



Q&A: Steven Page

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By *DIANE DAVISON*,

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Steven Page is the Barenaked Ladies' lead singer and guitarist. Our Diane Davison caught up with during his stop in Baltimore.

Diane Davison: The show was fabulous. You are extremely acrobatic on stage; have you ever hurt yourself?

Steven Page: Not really, you know, aches and pains but not like I really break myself up or anything.

DD: Did you ever study dance or gymnastics?

SP: Oh no, I was a spazz!

DD: Were you ever classically trained on your voice? Did you study opera?

SP: At university I wasn't a music major but there was a music program. I sang in choirs my whole teen-age years and then in university I took vocal music ... but as part of that program you got master classes and private vocal lessons so I really got to take advantage of that.

DD: Is that when you first really knew your voice, or did you have that voice when you were a child?

SP: I started singing with interest at about 12 or 13 but I think I did it because I just liked it; not because I was particularly good at it.

DD: What are your feelings toward your personal projects; was this your first solo project that you just did [The Vanity Project]?

SP: Uh-huh. I've been working on this for a long time. It started as a song-writing project with a guy, Steven Duffy, that I'm a friend and fan of, and over time it kind of evolved into a record as the technology became more and more available for us to do this at home, it became more and more developed. It's been about five years in the works, and when it finally came out last year it was certainly moving and something that I was very excited about.

DD: Are you into tech things? Are you a tech head?

SP: Yeah, I am in a way. I like it as a tool. I like the theory of things like file sharing and so on. But as far as the workings of computers go, as long as it helps me do what I like to do musically then I think it's great. But I am into it, and I certainly do have an interest in recording means and that kind of thing as well.

DD: Is the band Barenaked Ladies, as individuals, all interested in technology because you guys do a lot on the forefront of technology --- as far as being a band putting out their music?

SP: We do like it. Our management company, Nettwerk, are definitely also very interested in technology so they've kind of helped keep us on top of things but we certainly are. Whether it's just our interest in our own personal computers or what's going on in pop culture, or Ed's a big fan of video games, it certainly keeps us in the loop that way.

DD: So did it come from the band to do the thumb drive or the concert downloads?

SP: The concert downloads came from ... as a band idea, that was my idea because I'd seen that other artists like Pearl Jam were doing it. I wanted to be able to offer a very high-quality version of that. Especially at that point we were out of our record deal, meaning we had the freedom to release whatever we wanted to. The USB drive was management's idea, and we're very excited about it.

DD: You have a lot of TV shows coming out soon. What's the status of the variety show?

SP: The variety show is ... your guess is as good as mine but I would assume that it's not gonna happen.

DD: Really?

SP: Yeah.

DD: Awwwwwww.

SP: Well it was an administration change at Fox and we had it in there and we just kind of got lost in the shuffle.

DD: But you have a couple of specials coming up. The A&E thing, is that Canada only?

SP: The A&E thing is I think live, we're taping it tomorrow. I'm not sure if it's live or not. We did a Bravo thing that was for Bravo Canada but it's on I think HDNet in the U.S. — the high definition network. And then we also did the Dennis Leary Christmas Special which is on now.

DD: About going independent --- you mentioned that. Can you give me some insight into the band's problem with their recording contract and being under the standard recording contracts in the industry, and what helped make up your minds to go independent?

SP: Well, the biggest problem is with the way that the standard recording contract is set up. There is no opportunity for the copyright creator --- the artist --- to actually own the copyright. Ever. Once you recoup the label's costs, you would think that there would be the opportunity to buy it back at some point at some exorbitant rate; and that's not an option. You know, this is probably what the whole George Michael/Sony case was about years ago.

DD: Right.

SP: So I think at that level it becomes usually ... something in most other businesses [that] wouldn't be acceptable. What we have now is a system that people are so used to, and artists that are so scared, and in exchange for capital essentially, if you look at labels as venture capitalists they're very useful in helping to create your product. They're also very useful in providing services to artists. But I think we need to start looking at labels as people who could actually provide valuable services to copyright holders, like us, rather than copyright collectors and enforcers, which is how they see themselves now.

DD: When the label heard that you were not going to renew your contract, did they make any attempt to try and negotiate that? Were they willing to even consider doing something having to do with copyrights?

SP: They're still doing physical distribution. I think for them they realized that when we left it was the point of diminishing returns for them. Because the way the deals were structured your profits get higher and higher and higher but the returns get lower and lower and lower, especially as the record business started to wane. We got very lucky at the height of our career was also the height of the record company's revenue model. A lot of it was artificial.

DD: ... According to what they state.

SP: Well, that was the biggest point in the music industry, was at the end of the '90s. All of which that started to slip, then overall everybody's sale started to slip [so] they see it as a less valuable investment. So I think in a lot of ways they were happy to see us.

DD: Though there are some reports questioning how much the sales are truly slipping and how much they are kind of finagling the numbers.

SP: Oh, the numbers are very manipulatable, but I think that in general they used to do things like selling CDs and DVDs and LPs and whatever else, the same record over and over and over again. I think frankly the audiences are less and less interested in that.

DD: Right, and they're not keeping up with technology, obviously, and in that vein, what are your thoughts on Napster and peer-to-peer and all that?

SP: I think that it's valuable, and I think the labels fight it because they don't want to change the way they do business. The change has been made for them. This is how a large part of audiences find music. There's a study in England last year that said people who download music "illegally" tend to buy more music legally than people who download stuff from places like iTunes music store.

DD: And do you believe that?

SP: People who download stuff in the currently illegal fashion and people who share music are more often true music fans; they're the people who are gonna come to shows they're really looking for bootlegs, obscurity, ... as well as whatever is at the top of the charts. But it's not hurting 50 Cent.

DD: Since you're independent now, how do you foresee getting your music out there? You obviously have a huge following, but [in] getting it out to the mainstream audience, do you foresee doing any new or interesting things to try to get it out there?

SP: Well, I think we keep looking because so much of what we're doing now is looking at niche markets. I think the mainstream is an interesting beast because by reaching the mainstream at full throttle you kind of alienate yourself from the core audience, which is the

fringe audience in a way. And the mainstream audience, they're actually looking not, say, for the highest quality but what's most popular. So that will ... dictate the follow-up, too. A place to reach the mainstream is quite often the high-profile mass-merchandise places like Target and Wal-Mart and so on. And luckily we had good relationships with retailers like them.

DD: This concert tour, it looks like it's mostly all small venues, theater type venues ...?

SP: ... The theaters are kind of cut down, almost half-size arenas.

DD: Right, so was this very important to all of you as a band to do this because you certainly could fill up much larger venues?

SP: I think the nature of the holiday show is a little bit more intimate, and frankly we don't want to drain the marketplace for when we actually want to come back and promote a whole brand-new album. We'd like to come back and do a much more spectacular show in a larger venue. But by keeping it intimate I think it makes it feel more of the season, too.

DD: It was great that you debuted that new song for us here in Baltimore. When can we expect a new album possibly coming out?

SP: We're aiming for September. We don't finish the record until mid-spring and then we'll have to get the marketing set up, so I think that September would be a safe bet.

DD: Great, and a tour to follow?

SP: Yes.

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