



DON'T KNOW THAT I WILL BUT UNTIL I CAN FIND ME THE GIRL WHO'LL STAY AND WON'T PLAY GAMES BEHIND ME I'LL BE WHAT I AM A SOLITARY MAN

NEIL DIAMOND

[BY ALAN LIGHT]



SONGWRITING has always been about discovery for Neil Diamond. Of course, he is one of the world's most popular performers, with over 125 million albums sold. Already a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame, he has been a dominant force on the pop charts for two generations: Thirty-six of his songs have hit the Top Forty. More than four decades into a legendary career, he remains one of the top touring acts around the globe.

"I secretly believe that there's some sort of lucky star that I travel under," he told *Rolling Stone* on hearing the news of his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction. "I've always been grateful for it, and I've always felt a sense of responsibility to my audience, and I always will."

Beyond the sales and statistics, though, for Diamond, every song still offers a chance for revelation. From his early days in the Brill Building to his recent collaborations with producer Rick Rubin, he has consistently turned to his songs as a way to explore the full spectrum

of human emotion, from loneliness to joy, from mortality to romance.

In the notes to his 2008 album *Home Before Dark*, the singer addressed the two sides of his personality, which he divides into the songwriter and the performer. With the album's release, he wrote, "I'm relieved to shed the introspective, isolated person . . . and eager to take on my other identity: extroverted, fun-loving, and open to life."

His work with Rubin—three Top Ten albums, including his first-ever Number One with *Home Before Dark*—capped a remarkable renaissance for this true renaissance man whose life has taken him from an

itinerant childhood to television and movie screens and some of the world's greatest concert halls. Neil Diamond was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up there in different neighborhoods as his family relocated frequently when his father opened various dry-goods stores.

"What I remember most about my childhood," Diamond said in 1971, "was the constant moving from school to school. Under the circumstances, making friends was impossible. I was pretty much an outsider most of the

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time. I was never accepted. That's why I took to writing so passionately."

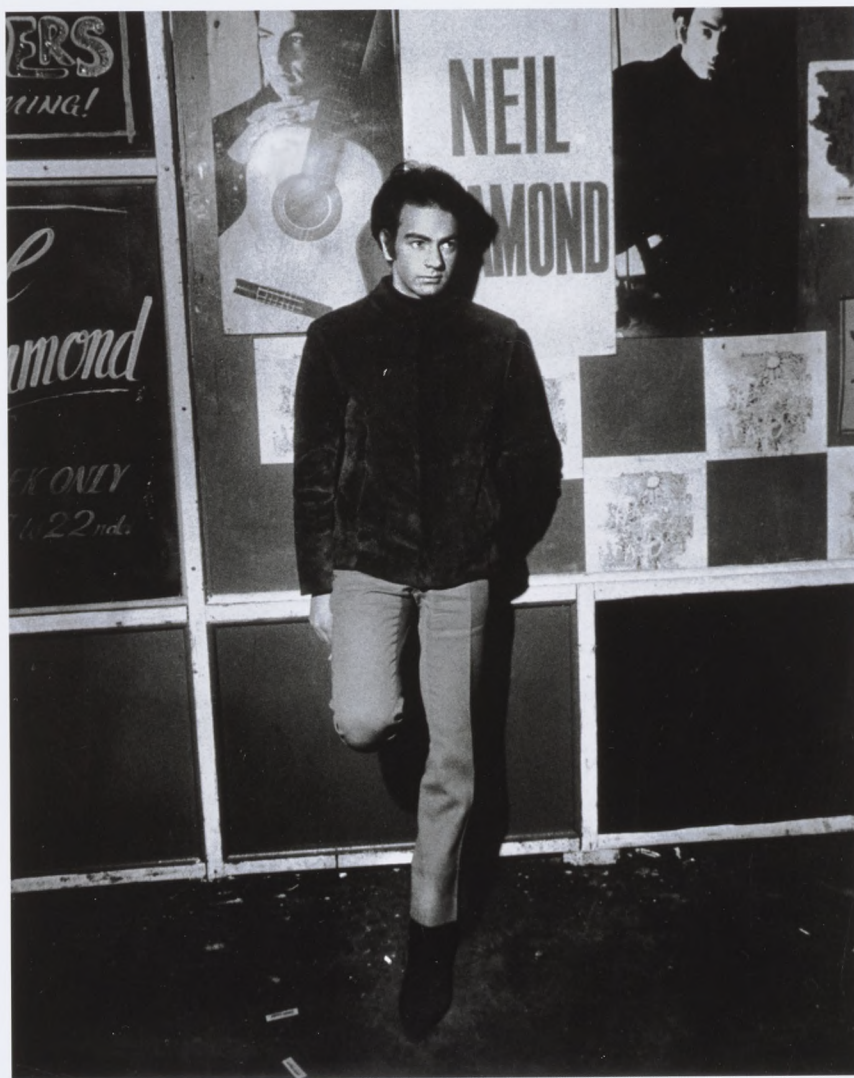
He attended New York University on a fencing scholarship but was getting drawn deeper and deeper into music, especially into lyric writing. "I was bored by school, and writing lyrics in class was interesting," he once said. "I never really chose songwriting. It

