done well with Edel - I've had a lot of stuff sent to me from them and it's all been good stuff.

Aye - they pick and choose. They did the Foreigner album, and that was really good... they've done quite a few and we like the company, it's becoming a rather respectable label. Especially for bands like ourselves. They aren't interested in hip-hop or stuff, they are pretty much a rock label.

It's interesting you mentioned the Foreigner album, because when that one came out I voted that my album of the year, I'm noticing a pattern now, they're all coming out via Edel! (laughs)

Well there you go! We used them for publishing for about six years but they have become a serious record company now. And they're a lot stronger now than they were when 'The Newz' came out. I think they were feeling their way back then, and I'm confident they can do an

even better job this time. I don't want to blow my horn, but they seem very happy with what we've delivered.

Well, you've been in the band from the start and put out over twenty studio records, so you should know what works and what doesn't... it must be a bit unnerving for Lee, this is only his second!

Yeah, it is with us, but he has made records with other people before. Even Jimmy, he's been with us for a long time but his first Nazareth record was 'Boogaloo' so this is only his third. We've done a lot of live stuff together and recorded some of them, but yeah, it wasn't until 'The Newz' that the four of us could sit down together and say 'This is different now, this is a new recording line up'. It's very different recording in a studio to playing live on stage. You can really get a bunch of people to come out live with you and do the job - take Guns 'N Roses for example. Axel is up there with a great band, all great players, but those guys didn't make any of the records. It's always a bit nerve wracking when you make a new record with a new line up because you can't know what it will be like until you've made your first one. With 'The Newz' it worked out so well - everyone loved it even better than we thought. We knew we had something!

Finally, on the subject of playing live shows, you said at the beginning you were looking at doing rehearsals for the upcoming shows - do you know which songs off 'Big Dogz' you'll play?

Yeah, we'll do 'Big Dogz', 'Radio' and 'When Jesus Comes To Save The World Again'. Those are definites. We're looking if we can get another one or two in - the thing is James, when you've been around as long as us, when you start on a set list there is about ten songs you have to play that go in before you even start! That's what people buy tickets for - nobody comes to see us hoping we'll play all of the new album. They want the hits. We'd love to go out and just play the new album because we're proud of it, and any band with a new record out would say that. But you can't do that, so you have to pick out maybe three that are all different to give the fans a taster of what is on there. We do about an hour and a half on stage, but some shows we've only got seventy five minutes because we're sharing with Uriah Heep. You've got to try and balance it, but I won't know until we've finished the rehearsals. In fact, I won't really know until we've done the first gig! (laughs)

