Interview/Profile
By Litsa Dremousis

Harvey Danger frontman, Sean Nelson, is a vision of nerd-chic splendor tonight in a seersucker blazer and wire-rimmed glasses and his smokestack curls sway with each arch of his throat. The seminal Seattle band has packed the Crocodile Café and the crowd shouts out requests, in equal measure, from the group's three discs, 1998's *Where Have All the Merrymakers Gone?*, 2000's *King James Version,* and last year's *Little By Little*. During "Little Round Mirrors", perhaps *LBL*'s finest track ("A shooting star is/ a little piece of/ cosmic debris/ desperately wanting to fall to earth"), Nelson's vocals swoop and careen with the velocity of a tidal wave and the effect is drenching. His usually ethereal high notes fail him, though, and he is visibly chagrined. "I guess I shouldn't have smoked all that crystal meth before the show," he deadpans between songs. "Speed kills."

Landmark indie label, Kill Rock Stars, is re-releasing *Little by Little* on July 25 and Nelson and I meet at his apartment the week after the show to discuss the record's newest incarnation, Harvey Danger's circuitous history, and "Flagpole Sitta," a.k.a. *that song*. At thirty-three, the California native is an integral part of the Seattle arts community (MSN music editor, *Stranger* blogger/ editor emeritus, KEXP deejay, Barsuk Records co-owner, one-time Seattle Sound contributor) and a critically lauded songwriter *(Little By Little*, especially, received lustrous praise), but still gets erroneously tagged as a one hit wonder. Nelson's framed portrait of Phillip Roth watches us as we talk on the living room couch.

Litsa Dremousis for Seattle Sound: The Kill Rock Stars release is?

Sean Nelson: July 25.

SS: I read that it's different.

SN: It's a little different. It feels different for us because we changed the order of the second half and we swapped a song from the bonus disc with a song that was on the record. "Incommunicado" was on the record and "Picture Picture" was on the bonus disc and we switched them.

SS: That's great, because everyone loves "Picture Picture".

SN: We felt that it didn't fit on the record, that it was too aggressive.

SS: It's got sharper edges.

SN: As time went by, it became clearer that those sharper edges were missing from the record, I think. Now it feels like the record is actually done and having the power to revise it like that was really exciting. Because at first we thought, maybe we should leave it because that's the way it was, but then we thought, you know, in every period of this band's life I thought, I wish we had done that differently. And this was a chance to do that. It's a tiny victory, but it feels huge for us.

SS: Did Kill Rock Stars approach you or did you approach them?

SN: I was walking downtown, having just come from a job interview. I didn't really want the job and I was walking downtown and feeling like, what have I done with my life? Suddenly this Volvo zooms up alongside me and hear this voice from inside say, "Hey, Sean! Ijust heard the new Harvey Danger song on the radio and it's amazing!" I had no idea who it was at first, but then I saw it was Slim Moon and he was talking about "Cream and Bastards Rise" getting played on KEXP. And I was like, wow, what a great thing to have happen when you're walking downtown feeling weird anyway. So he kept getting in touch with me and saying, "That song is really great." And after the third time he got in touch, I asked, "Do you want to put it out as a single?" And he said, "Yeah, I'd love to put it out as a single." So Kill Rock Stars did that as a single. I doubt it was a huge seller for them, but we actually got a royalty from it. Our very first record company royalty. And it wasn't a ton of money, but it was more money than we expected to see. And it was a really nice thing. I've always bowed before Kill Rock Stars. They've put out many of my favorite records of all time from bands that are so important to me. Sleater-Kinney and Unwound especially, and the Decemberists. So at one point, we wanted the music to get picked up by a label, but it was too weird for me to be doing it on Barsuk—although I think they're going to be putting out sort of a single/EP later on in the year as well. So we asked Kill

Rock Stars, do you want to license the record? Because at that point, we had very limited distribution, through a great company called Junket Boy, which is the distribution wing of the Coalition of Independent Music Stores. They really helped us out in a massive way, but they only get it in one hundred stores or something. I don't know, I can't remember the actual number, which was fine then. But we thought, we don't need it to have a big push, we just need it to be available everywhere. Kill Rock Stars has distribution through ADA and through Touch and Go and so he said, yeah, let's do it. And I have to say, with my experience with record labels, which is with lots of indies and lots of majors, I've never had an experience that was almost so completely hands off. The Kill Rock Stars ethos seems to be, "What do you want to do?" And then you say, "Uh, two CDs in a jewel box?"