just absorbed me and became more and more important in my life as the years passed."

After a failed first single with Columbia Records, Diamond became a writer at the fabled Brill Building. His true arrival came when the Monkees scored a Number One smash with his song "I'm a Believer" in 1966. The band had several more hits with Diamond songs, including "A Little Bit Me, a Little Bit You"—though Diamond wrote all of these songs to record himself.

After signing a solo deal with Bang Records, Diamond began taking the pop world by storm. "Solitary Man" was his first hit, followed by "Cherry, Cherry," "Kentucky Woman,"

and many others. In his 2006 history of the Brill Building, *Always Magic in the Air*, Ken Emerson notes "how inventive and varied [Diamond's] initial singles were, running the gamut from folk to Latin to blues and nearly garage rock, plus a few pop ballads." (One notable difference between Diamond and the other Brill Building writers is that he always



THIS PAGE Neil Diamond gets his start, 1963 (top); marquee man, 1967. **OPPOSITE PAGE** In the studio, mid-seventies.

worked on guitar, whereas virtually everyone else wrote on the piano.)

In 1970, Diamond moved from New York to California, after signing with MCA Records. His sound was transforming with songs like "Cracklin' Rosie," "Sweet Caroline (Good Times Never Seemed So Good)," and "Song Sung Blue" taking on a less punchy, country-flavored feel. "Cracklin' Rosie" was his first Number One.

Meanwhile, Diamond was establishing himself as a consummate stage performer and drawing larger and larger audiences. He was growing into a new sense of himself through his confidence in concert. "In a sense, I discovered myself onstage, discovered myself as a person," he once said. "And that's all I've done ever since. Everything I've done onstage since my very early years is development, an enlargement of that whole thing." The 1972 live double-album *Hot August Night* is generally considered the definitive document of Neil Diamond onstage.

In 1973, Diamond returned to Columbia Records, where he remains to this day. His first release was the soundtrack to *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, but around that time, he also announced that he was taking a hiatus from performing, which wound up lasting more than three years. When he returned to touring in 1976, he said, "I had secretly hoped . . . that I would never have to come back and perform. I was exhausted. But then I got itchy about wanting to be in front of an audience again. I wanted to test myself again."

