

Feature by Norm Frizzell

The professional music world is a tough business to break into. The Canadian music business is especially tough. Dan Hill, a singer-songwriter from Toronto, is making a stab at it. With an album out on GRT (*Dan Hill*), he is currently opening shows for Murray McLaughlin on a cross-country tour. With a break in the tour, Dan decided to take a two night stint at the Hovel before joining up with Murray in Vancouver. He took a few minutes backstage after his performance last Tuesday to talk about his career and music.

This is not his first experience with recording contracts and all that goes with it. A few years back, Dan, fresh out of high school, signed a contract with RCA. They liked the demo tapes he had sent them and brought him into the studio to cut some more. He admits it was a fluke; recording contracts aren't usually signed the day after the demos are sent in. All was not rosy though:

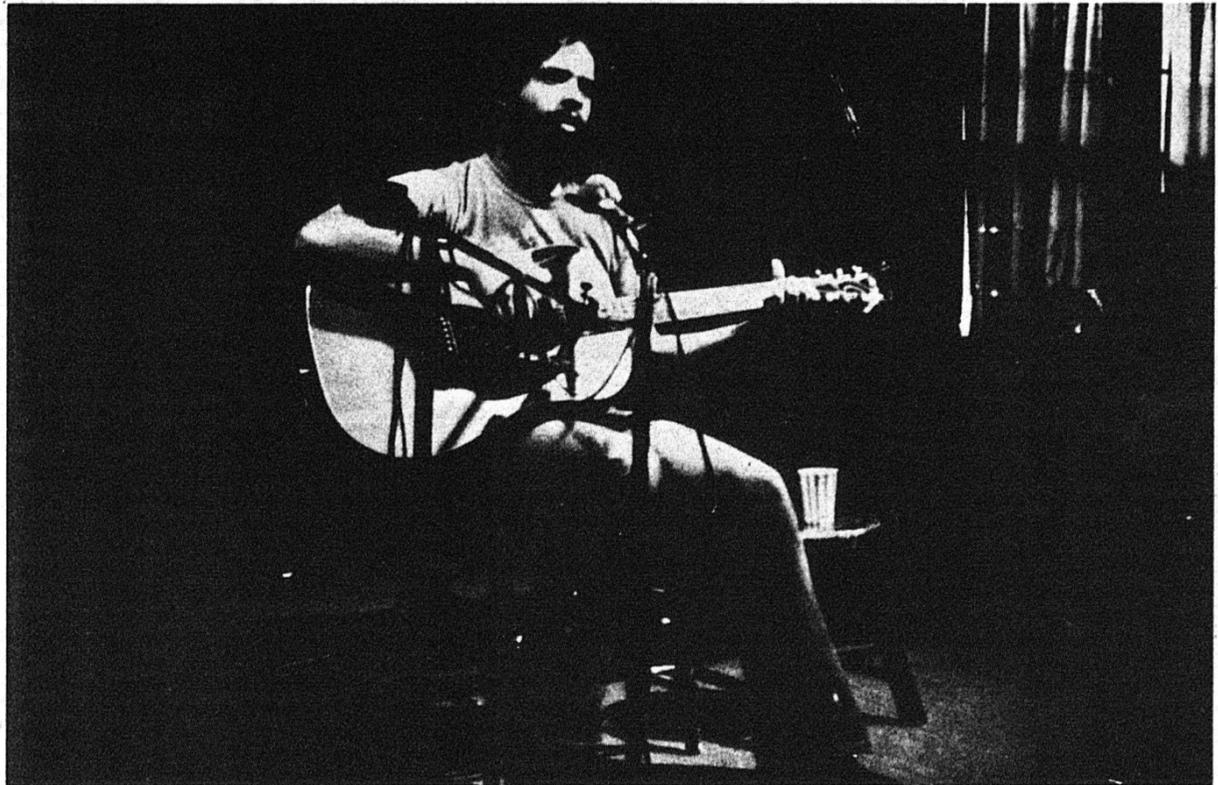
"We released a single that was fairly poorly produced. I didn't get along well with the producers. They paid me \$450 for the session asked me to kick back \$360. I wouldn't do it. There was a tremendous setback and everything screwed up. They screwed up the single. I'm not bitter about it, at all, because it made me grow up fast. I was lucky to go through as young as I was."

