

THE DAMN TRUTH -- Now or Nowhere

Now or Nowhere is the third album by The Damn Truth, a band that, in many ways, has been hiding in plain sight for the last nine years. They've played Europe and crisscrossed the USA and Canada, opened tours for ZZ Top (and partied with Billy Gibbons in his pyjamas), the Sheepdogs, Styx and Rival Sons, sold out the legendary Whisky a Go Go in Los Angeles, sold out the Corona Theatre in their hometown of Montreal, and even had one of their videos featured on the official Janis Joplin Facebook page. It's a lineage of hard work that's come to fruition with Now or Nowhere.

The Damn Truth are Lee-la Baum (lead vocals/guitar), Tom Shemer (lead guitar/vocals), PY Letellier (bass/vocals) and Dave Traina (drums/vocals).

With six tracks produced by Bob Rock (Metallica, Aerosmith, Mötley Crüe, Bon Jovi, Tragically Hip) at The Warehouse Studio in Vancouver, Now or Nowhere is a definitive statement about the band, about the times, and about ourselves as we navigate life, love, and everything else in a world gone seemingly upside down and sideways. Unable to finish the album with Bob because of COVID-19 restrictions, the band recorded the remaining three songs with help from Juno Award-winning producer Jean Massicotte (Patrick Watson, The Damn Truth); mixing was done by Vance Powell (Jack White, Chris Stapleton), Nick DiDia (Bruce Springsteen, Rage Against The Machine), and Mike Plotnikoff (Van Halen, Cranberries, Three Days Grace). It's worth noting there are three Grammy Award winners on this album (Bob Rock, Vance Powell and Nick DiDia).

"I realize that people see us as a hard-rock band," singer/guitarist Lee-la Baum says, "and we are, but we're also, deep-down, rock 'n' roll hippies. All those things about being self-reliant, and community, and peace, and love -- well, that's us. That's who we are."

As if to reinforce that point, when Lee-la and lead guitarist Tom Shemer first met, they were both naked at a hippie festival not far from the Sea of Galilee (where the Bible says Jesus walked on water). "Yeah, totally naked. Just Lee-La and her guitar," Tom adds. "And we've been together ever since. No pretensions. Nothing to hide. Just love."

The power of love is the real thread through this album's musical layers.

"I think with this album we tried to put a conscious effort into writing more positive and uplifting songs," Lee-la explains. "Our previous albums were more of a mirror of what we felt was going on in society; they had a darker underlying tone. With this record, we really wanted to bring hope and positivity back into our songs, focusing on love and not fear."

Tom thinks back to the turning point that inspired the album's title: "There was a moment late at night, in the van, on the road somewhere on a Canadian highway, where we decided there is no more putting off love, no more putting off hope, no more putting off resilience and courage. We decided that it's Now or Nowhere."

The '60s ethos of organic self-sufficiency is the lifeblood of The Damn Truth and the secret to a work ethic that has garnered them almost 2 million streams on Spotify, 60,000 followers on TikTok and more than 2 million YouTube views. Lee-la's voice on the Yves Saint Laurent Mon Paris perfume video ad has been heard internationally, doubling their fan base overnight as the word about The Damn Truth and their powerhouse singer circled the globe.

"We are fortunate enough to live in a time where knowledge is free, and you can basically learn how to do everything yourself." Tom says. "That was instrumental for us as a young band with no budget. We had to make and shoot our own videos, produce and record our own releases and do all the promo ourselves. The by-product of this was that, in a sense, we were the artist, record label and distributor of our art, which allowed us to have insight into what it means/what to expect from a record label, filmmakers, etc."

That DIY attitude appealed to Bob Rock and was reminiscent of his early days working with indie bands during his formative years in Vancouver. He was so impressed with The Damn Truth's attitude and songs, and with Lee-la's voice, that he decided to record them live off the floor, in keeping with the band's '70s rock roots. This allows for a better band dynamic and ensures the bed tracks have that powerful live gig energy that's so crucial to the Bob Rock sound. (Bob calls it, "Getting the FEELS.") "He just got us, what we were about, what we were trying to do," Lee-la recalls. "He was all about the music and having the band support the song every step of the way. He had a clear vision but was also very open to our suggestions and ideas."