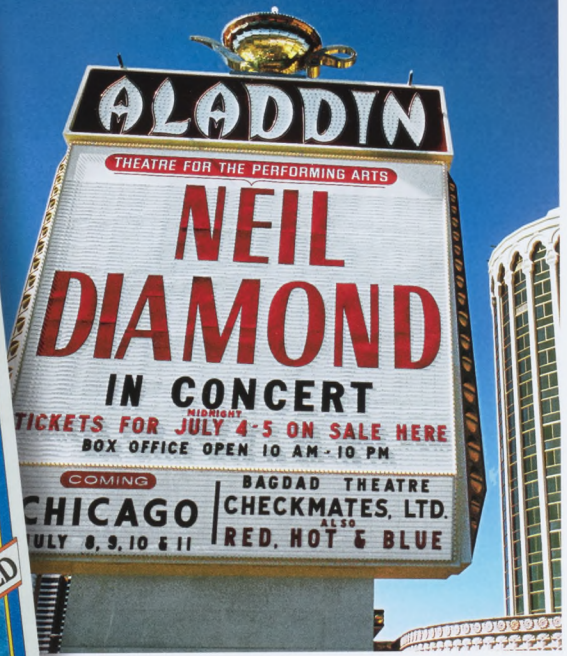
That same year, he released the sweeping *Beautiful Noise*, produced by the Band's Robbie Robertson. On Thanksgiving

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THIS PAGE In Los Angeles, late-seventies; Las Vegas, 1977. OPPOSITE PAGE At Madison Square Garden, 2001.



night, 1976, he appeared at the Band's farewell concert, *The Last Waltz*, and his performance of "Dry Your Eyes" was featured in Martin Scorsese's documentary of the evening. (Asked how he felt about playing the show, he said, "I don't fit in. But you could put me in any show and I wouldn't fit in.")

After "You Don't Bring Me Flowers" gave him another Number One hit, Diamond turned his attention to the silver screen, starring in the 1980 remake of the Al Jolson classic *The Jazz Singer*, opposite Sir Laurence Olivier. The soundtrack included the Top Ten singles "Love on the Rocks," "Hello Again," and "America."

Over the past few decades, Diamond has continued his

reign as an international touring sensation. Meanwhile, an array of artists keep covering his work: In the eighties, the British reggae band UB40 had a worldwide smash with his composition from almost twenty years earlier, "Red Red Wine." The same year the UB40 song reached Number One in the U.S., "America" served as the theme song for Michael Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign.

In 1994, Urge Overkill's ominous cover of Diamond's "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon" was an unforgettable highlight of the multiplatinum soundtrack to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. As Diamond became ever more iconic, he even demonstrated the ability to laugh at his own image, appearing on *Saturday Night Live* opposite a Diamond-impersonating Will Ferrell, and accepting a role playing himself in the 2001 comedy *Saving Silverman*.

In 2001, Johnny Cash won a Grammy for his version of "Solitary Man," a song that provided the title to the third volume of his historic *American Recordings* series. (The song also served as the title for a 2010 film starring Michael Douglas and Susan Sarandon.) Meanwhile, "Sweet Caroline" was assuming anthemic proportions, most notably as the eighth-inning sing-along for Boston Red Sox home games (Diamond announced his 2008 world tour, including a stop at Boston's Fenway Park, in an appearance on the stadium's video screen during the season's opening game).

But in 2005, focus on the cover versions and the touring persona shifted back to Neil Diamond the songwriter. Rick Rubin wanted to see Diamond get back to where he once belonged and created a sound more stripped-down than anything we had ever heard from him. The response to this approach was overwhelming: *12 Songs*, written entirely by Diamond, debuted at Number Four on the *Billboard* album chart, his highest-ever debut. In a four-star review, *Rolling Stone* wrote "He's

