

# SOMETHING IN THE SONG

Country singer/songwriter **Graham Nancarrow** is singing his way back home.

Written by **WENDY HINMAN**

**T**here is something in the music that makes you want to stay. There is something in baseball that makes you want to play. They both take you into a time-suspending flow state and that is hard to leave. Graham Nancarrow had one of those golden Carlsbad childhoods. Born in '88, there were still enough hills in Carlsbad's hinterlands to ride dirt bikes through. There was fishing and Box Canyon and surfing Warm Waters, so much offered when a boy could still be free range. There was baseball, a garage band and Rob Machado's Surf Club. When Nancarrow graduated from La Costa Canyon High School (2006) he had to pick a path; he had to decide which to put down and which to polish, his glove or his guitar.

## CATCH

The movie "Field of Dreams" fully resolves when Ray Kinsella says to the father he never really knew, "Hey Dad, wanna have a catch?" Graham Nancarrow did know his dad. "We were very close," he says, because they often played catch. (Nancarrow's dad was San Diego's local news icon, Loren Nancarrow, who passed

away too young in 2013 of brain cancer.) Once you start playing catch you talk about other things. The catch is enough of a distraction for a man to reveal his heart. "I got to know so much about him talking during catch."

"My dad really loved baseball," Nancarrow says. "Baseball was what I wanted to do since I was a kid." And he was good enough to pursue it beyond high school. Nancarrow did try the expected college path outside of baseball and music. He went to Cal State San Francisco, but "I wasn't paying attention. I could hear the crack of the bats," on the CSUSF diamond from his dorm room. "I could have been a walk-on." There is something in baseball.

When he left San Francisco with college unfinished, Loren picked him up. "It was a long ride home with my dad. He didn't say much." Not much out loud, but internally between them was baseball and music, the potential and the futurity of where the road would take them.

## PICK

While at LCC, Nancarrow was in a punk rock band, Mised Citizens, which won The Battle of the Bands and signed with the Rancid record label. That band broke

**"I can still remember the sound of the sprinklers. Every time my daddy watered the yard; I can still remember just what he told me, Son you're gonna make it but you gotta try hard."**

*—"Sprinklers," by Graham Nancarrow*



up as everyone was finding their adult way. But there is something in the music. Nancarrow says his dad introduced him to his music (the Beatles, Motown) and to country music (Cash, Waylon, Elvis). "Hound Dog!" He says when he heard that for the first time, he watched all the old Elvis movies.

It wasn't an overnight change from punk rock to country. Like Social Distortion playing rockabilly, "I had a couple of crossover songs between rock and country." And then he met some amazing musicians in dive bars, where the best ones are usually found. Or in other great art spaces: "I was in Barrio Logan at the Two Roses," he says of the tattoo parlor/barbershop/coffee house. There he met and heard Joe Wizzy for the first time. And he also, "saw Russell Hayden come in with a double-neck lap steel guitar." Before long, Wizzy, Hayden and Graham added Ron Kerner on drums and Tommy Andrews on guitar. The award-winning band Nancarrow came together.

After creating some buzz on the West Coast, it was time for the next move. There were shows at the Belly Up Tavern. "That's my Grand Ol' Opry," Nancarrow says of the history of that hallowed hall in Solana Beach. But before the spotlight, every artist has dues to pay in some smoky old club and in some quiet room where the work is done unseen over and over again. It's not just country music artists anymore, but especially in country, all red dirt roads lead to Nashville.

**HIT**

"I fell in love with Nashville," Nancarrow says of the hurly-burly capital of country music. He got a job at the legendary Tootsie's in the heart of the Honkytonk Highway on Broadway, a stone's throw from the Ryman Auditorium. Nashville will make you sweat through every T-shirt you own. In Music City, USA, you have to say yes to what comes and make a way where there isn't any.



Before you get to play in Nissan Stadium, you gotta pick a lot of strings. One time when Nancarrow thought he was done working, he got a call from a band that needed a frontman immediately. He grabbed an Uber and a guitar and stepped on stage to perform without rehearsal, let alone introductions. That's how he met musician and songwriter John Bohlinger. Their guitars sang to each other. Bohlinger had just lost his son; Nancarrow, his father. Country music is made for grieving and healing and they started working together.

Another time performing at Tootsie's, someone requested "Don't Stop Believing." Just as he was singing about people "hidin' somewhere in the night," he looked down and saw George Strait in the audience. He couldn't believe he was singing a song by the not-a-country band Journey. And that is where the cowboy rode away.

When artists in Nashville aren't gigging, they are recording, or hoping to. Rhett Miller of the Old 97's called the band and said the great Vance Powell had an opening. While recording the album "Hot Chicken," Powell challenged the band to sit for a couple hours and write a tribute to their roots: "old punkers turned country who surf." The result was the surfy instrumental "Hot Chicken Consequences" (hot chicken is to Nashville what tacos are to Carlsbad). It was picked up for the soundtrack of the Amazon Prime doc, "Deep Fried Gold," about the emergence of the hot chicken scene in Nashville.

**HOME**

Nashville did its work and so did Nancarrow. It put him on stages big and small. It introduced him to the important players of the industry, producers and sound engineers. The band Nancarrow came out of Nashville with four studio albums and multiple EPs. It polished up Nancarrow's range and pluck. But it was time to come home.

Like Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, he's country, but also western. Like Dwight Yoakam and Conway Twitty, he can shine on the best coast. Nancarrow does Vegas residencies at the MGM about five times a year, but it is with a view of the Pacific that he'll add to California's great country music tradition. More than fame or name, it's the flow state of rhythm and harmony that sings to Nancarrow's soul. Whether he is composing in a van on the beach or headlining on stage, there's something in the music that makes him want to stay.

a) The band Nancarrow (from left): Joe Wizzy, Graham Nancarrow, Russell Hayden and Ron Kerner. b) The family Nancarrow (from left): Hannah, Loren, Graham, Susie and Britta (photos courtesy of Graham Nancarrow).



a) Nancarrow helping his garden-loving dad move mulch. b) Nancarrow at La Costa Canyon High School, when life was diamonds. c) The Nancarrow band playing the Del Mar Concert Series when life became rhinestones (photos courtesy of Graham Nancarrow).