SS: They gave you that kind of autonomy?

SN: Yeah. I had come to think of that sort of thing as mythical. All indies talk a good game about artistic control, but very few of them actually allow the artists to do whatever they want to do. And it's actually smart business sense not to let artists do whatever they want to do. But thankfully, Kill Rock Stars operates on a totally different principle from a business sense and they have proven that that also pays off. I admire them so much and I feel very grateful.

SS: That's got to be exciting.

SN: It's super-exciting! I'm someone who cares what label the record is on. I think it matters, even in just a small, fan way. I think it's part of the expression of the record. To have Kill Rock Stars name on our thing is a huge validation.

SS: Back in the fall, *Little by Little* topped 100,000 downloads. What's it at now?

SN: I honestly don't know. After 100,000, I stopped checking [as of July, 2006, the number was close to 150,000]. I was hoping for 20,000. I thought, maybe we can reach 20,000 because 20,000 people bought *King James Version.* Of course, we can't know how many people downloaded *Little by Little* because they like Harvey Danger or because they're into the idea of a free record, but for whatever reason they did it, we felt vindicated by that. By the attention we were able to get about the record. Not about the personality

or whatever, but about the record. We were linked on Slashdot and BoingBoing and Fark, sort of the tech nerd clearing houses, places that I was vaguely aware of, but they're so unbelievably well-trafficked. And a lot of those sites also linked to our non-manifesto, which was great, too. That, apparently, got a lot of attention. Someone put it on the syllabus for a class at M.I.T. I wrote that document and Jeff edited it and we worked together very closely, probably for the first time. He's completely drove the entire process of the downloads. He built the web site with some friends and imagined the project from the get-go. It was his idea to begin with. As soon as he said it, Aaron and I were completely on board right away. But it made so much sense after having had a semi-disastrous experience at South by Southwest with the record after we finished it. We played at the Barsuk showcase and people seemed to like it and it wasn't a *bad* show. We played first and there a huge line for us, and it all felt very right. And then we got offstage and we were looking around and no one cared. And the thought of having to build up a "buzz" about our band *again*, felt like repaying dues we didn't necessarily have to pay in the first place.

SS: You're taking the final twice. You'd already passed the class.

SN: And also, it felt absurd because there's no 99 cent version of our story. There's no bite size thing. You have to say the whole story in order for it to be interesting. And we don't look hot or young and we don't sound hot or young and we're *not* hot or young. [Laughs.] We're not old per se, either, but we're just a band and that is always what we tried to be. And it made us feel a little ridiculous and cheap being at this industry thing, trying to get industry attention, when we didn't even really enjoy it the first time. I go to South by Southwest and I have an okay time, but there's so much desperation and so much delusion and so much of the wrong stuff is focused on. Part of the reason we got back together is to assuage our sense of having focused on all the wrong things initially, when we got all the attention we got. So we went home and licked our wounds and Jeff came up with the download concept and it felt exactly right. And I'm so happy we did it. Even though we gave ourselves a year to recoup the cost of the album, which was expensive to make, and which we paid for completely by ourselves, which was tough to do. And we're well within reach. We'll definitely do it before the year is up.

SS: That's great.

SN: We really felt that we had to prove something to ourselves, that we

actually another record in us. We actually felt the call on this in a big way.