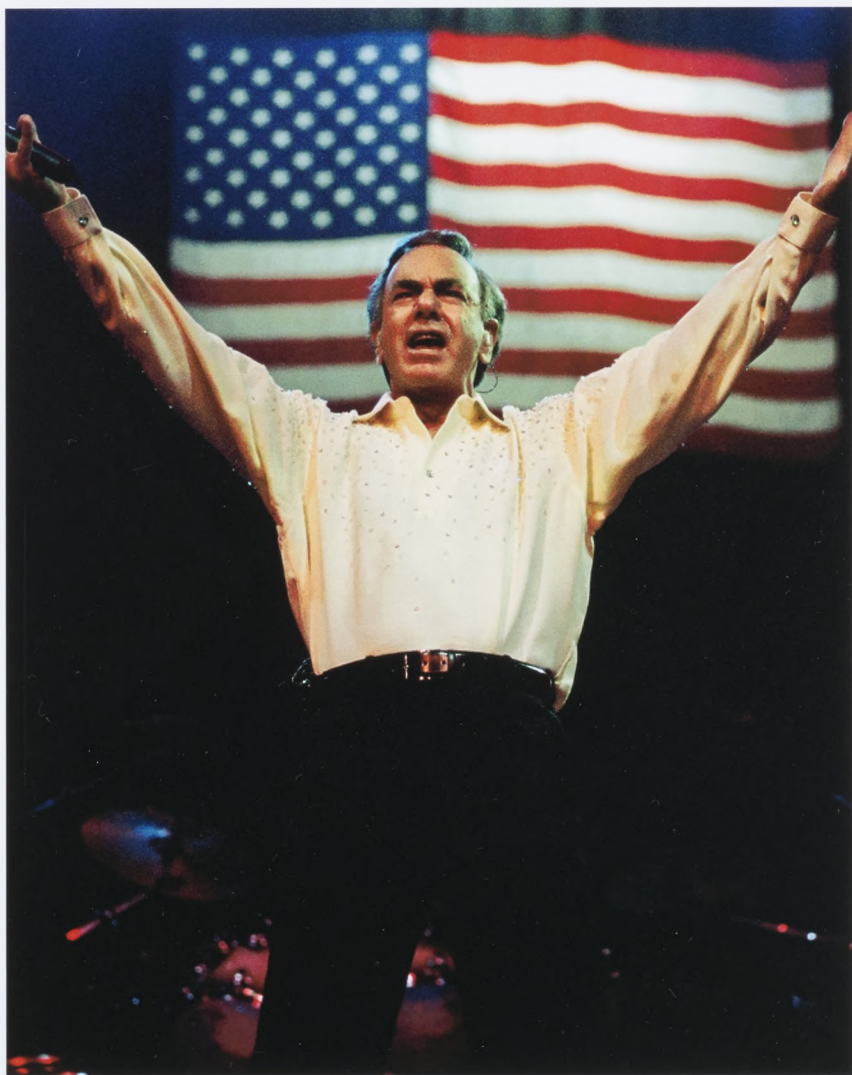
as direct as he's ever been with his lyrics, which give them an extra poignancy and . . . a simple profundity."

With *Home Before Dark*, he pushed himself even harder. "That first *12 Songs* album was more of a testing of the waters and a 'getting to know you' album," he said. "This one is 'We know each other and respect each other, and let's try and knock people's socks off,' and that's what we went for." On the album's disarmingly honest "Act Like a Man," he laid it all on the table: "Songwritin'/It's just a little bit frightenin'/Like playing with lightning'."

Diamond's 2008 tour, the most ambitious stage production of his career, took him to thirty-seven North American cities and to England's massive Glastonbury Festival. The show was documented

with the *Hot August Night/NYC* DVD, which not only went double platinum but also aired as a wildly successful TV special on CBS.

Diamond was honored as the 2009 MusiCares Person of the Year, and fans from Tim McGraw to Coldplay, from the Jonas Brothers to Jennifer Hudson, turned out to celebrate his career and charity work. In November of 2010, Diamond returned to his role as an interpretive singer with the *Dreams* album, a collection of fourteen of his favorite songs by such songwriters as Leonard Cohen and Randy Newman — and brought it all back home with a stripped-down version of his own



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More than forty-five years after his first recording, Neil Diamond continues to work with the fire and drive of a new artist. At a stage in his life when he could easily be humming along on cruise control, he still wants to explore the limitless possibilities of songwriting.

"Each album means as much as my very first record—if not more," he recently said, "and the experience of creation has yet to become easy. In truth, I'm as hungry as I ever was." ❁