



After more than a decade as the singer/songwriter for Broken Poets, Tim McDonald is not quite a household name . . .not yet anyway. If the reviews of their third album, “Everything in Nature,” are any indication, you’ll be hearing more of this talented musician in the near future. His gene pool is deep (Sister Llory McDonald was a member of Jerry Riopelle’s band before creating her own band Combo Deluxe) and the road to success a lengthy one, but Tim has no regrets. He realizes he was simply caught between the demise of the record label and the emergence of the digital world. That in-between territory so many Indie artists have been forced to navigate during this period of transition.

If you want to know more about Tim McDonald just listen to those penetrating lyrics that affect even the most casual listener. He walks you through his thoughts like a tour guide pointing out the indignities of a world that resists full examination. And although he has an easygoing demeanor, don’t discount the passion he has for his work.

Tim sat down recently to discuss his career and the revelation that we are all part of nature. Something which he believes so strongly that fifty percent of the new CD’s proceeds will be donated to The Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace and Oxfam.

I started by asking him why he wrote songs:

Tim McDonald: Well (Laughing) I probably started as a teenager just needing to work through any stress that I had and didn’t know how to express it any other way, but now it’s sort of evolved into something else. It’s more of a craft and I’m able to do it and think at the same time (Laughs).

Earth Village: The band began in New York and made a pit stop in New Orleans and Austin before settling back down in your hometown of Phoenix. What was your New York experience like?

TM: New York was great. I got to work with some unbelievably talented people, Robert Scoville (Tom Petty’s sound engineer) and Jonathan Mover (Drummer with Fuel and Alice Cooper), plus Keith Lentin who is one of the top session players in New York. Also, I got to play in the same clubs that Dylan played in and record at Skyline Studios where bands like Fleetwood Mac and David Bowie recorded. As a matter of fact Steely

Dan came in right after we did our demo, so I guess you could say we got to open up for them at the studio.

EV: You were there on September 11th?

TM: Yeah, I love New York. I was deciding between LA and New York and chose New York because of the people. I mean, if you're going to be rejected they'll tell you right to your face instead of behind your back and that's just so refreshing.

But yeah, September 11th, it was horrible for the entire country, but in the city itself, it was just . . . I mean six months later they were still having funerals and it just seemed like the bottom dropped out. That's when I thought about New Orleans (Laughs) I guess I was just going on tour of all the disaster sites.

EV: Then Austin?

TM: Yeah, I liked the music scene there, but it just seemed too small after New York. That's when I came back to Phoenix and the funny thing is, I grew up here my whole life hearing the words Paradise Valley and I never really got it, I didn't even think about what those two words meant, I just took it for granted I guess and after two years in New York I came back and I'm like, "Paradise Valley," I get it now, it's freaking paradise.

EV: So now you're back in Arizona and have your own record label, Wordvender, how has the digital age affected your career?

TM: I tell you honestly, the greatest thing that ever happened to me was never really getting signed by a major record label. I mean I had one record deal with a company that really didn't have any money, so we got shelved and stuck in a corner. I'm so glad to be out of that. Now with Wordvender, I'm in full control and I've got a catalog of music that I can license. The worst thing a band could do right now is sign with a record label, because they still haven't figured out how to deal with the whole digital sales side of things.

We work with CD Baby, who got us into iTunes, and between those sites, our MySpace page and others we've become part of the digital landscape and developed our own national fan base.

EV: "Optimism in E-Minor," was such a great collection of songs—

TM: Thank you.

EV: How do you follow up something that you had so much success with, or do you always feel that your newest CD is like your new baby?

TM: Yeah, I really do think that the new record is better, I feel like we tried to write pop songs on "Optimism in E Minor" and the new one is just a little more heartfelt.

EV: As with all emerging artists you sometimes need to find other ways to pay the mortgage. Tell me about the time you decided you weren't going to do anything but take your guitar and live by whatever you made on your music alone. What was that like?

TM: Wow. Yeah, well, I decided to go play coffee houses throughout Arizona and into California and back, and just tour and tour and it's kind of funny because even though people liked the music and they bought my CD's, I felt that the audience would look at me like . . . how good could I really be if I was playing in a coffee house . . . I mean you're only going to be taken so seriously when you're in that kind of venue, no matter how talented you are. I felt that people were listening to my songs thinking that they were songs that were being played on the radio, but they just didn't know who sung them. So I decided I needed to go back to writing songs and picking my spots. Like opening up for Seven Mary Three or James McMurtry or Ian Moore. At this point it's a matter of quality over quantity.

EV: But could you survive on your music alone if need be?

TM: Oh, absolutely. I mean I'd barely get by, but I could make it work. I'll always find a way to make it work.