SS: It shows on the record, too. I gave it to a bunch of friends for Christmas and, to a person, they loved it. But I'm sure you know, the Harvey Danger name carries a lot of baggage. You know how the record made Magnet's "Ten Best Records You Didn't Hear This Year" list, or whatever it was called? Once people listened to it, they loved it. But as an objective observer, it seems like the baggage was an impediment to getting people to listen to it. There's still this MTV tag clinging to the band.

SN: It's always going to be there. It's always what the band is going to mean. That's how the band was introduced.

SS: Did you ever consider releasing this disc under a different name?

SN: When we first got back together at the tenth anniversary show, it felt so good that I thought, let's keep making music, but let's call it something else. Because Harvey Danger is inextricably tied to what it was.

SS: When you go to Amazon and look up *Merrymakers*, under "People Who Bought This Item Also Bought", stuff like Marcy Playground comes up. But I never think of you guys as being part of that.

SN: Right. The truth about the band is that there's the Seattle version and the national version. And the Seattle version, the people who came to Harvey Danger and the people who come to it now, it means something else. Just in Seattle, I think. I think outside Seattle, it means "commercial alternative rock of the late nineties" and "one hit wonder". And it does mean Marcy Playground and Fuel and all those other bands and when we were thrust into that context, it felt so wrong to me—to all of us, really—that I was incapable of having a sense of humor about it. And that's what everybody around me advised, just laugh about it.

SS: But how old were you at the time?

SN: I was twenty-four.

SS: That's the crux. At that age, you don't have the sense of perspective and experience to laugh at those things.

SN: And you have to know who you are enough to know what you want.

And I knew none of those things. And it helps when the band is tight friends and you have friendships and you can lean on each other. With us, you'd think we would have been, that we would have been prepared for that because we lived together for three years beforehand. We were in each other's pockets all day every day for years. But once all that stuff started happening, I completely withdrew and everybody withdrew. We all went through the same thing, but we all went through it separately. We weren't there for each other. When I was in the Long Winters, we were touring with Nada Surf—they might have internalized some of that same stigma, because I was also present when Barsuk was considering putting out the Nada Surf record [*Let Go*] and as soon as I heard it, I really wanted it to be a Barsuk release.

SS: It's an amazing disc.

SN: Yeah, *Let Go* is a great record and it's also the perfect record, as a gesture, for a band to make. Musically it's beautiful and conceptually, it couldn't be more perfect. But when the record first came down, it was like, "We've been in touch with this band, Nada Surf" and people were like, "Ah, man! *Nada Surf?* Are you crazy? Don't put out *Nada Surf*! They're from the nineties! They're a one hit wonder!" And I immediately related it to my experience. We heard things from inner-circle Barsuk advisors who said, if you put this Nada Surf record out, it will destroy everything you ever built. You will ruin Barsuk. And I think that's the beauty of Josh Rosenfeld because he was like, oh yeah? I'm putting it out, because you're saying that, all the more reason. But really it was just that he had faith in their music and really liked it. But anyway, watching them, they didn't even reinvent themselves. They just plowed ahead. They believed that what they were doing was good and they knew they were doing it for the right reasons. They knew what they wanted and they got it. And watching it was so beautiful, not just because of the sort of reflected fantasy—that it could happen with Harvey Danger—it wasn't like that, it was more like, these guys became really good friends of mine and I watched them feel the reaction from the audience. I watched them vindicate themselves. It made cry, it made me so happy. And I did project a lot of their experience onto mine, but the fact that Harvey Danger is and was such a stigmatized institution, that's been a big part of my life for the last several years. Obviously. I never liked the band name to begin with. That was the other issue.

SS: It's so self-deprecating.

