



# EVEN ANIMALS STARTED SMALL:

## A CURIOUS CONVERSATION WITH AS TALL AS LIONS' DAN NIGRO

Words By BOB FREVILLE

It is not easy to find unique and spirited music on Long Island. For every incredible, genre-defying act like Dearly Departed or The Bogmen, there are twenty-eight worthless Taking Back Sunday facsimiles sprouting up every minute... or a Local Music Bin worth of elitist punkcore groups that won't give it up, even after coughing up a lung. This is frustrating for someone like me who thrives on images and sounds.

But it is also this fact that makes it that much more satisfying to find a band like As Tall As Lions, whose musical melancholy reaches a somber and soul-revealing apex that Chris Martin only dreams about while flogging his limey Longfellow.

Dan Nigro, the troubadour in the foreground of ATAL, sums up their achievements in indie rock very simply. "Writing good songs was the motive."

"We had rushed through our first record [*Blood and Aphorisms*]," he said. "We were very unhappy with the turn out. We felt... incomplete.

"If you have a million dollar budget you can go in with half-written songs and finish them in the studio. But when you have four weeks for the pre-production, recording and mixing of an entire record you have to go in there and have it all together. We didn't have the time. It was a big mess."

For their follow-up Dan and his Nigros were going to be prepared. Seven months in a practice space, fleshing out ideas and demoing, and two months recording. Lo, the ATAL self-titled LP is born!

"Has it been easy making music on Long Island with its natural proclivity to heavier sounds?" I asked.

"Nothing has hindered our writing style," Dan insisted. "There is such a large hardcore and quote/unquote emo scene... we get pigeonholed as the wrong band a lot of the time. That's been hard to break out of, but in terms of music... we

write music that comes natural to us. It's a product of... the environment that we hang out in. It's always been very easy for us to write the way we do."

I was curious as to Dan's thoughts on the current musical climate on the Island. "Do you see it as being more progressive than it was ten years ago?"

"I think it's been kind of constant," he said. "There's always been a lot of good bands and a lot of really bad bands. I don't know if it's progressed that much. Obviously music evolves and what's popular in the area changes... but I wouldn't say it's necessarily better or worse, at this point."

Dan and I lamented about what a bummer it is living in a place that lacks Class A musical venues. "But the bigger bands on Long Island," Dan added with a hiccup, "tend to stay away from the Island and just play New [hiccup] York City. Which is kind of sad."

I cut him off abruptly. "Have you been drinking?"

"Have I been drinking?!"

"Yeah," I said. "I heard you hiccup."

"Oh, no, no," Dan intoned hastily. "I definitely haven't been drinking. I had hiccups, I have a hiccup, uh, I dunno."

I didn't know if he was lying to me, but something in his easy-going manner was obliterating my understanding of the band. This guy sounded more like Matthew McConaughey than Morrissey.

"Why do you make such sad music?" I asked.

"Do you think it's sad?"

"Oh, yeah," I replied. "It's beautiful but it's kind of... forlorn."

"Well," Dan said, giving it fastidious consid-

eration. "I don't know. I guess like I said before, it's a product of our environment. During the writing process, we were all going through a lot of personal stuff... we were happy making the album, but... it emanated from us." He reiterated. "We weren't trying to write sad music, that just came out."

I didn't want to get all morose so I quickly switched gears on my new friend Dan. "What was it like working with a glockenspiel?"

Dan laughed. "A glockenspiel is set up just like a piano so it's nothing too difficult to play. It was more of a textural thing. It would really open up the space on some parts."

I didn't have the faintest idea what Dan was talking about, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was the music. "The last track on your CD comes in at four minutes and twenty seconds. Was that intentional?"

"No," Dan said. "But when we saw that we did find it quite funny. I would recommend rolling up a jay and smoking one for the song cuz it definitely enhances the experience."

It was time to demystify the secret. "Does your bonus track have a name?"

"It has two different names. The original name was 'Evening Virgin Cotton Nymph.' The actual name, which honestly isn't listed anywhere, is 'A Soft Hum.' That's what we call it now."

They decided to use the song as their bonus track because, once again, they weren't happy with the turn out. "We had demoed the song," Dan explained. "It had a certain vibe to it that we really liked. It was very open, very roomy."

"Our producers had a very different idea. They saw it as this straight up pop song. It was one of the songs we had been the most excited about... to take it off the record completely would have been a shame."

So we used it as a bonus, in hopes that people would take it as a bonus track—if they didn't like it, they could dismiss it and if they liked it, it was an extra treat."

Dan seemed to have all the answers, but I was curious if he thought much about his band name. "Do you feel tall in the presence of caged animals?"

"I feel very tall in the presence of caged animals," Dan chuckled.

"That's fucked up," I said. "I don't know if you know too much about what's going on in North America. They kind of saw off a good six inches of bone when the lions are young so they'll always fit in their cages."

"Really?" Dan seemed shaken.

"Yeah, it's fucked up. Well, I mean, it's the circus and they're a bunch of crazy motherfuckers, you know?"

"Yeah," Dan said. "I did not know that, actually. Sorry."

Dan had suffered enough, so I decided to get in touch with his feelings. "What's bothering you right now?"

"What's bothering me right now? The fact that I'm stuck in the rain in Oregon and our rental van has now broken down and we're in the middle of nowhere and we've missed five shows. That's what's bothering me right now."

Thanks to Violet Fewes for editorial wizardry and purple buns