With some experience under his belt, Dan headed for New York. Harry Belafonte was interested in doing some of his songs and Jose Feleiciano wanted to manage him. At the same time, he made the rounds of the New York record company offices. Although the results were dismal, Dan was able to chalk it up to experience:

"All the record companies were saying I was not commercial enough and then I'd go over to Belafonte's place and he'd be saying 'Godammit, I really love your stuff.' I really needed that reassurance to keep on knocking



Photos by Curtis Wilson



Dan Hill: "...once I get the hang of how they (record companies) work, they won't be able to manipulate me..."

An uphill climb for Dan

my head against the wall... I'm thankful that he gave me the encouragement."

Dan eventually returned to Toronto, where he did some local gigs and generally laid low for awhile. It wasn't until a few months ago that things began to pick up. With the help of some independent backers, Dan, Matthew McCauley, and Fred Mollin rented some studio time at Mantra Sound in Toronto. A number of local musicians were contacted or dropped in to fill out the arrangements and add their touches. The results were mixed down at Mantra with Dan and Matt supervising the production. Copies were sent to various record companies. GRT was the most enthusiastic about the tapes, eventually buying them. The tapes were then sent to New York's Sterling Sound, where mastering engineer Bob Ludwig cut the acetate for Dan's first solo album.

The album is out in the stores now, in both Canada and the States. Dan is being managed by Bernie Finkelstein, a very important man in the Canadian music scene, being manager of both Bruce Cockburn and Murray McLaughlin, as well as owning True North Records, the label for which they record. With this national tour and a subsequent one in the States, Dan is out obtaining the necessary exposure.

Also in the exposure is a single, "Growing Up", which has been released. In his performance on Tuesday night, Dan related an incident of hearing his single on a Toronto radio station's 'Battle of the Singles':

His initial reaction was one of shock. How could anyone have something so demeaning as a 'Battle of the Singles'? The disc jockey would play two recently released singles and then ask the listeners to phone in, voting for which single they figured deserved a cherished position on the Top Forty playlist. When Dan heard his single was being matched against Linda Ronstadt's latest one, he figured he didn't have a hope in hell against an established artist like Linda. He felt a little moral support for the home team was in order, if only to put in a show. He immediately grabbed the nearest phone and started calling the radio station, voting for his single in as many different voices as he could muster in the given time limit. His diligence paid off. "Growing Up" beat out "Heat Wave" by five votes.

Voting for his own single was just a momentary incidence of inspired craziness. For the most part, Dan is keeping a level headed approach to his accelerating career. In another song from the album, "Seed of Music", Dan sings about the hopes that the music machine does not make a 'Jukebox out of me'. In his present situation Dan feels dehumanization of himself or his music will be avoided:

"The thing I'm really lucky about is that my management is the same one that manages Bruce and Murray. They're very, very intelligent and patient managers. They never will exploit their artists. They'll bill them the way the artists want to be billed. You'll notice with Bruce, for

example, he doesn't do nothing he doesn't want to. He'll just go away in a cave for six months and hide. No one is going to tell him what to do.

"The record company is the same thing. The trick is to control them rather than have them control you. If I can use them to service me rather than have them use me to service them, then everything's all right. I just won't be molded into what they want me to do. I have a good enough relationship with GRT in Canada that it's not going to happen. In the States, it might be a little different; but I'm sure once I get the hang of how they work, they won't be able to manipulate me either."

Dan flew down to Los Angeles yesterday to do the usual rounds of press parties and interviews to promote the recent release of his album in the States. Making it in the States is an important factor for success in Canada. With the major influx of American media across the border, after a rave article in such a publication as *Rolling Stone*, a neglected Canadian artist can all of a sudden find himself the centre of attention.

After a brief stay in the States, Dan will be back at Mantra Sound in December laying down tracks for his second album. This time, Dan's got record company money behind him. The episodes of banging his head against the wall are in the past.

The struggle is not over, though. How far Dan Hill goes in the Canadian music business is now up to himself and the record-buying public.