

DAN MANGAN AND THE QUEST FOR POLARIS

By Barbara Bruederlin

It's 3:30 on a scorching afternoon, with not a whisper of a cloud in the sky, the sun all but boiling your eyeballs inside their parched sockets. And there, on the desiccated turf in front of Stage 4, that notoriously sun-baked spot that offers not the slightest sliver of shade, a crush of sweaty bodies are dancing, clapping, and singing joyously that robots need love too. If I wasn't convinced before of the power that Dan Mangan has to engage an audience, I sure was now.

"I was amazed everybody stuck it out," he confides later, as we cool off by the Bow River. "It was so hot and we got a great crowd and everybody was really giving themselves to the concert." Dan seems genuinely surprised and humbled by his reception at the Calgary Folk Music Festival, but his was certainly one of the more buzzed names on the island that weekend. At the autograph table, the throngs of fans lined up for Mangan outnumbered those waiting for Corb Lund, the day's highly anticipated headliner. At the media tent, interview requests for a performer whose only Main Stage appearance was as a 'tweener were the most numerous ever received. In the merch tent, he also did well, well, very well.

There's no denying that Dan Mangan's star is steadily rising, but it hasn't happened without a lifetime of hard work. "I've always had an absurd amount of ambition. There's no reason to work any less hard at this than any other job on the planet," he reasons. "I remember as a kid I was sweeping a deck, doing a really crappy job and my dad came out and within 10 seconds completely swept the deck. I had spent 30 minutes out there completely wallowing, pushing dust around. That was a real moment for me."

Working hard, touring incessantly suits the gruff-voiced troubadour. Though he sings with the world-weary raspiness of an old soul, he's a young man with fire in his eye. "As exhausted as I might get on the road, I have a big appetite for people and new experiences," he explains. "Everywhere you go, there's someone there to help you. When you visit someone's hometown they want to show you all the things that most tourists miss."

Despite his hunger for travel and urging people to "get outside of their comfort zones and hometown bubbles", Dan has some inevitable road regrets. Ironically, for someone who studied literature and for whom literature figures so prominently in his music, he has little time left for reading. "It's actually really getting me down". It's not just the cedars, apparently, that he pines for.

Dan has a reputation for accepting every gig and media request that comes his way. The fact that six reporters were scheduled to speak to him at 5:30pm on the final day of the Calgary Folk Festival speaks volumes about both his capacity for work and his enormous popularity. He shrugs it off matter-of-factly. "If you want to open a restaurant or if you want to sell lawnmowers, it doesn't matter, you should have that same kind of ambition to do a good job."

He's no stranger to accolades, but Dan maintains that having an album shortlisted for the 2010 Polaris prize "may be the coolest milestone that I've had yet, as an aspiring musician." For a person who is normally so accessible, he is surprisingly tight-lipped about the odds of collecting the big prize, declining to even speculate on the outcome. "I would be happy if they didn't even choose a winner," he insists, when pressed. "The calibre of the bands that are on the list and on the previous shortlists ... I just have so much respect for the award and for everything it stands for."

He may be a consummate diplomat, but *Nice, Nice, Very Nice* is certainly Polaris-worthy. Against a solid field of competitors, this album has the power to rip the most cynical heart into tiny shreds, with detailed observations of the sweet sorrows and painful glories of existence. The signature song, *Robots*, has become so much of a crowd favourite that people risk heat-stroke to participate in the inevitable sing-along. Despite popularity's somewhat double-edged sword, Dan is grateful for the phenomenon that *Robots* has become. "It's hard not to be moved every single time, especially when people are just giving you everything."

Clearly, this crowd favourite would make a most gracious winner.



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