

NICK HEYWARD

There have been plenty of ups-and-downs for Nick Heyward, but the reinvigorated 80s poster-boy is back doing what he loves

WORDS: GEORGE HENRY KING

The 80s was a decade as turbulent as it was revolutionary; dividing as it was reuniting. The Berlin Wall crippled under the pressure of hope and resilience, while the skyrocketing unemployment under Margaret Thatcher dampened the usually unbreakable spirit of Great Britain. Mullets and perms were suffocated by gallons of hairspray, while new wave and synth-pop soundtracked the birth of MTV and the rising popularity of portable cassette players. Undeniably, there were ups-and-downs, and Nick Heyward's equally disjointed experience of the decade was a metaphor for the era.

Heyward was Haircut 100's babyfaced frontman, a puppy-eyed heart throb and a pop sensation partial to a woolly jumper. By just 22, he had composed four Top 10 hit singles and a platinum debut album. Performances on *Top of the Pops* were frequent and cover shoots for magazines like *Smash Hits* and *NME* quickly became old hat; Haircut 100 were at the height of their powers. But before 1983 had chance to get out of the blocks, Heyward left the very pop group that had catapulted him to stardom in favour of going it alone. His solo endeavours, however, resulted in very few commercial successes.

The release of his debut solo album, *North of a Miracle*, awarded Nick with yet another Top 10 album less than a year after his departure from the group – but that was sadly as good as it would get. Over the course of the next 15 years, Heyward would release another five solo efforts – four of which would fail to crack the Top 100. Most musicians would blame an album's lack of success on negative reviews or on critics writing within the interests of their own agendas; some might even hold their hands up and say that the music simply wasn't good enough. Nick, however, puts it down to his decision-making.

"I've never felt under-appreciated generally," Heyward explains. "I suppose there are moments where you go, 'I wonder why I didn't become Bono or Depeche Mode?' and that's an interesting concept and when you get old you do realise that you are made by your decision making process."

After only a 12-month partnership, the Alan McGee-led Creation Records dropped Nick in 1998. For the fourth time in 12 years, he was once again facing life without the backing of

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a label. Given that songwriters just want to be able to write and release songs, having to find another label was initially more annoying inconvenience than it was a life-changing career setback.

"If you're a songwriter, you don't care about those things; you just want to make music," he defiantly states whilst sipping on a coffee. "Even if someone wants to put it out, you don't even really care about that, you just want to make music and know that it's just gone out there."

While Nick was still frequently putting lyrics to paper and vocal melodies to chord structures, frustratingly for him the world was only on the precipice of the digital age. The likes of iTunes, Spotify and Pledge Music for example – the very platforms that unsigned musicians can now use to fund and release music – were yet to materialise, so Nick was left without the budget to record an album and without a viable way in which to release it. His belief in his songwriting ability quite rightly never wavered, but having already been dropped by Sony Music earlier in his career, Nick was now blacklisted by every record label – major, indie or otherwise – in the country. He may have battled tirelessly throughout the 90s to re-establish himself as a credible songwriter, but his efforts weren't reflected by the desperate situation in which he found himself – and it only got worse.

During the same week in which he was shown the door by Alan McGee, his publisher also jumped ship, his girlfriend left him and he was told that his mum had very little time left to live. Every structure in his life was either broken or breaking and it seemed as if only the occurrence of something otherworldly could get him through the decade. And during the early hours of April 30, 1998, an otherworldly occurrence is exactly what happened – Nick had a spiritual awakening.

"There was this moment where I sort of just let go of everything," he recalls. "I had a massive thunderbolt flash go off like somebody had just punched me in the face, but I just felt this complete state of acceptance and fearlessness. It felt like 'Nick Heyward' was finished and the struggle had finished and it was amazing. The first thing I did was start crying. They weren't tears of pity or anger, they were tears of joy and I just kept crying all over the place. A lot of my friends couldn't handle me I must say – they just felt like I'd gone bonkers."



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Fast forward to 2017 and the future of Nick Heyward looks as bright as the gleaming smile that remains sprawled across his face for the duration of our interview. We may be amidst the hustle and bustle of Soho, but Nick’s large bank of metaphors, obsession with Bono and distinct air of contentment is infectious, and it engulfs the entirety of the most renowned private members club in London; The Groucho. He’s rejuvenated, happy and clearly has a spring back in his step; after all, spending your afternoon promoting a new album and entertaining a revolving door of interviewers is far from easy work.

The new album in question is *Woodland Echoes*; a swooping, visceral and organic sounding canvas of acoustic Americana, seasoned with the unmistakably British

GEARBOX

“I play a Manton EBGO8 Artist Acoustic Guitar. These are just highly regarded. I went into Guitar Village and this guy just got me into it... It's got this little microphone that comes up underneath the strings.

“He’s said he’s been to lots of open-mic nights and he said you just know when this guitar comes on because it’s the most acoustic sounding electro-acoustic that you can get. I’ve gone for that because I cannot handle those synthetic, plug-in acoustic sounds.”

undertones of The Beatles and Paul Weller. The album first developed randomly after Nick’s son Ollie became a qualified sound engineer and so the initial sessions played out in his son’s bedroom. After a series of promising demos were recorded, a reinvigorated Nick, now armed with the accessibility of the digital era, decided to hit the road – briefly reforming Haircut 100 in the process – in order to raise the money required to record the album properly. The finished piece, however – part recorded in England, part recorded in Key West, Florida – wouldn’t be released for another ten years. The reason behind its slow process was as much about money as it was about Nick’s constant longing for perfection. “Instead of buying a house, I bought this album,” Nick tells me before politely asking the waiter for another coffee. No wonder then that when it came to signing off the album, he wouldn’t just settle for ‘that’ll do’.

“My job is to make sure that the song reaches its full potential, so that’s all I was doing. You know when a painting is done and it’s ready to frame. And when the album was finished, I really knew it was – I know how to make proper records. That magic is what you have to make and you know when you haven’t made it.”

Ahead of its release, an album campaign was set up on Pledge Music to help fund the production and distribution of the record. It gave fans the chance to pre-order copies of the album and exclusive limited edition extras. It meant the album had an instant audience before and after its release. Being his first solo album not aided by a record label, however, meant there was a sense of financial insecurity. But given the vast amount of trials and tribulations he has experienced in the past with record labels, surely Nick would never sign along the dotted line again?

“As long as the creative process comes out, and you don’t get trod on again, then it would be great. But if the hosepipe isn’t on or doesn’t work, you’re garden is going to suffer and as the chief gardener, it’s my job to keep the garden flourishing. You’d have to know that they [record label] were going to look after it and there wasn’t a possibility of someone turning off the taps again and you’re garden was going to die.”

As the flames on our table-candles start to burn out – metaphorically and literally calling time on a conversation – I ask Nick what his hopes are for *Woodland Echoes*. “The secret is, I don’t really mind what happens to it really. The fact that I’m sat here talking to you because of it is amazing in itself. So, whether there is or isn’t a chart position, it’s always going to be there anyway. I can’t force acorns onto people – it’s too stressful that stuff.” ■

Woodland Echoes is out now.
Info: www.nickheyward.com