SN: It's based on a piece of cartoon graffiti on the wall of the UW Daily's offices. It's the name of a comic strip. When we got started, it was Jeff and Aaron, two friends saying let's play some rock and roll. They went to the store and they bought their guitar and their bass on the same day. All that stuff is really true, it's not just a story. They learned to play music together because they started loving rock and roll at the same time, in college. And Harvey Danger seemed like the perfect, unpretentious, sort of site-specific band name, a throwaway. And when Evan and I joined, that's what the band was already called, so it wasn't a big deal. But when we got our recognition, I became acutely self-conscious about *everything*. Mainly because it didn't seem like there was a way to communicate the finer points of anything in the context of MTV and commercial radio. It was incredibly lonely and frustrating, to get that much exposure seems like such a gift, but to have that exposure laser-focused on three and a half minutes and almost no one was focused on, or even mildly interested in, or even aware of anything else. You're supposed to be very grateful for that, and in a way you are, but if three and a half minutes were all you were interested in as a band, you wouldn't be a band.

SS: It's stripped from any larger context.

SN: Right. And it just couldn't help but infect my consciousness. So in 2005, I really lobbied to have the band called something else besides Harvey Danger.

SS: Did you have any other names in mind?

SN: All the band names I ended up using for my little semi-solo projects. "The Vernacular" was the main one.

SS: I love "Sean Nelson and His Mortal Enemies".

SN: I really like that one, too. That wouldn't have flown for Harvey Danger because it's definitely not my band. It's a group all the way.

SS: Right.

SN: Once we played the tenth anniversary show and people flew in from all around the world and there were lines around the block and TV cameras, clearly there was interest in our band, and clearly, we couldn't be playing a song from the first record and still feel like, I don't know, I can't calculate

the math of why band names take on the identities they do. I'm sure Bob Mould could go out and play Husker Du songs and Sugar songs and Bob Mould songs and everyone would love it, actually, but when he goes out, he plays only Bob Mould songs. That's my impression, anyway, and a lot of people do that. And it soon became clear that like, if we're not going to have an entirely new set of music, if we're not going to have 20 new songs that sound really different, then it's really disingenuous for us to call ourselves anything but Harvey Danger. There's also the practical consideration of starting a band from scratch, particularly when the only thing one could ever say about the band is that they used to be Harvey Danger. It just didn't make any sense. And that was sort of sad, but maybe the challenge was just to be okay with it. Maybe the challenge of the whole project for me is to resolve my mixed feelings about everything I have ever done and just be what I am. And it has changed. The band has never meant "Flagpole Sitta" to us, and now it's been long enough that it's starting to not just mean that to everyone else, too.

SS: This is an overblown analogy, but the Edge has said that whenever U2 contemplated breaking up, they've remembered that the guys in the Beatles were always the Beatles.

SN: [Laughs.] It felt true at the tenth anniversary show and it is true. And we're out doing these tours and there aren't a lot of them, but we're getting people at the shows who haven't gotten to see the band since they were fifteen or sixteen.

SS: That's got to be gratifying to have an audience like you had at the Croc last week, where the audience knew the older stuff and the newer songs, too.

SN: Yes, that's major to me. Part of it is that we came out big in 1998 and that's eight years ago. When I was on tour with the Long Winters, after almost every show someone would come up to me and say something like, "*Merrymakers* is the first record I ever bought. I was in the fifth grade. I'd never heard any music and then you said in an interview that you said you liked Death Cab for Cutie and I got their first album and that's how I got interested in independent music. I never listened to anything independent before." That's happened about a hundred times in the last five years. And that's been massively gratifying. Part of my being self-conscious about the band publicity machine is that I tried to deflect some of the attention we were getting onto the music that we liked, the music that inspired us. That

was the great lesson of mainstream exposure, that in the exurbs and the suburbs, they get what they're given by MTV and by mainstream radio culture and that's all they get. It's different now because the web has a bigger reach. But even then, the web is commercialized enough that people get what they get from AOL and MSN.

SS: It depends what they're motivated to seek out, too.

SN: Yeah, you can find it now more easily. You still don't necessarily get exposed to it.

SS: It's got to be gratifying to click on kids' pages on your MySpace page because geographically, your fans are really scattered.