EV: Now, tell me about the title of the new CD, "Everything in Nature," and how you got so involved with environmental issues.

TM: Okay so I'm outside thinking about my career and questioning all these decisions, what I should be doing, and just thinking about myself so much and I'm staring at the trees and the nature around me, and thinking—I mean I'm a songwriter so I think too much already anyway—and I'm going over thoughts in my head and I started to realize that everything around me in nature wasn't asking these questions. And that was the first thought that came to me—how interesting, maybe I could write a song about it, but it just hit me that everything in nature has its own pre-determined will already set within it. I mean we might think we have free will to do what we want, but in a way our body becomes a fully grown body on its own will, I mean you're not telling your body to become a fully grown woman or man, so there are things, even within ourselves, that are already set in place, but we're the only thing in nature that is aware of itself, and therefore it must be our responsibility to help maintain it. So it was that initial realization that sparked the inspiration for the songs, and once the record was done I thought —Let's give back instead of worrying about ourselves so much. It just seemed the obvious thing to do considering where the songs came from.

EV: For an artist like yourself who's not wealthy or financially set, it's a pretty bold move to donate so much money (50% of all the proceeds) to these causes, so it's obviously something you must feel strongly about.

TM: Yeah, it really had an impact on me and made me realize how selfish I'm being and we're all being, I mean the songs on the record really speak to that. We're all here trying

to make our mark on the world to the detriment of the planet. In fact we're releasing this video now for the song "Idle Thought" and you want to know what the great thing about the video is?

EV: What?

TM: We're not in it. (Laughs) ... I mean I'm not knocking other bands, but we're all stuck in this mentality of, "What new guitar can I hold in the video while I'm strumming my chords and acting like I'm singing my song. What look can I give?" It's just so ridiculous. When I came up with the idea of not being in the video I started watching other videos and thought we're just repeating ourselves over and over—you know, "How cool can I look? How can I be a rock star?" and I never wanted to be a rock star, it's never been about that. Maybe when I was really young that might've been exciting, but I've never really wanted that.

Just think how many times an artist's video will get in the way of perceiving a song? When you're in your car listening to a song on the radio, the songwriter's words become images in your mind, and it becomes your song –

EV: You create your own video to the music.

TM: Exactly. But then you watch the video on TV and you're stuck with Billy Idol in your face. (Laughs) Everyone seems to be a rock star and it's all about them, I mean I realize we have to have some kind of image and I understand that, but if I'm going to be about anything it's going to be about the songs, not about, "How cool can I look."

EV: Do you think of yourself as a storyteller or someone who molds images in someone's mind?

TM: Yeah, the songs seem to come in different spurts like that. One minute I'm telling a story and the next I'm throwing out images, it's hard to put a finger on what I do. I guess I put words together that create images and usually a story unfolds from there. But it's never contrived.

EV: If you knew definitively that there were no listeners left on the planet and it was just you . . . no one else. Would you still be writing songs?

TM: Wow, that's a great question. Well, okay, here's the dilemma. I've always heard these musicians say, "I don't give a crap what people think about my music," and the first thing I think is, "If you didn't care what people thought then go out in the desert and play. Why are you bothering to play where anybody could hear you." And so of course there's always that side of me that wants to be heard. But I have to be honest there is this other side of me that just enjoys sitting by myself and writing songs. Maybe just playing for the cat, although I guess you could consider that an audience.

But, yeah, an artist always wants some reflection from an audience, everybody does, if they say they don't then I think they're lying. So I guess to answer your question, yes I would still play, but it would be discouraging to know that it would never be heard.

EV: Early in your career, like many young artists, you drank and smoked to excess at times. Then around 21 or so you just quit everything. What effect did that have on your songwriting? And your life, for that matter.

TM: Yeah, I guess I was heading down a path that wasn't going anywhere and I was kind of hiding from my feelings, but as soon as I stopped drinking I'll tell you what, everything just opened up and I was able to access a part of my creativity that I was never able to access before and that just keeps growing and getting richer and richer and it all started when I quit. I'm just so grateful to be able to look back and see where I came from. It gives me some perspective.

EV: So what's the future look like?

TM: Well, I'm already writing songs for the next record, but that's probably a couple of years away. I'll be spending most of my time promoting "Everything in Nature." I've got this great publicist who is able to get the record into the right hands for reviewing. Then of course I have Wordvivor, which is the greatest thing now because I can actually steer my career in the direction I want and have total control—I mean do you think a record label would allow me to give 50% of my proceeds to a cause like Greenpeace? Don't get me wrong, a record label knows how to make money, and I guess that's my next challenge. But I couldn't be happier with the path I'm heading down now. It's an exciting time to be an artist.