Back home in Montreal, it soon became apparent that the pandemic lockdown meant a tough decision for the band.

"When we left Vancouver it was really with, 'See you soon,' not, 'Goodbye,' " Lee-la says. "The experience was so positive that it was a no-brainer to want to come back and finish the album with Bob. So we were all pretty much in shock when COVID took hold and no one could travel. So, finishing the record on our own was definitely out of necessity, not desire."

"It was very daunting at first. How could we actually do this? We were considering releasing the Bob Rock recordings as an EP, but feeling that we still had some very strong songs on our hands, and being firm believers in the album as an art form unto itself, we just didn't want to break apart the body of work. We never try to write concept albums, but in my opinion they end up being just that."

Although the first single, This Is Who We Are Now, sets the tone, it is actually Only Love that sets the theme ("Only love can keep us going/So if we hold on, it'll be all right.") A melancholy song in its demo version, Bob Rock suggested a refocus that brought out its true potential.

"I think we were all scratching our heads in disbelief when he wanted us speed it up that much," Tom says, "but today I can't believe we ever played it any other way, and it's so hard-hitting and rocky now."

This Is Who We Are Now is a classic study of inspiration coming at any time.

"Like almost everything good that The Damn Truth has ever produced, this song was born on the road and could be considered a 100% collaboration among the four of us," Tom points out. "I'll never forget the moment when I was driving to a gig in eastern Texas and PY was sitting in the passenger seat next to me. I told him, 'Dude, press record on the voice memo,' and I hummed, 'This is who we are now' into his phone. Months later, as the band laid down the track in the studio, Lee-la walked into the control room, grabbed the microphone and without writing anything down on paper, she did the take. That was it. Done."

There is no mistaking the arena-rock guitar that pries open the sing-a-long Tomorrow and the underlying sentiment that a lot of us are feeling right now.

"I made a conscious effort to try to forget the past, and say, 'Fuck you' to the future and focus on now," Tom says.

Lonely is a track familiar to fans who've seen the band perform it live, but the a cappella version audiences are used to has been given a serious dose of heaviness and depth. Once again, Tom explains why this song is so emotionally important to the band.

"We were on yet another cross-Canada tour when our van caught fire while we were in it and burned to a crisp on the highway in Sault Ste. Marie. As a band, we always sing together in the van on the long highway drives. Just prior to the van going up in flames, we were singing, 'Brother can you hear me? I'm lonely,' like a Gospel chant. Overwhelmed by the love and support we received from our fans and friends after the fire, we finished the tour in a rental and kept singing Lonely and adding it to the set while we kept working on it.

"We used to play it live as a spiritual a cappella song, but when Bob Rock got his ears on the track, he encouraged us to rethink the arrangement and helped us produce the album version."

The Damn Truth's family vibe and down-to-earth accessibility have endeared them to a loyal fan base who have been championing the band by word of mouth, with Lee-la as their unofficial den mother. "I honestly really love interacting with our fans," she says. "I think they are the sweetest. "I mean, every once in a while you get a hater or someone whose sole intent is to make you feel bad, but, thankfully, it doesn't happen too often. Most of the time, people are overwhelmingly positive and kind. I think our fans get what we are into, and our peace and love and rock 'n' roll vibe still resonate with people out there. As it should!" Lee-la adds with a laugh.

The fans were there when The Damn Truth headlined one of Canada's first drive-in concerts during the COVID lockdown, and especially when the band started a Songs We Love video series of tunes that influenced them. (One cover, Gimme Shelter, deeply resonated during the 2020 summer protests and was picked up by several radio stations.) Where the band truly came into their own was on TikTok, gathering a whole new fan base through their imaginative cover-song videos and by opening their stream to fans' requests.

"We were in serious performance withdrawal. After being on the road for years and being used to playing shows just about every night, it didn't feel right to not be performing." Lee-la says. "We set this goal for ourselves: to release a video a day for a month, or something like that. It

gave us a purpose and it was fun to get dressed up, revisit some of our favourite rock songs, and be reminded of others once the suggestions started coming in. It was pretty awesome to see the numbers go up and to get so much positive feedback from new fans all over the world. What we learned was, you're gonna find your tribe if you look hard enough."

In so many ways, a rock 'n' roll tribe of love and community is something we can all be a part of, right here, right now..