SN: Yeah, it is gratifying.

SS: When I was a publicist at SIFF years ago, some of us got into a debate regarding Harvey Danger. I liked you, but some of the staff thought you were MTV pablum. Those who liked you, really liked you, though. There was no mid ground.

SN: There wasn't and there still isn't. I think now the argument is more "who cares?" versus "I slightly care." [Laughs.] Before it was "I hate" versus "I love" and that's… whatever. I think I'm supposed to feel gratified that there's such huge polarity in people's reactions and intellectually, I understand that, but I would prefer if, actually, people just really liked it. [Laughs.] Or if they didn't care. I hated being hated because I didn't feel like we were being hated for anything other than the fact other people played us so much. But it might have been for legitimate reasons, too. People like what they like. I didn't have the wherewithal to cope with not being liked in that time in my life. And of course, that's the part no one tells you when you get massively big, you also get massively hated by just as many people, if not more people than you have liking you. Just because it's so easy to hate what's out there. It's a natural reaction. It's almost a reflex. And the ability to separate that from your own feelings about yourself, when you're already conflicted about yourself and your band… I now think *Where Have All the Merrymakers Gone?* is a good little record. It's very scrappy and full of energy and life. I listen to it and it reminds me of a time in my life and I think that's how people react to it. But back then I thought, "What about all these records that it's not as good as?" It came out the same year as *OK Computer* and we're anywhere as good as *OK Computer.* [Laughs.] So then it became,

"We have to make a record as good as *OK Computer* next" and it's so absurd for any band to say that.

SS: A lot of that has to do with being young. Going back to what you were saying earlier about Nada Surf, they're on the average, about five or six years older than you.

SN: Yeah.

SS: It's not that it's all grounded in chronology, but in your twenties, each year really counts. While we're on that, when you see things like what you're about to show [produces a copy of Spin Magazine, October 1998 issue, featuring a satirical photo spread of Harvey Danger in Nelson's old apartment, something like you might see in *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine—the band sits around a table while Nelson serves fish sticks for dinner, etc.], that's a perfect illustration of my discomfort in the mainstream world.

SS: That's what I was going to ask, do you feel any kind of nostalgia for this?

SN: I feel nostalgia for this apartment. [Laughs.] It's a terrible haircut, though. That's my first reaction.

SS: I like the fish sticks, though.

SN: Yeah, that was my contribution. It's funny, I just edited a piece by Alan Light, the husband of the woman who wrote this. Another interesting thing is that the Spin Magazine calendar for 1998, this is actually one of the images. The lead image is Alanis Morrisette and the secondary image is me. [Pauses.] That's really funny. That's [Barsuk co-owner] Emily Alford's grandmother's unbelievably ugly couch. Here's my beef with this: We may have taken ourselves too seriously, and I definitely cop to that, but we took ourselves seriously because no one else took us even remotely seriously. [Laughs.] I thought that it was not just a fun song, but a vaguely subversive song in its way. Not that it was, like, Vladimir Nabokov or anything, but I thought it was doing neat little literary travesty.

SS: I agree.

SN: And some people got it and some people had to put us into the sort of "antic zany" box. Then it was a desperate fight not to be the Barenaked

Ladies, you know? Not to be just novelty. And Chris Ballew, he and I have talked about this a few times, how when the Presidents came out, his whole thing was like, "Yeah, we're novelty. Bring it on."

SS: They ran with it.

SN: Yeah, they did and they sold millions of records and we sold half a million records. I think that's probably why. I think the minute we got some success, we instantly started bristling against the way that success defined us. And if we'd just said, "Yup, we're the guys who do 'Flagpole Sitta'!", it would have been a lot smoother and the label would have had an easier time marketing us. And it would have been fun for them and maybe it would have been more fun for us. Because ultimately that's what ended up happening anyway—at least in terms of popular imagination. But instead, in every interview, we said, "That's not what we're about! We don't think of ourselves that way, we don't like the radio, we don't like fame, we don't want it, blah blah blah, Seattle Seattle Seattle, no no no." We thought we were saying, "Just wait, because the next record is going to be so amazing." What we were really saying is, "We don't want it, so please don't give it to us anymore." And sure enough, it went away. It soon as it went away, we were all flabbergasted. We were like, we put all this work into *King James Version* and it's so much better and it's so much more than the last one. And the truth of the matter is, that without a song on the radio, we were just another band with a sound that was vaguely indie rock and vaguely stadium rock, somewhere in between those things. And I didn't understand how easy it had been for us the first time. I knew it had been easy, but I thought and we all thought that it was easy because we were so great. [Laughs.] I thought that's why all these doors had opened for us, when in fact it was just weird, dumb luck that we wrote this song that sounded so good on the radio, before there was any conception of us being on the radio. Then we got a really good illustration of what happens when it doesn't go easily, when every door doesn't open.

SS: *King James Version* was shelved for two years?

SN: It was shelved for a year. We came off the road in November in 1998 and we immediately started writing in December. And it came out in September of 2000, but it was fully done in the fall of 1999. And then the label sort of dissolved and all the merger stuff happened.

SS: While you were waiting for the record's release, time must have slowed

to a crawl. It must have been grating.

SN: It really fucked me up. I spent most of those days, because we didn't have to have jobs, and that was always my dream, to have enough money to do nothing. And by doing nothing, of course, I mean, I'll write all those books.

SS: You don't need the day job.

SN: Exactly. I'll do all that art. In fact, what I did was sit in my apartment in my underwear reading every Phillip Roth novel in consecutive order and smoking cigarettes and just fretting. I was terrified of leaving my house. I lived just off15th Ave E. and I would leave my apartment to go to the video store to get an armload of videos and to the 99 cent store to buy cigarettes and that was it. I sat in that apartment and smoked and watched movies and read Phillip Roth novels and that was my life. I felt pretty agoraphobic, I felt ashamed, I felt like we had gone through all that stuff and for nothing. And we were owed hundreds of thousands of dollars that no one knew who to contact to even get. It was almost impossible to do anything. There was no way to make music in that situation, for me anyway, because all I could think about was all the music we'd already made. We played nine shows in 1999 after playing at least two hundred in 1998. And we didn't publicize those nine and no one came and no one knew about them. It was completely demoralizing at that time and we were not speaking to one another. We got offered the opportunity to go and tour with the Pretenders and we couldn't afford it because we would have had to take such a financial loss to do the tour. Because opening bands don't get paid very well. And there was no label to give us support and there was no reason to do it, except that we really wanted to. It would have been really good for us, actually, but because of our inability to close ranks and say, this is what we want, we let our management talk us into not doing it and that felt like another huge defeat. The Pretenders are asking *us,* and no dice. It felt like being pregnant for fifteen months.

SS: It seems like it'd be inconceivable to try and write during that time because you'd be completely distracted. And not to be hippie about it, but emotionally, you wouldn't be open in any way.

SN: No, we really weren't. And all the lyrics I tried to write came out ugly and bitter and not about anything that I'd want to sing about. Everything

became venal and self-obsessed. I think *King James Version* is a pretty balanced record between light and dark, but it was really dark initially. Anti-pop and songs with no choruses. [Laughs.] The record we ended up finishing is still caustic, but it doesn't feel hopeless.

SS: It's not atonal.

SN: Yeah, exactly.

SS: Was it "Sad Sweetheart of the Radio" that you were waiting to see on MTV's "120 Minutes," but they accidentally played the video for "Flagpole Sitta" instead?

SN: Right. We made a half-million dollar video. This is classic, irrational exuberance of the music industry. There was ten thousand dollar photo shoot and then the $500,000 video. It felt like so much money to be spending and we already knew from experience that making a video before the radio is playing something is like setting the money on fire. At least it was back then, pre-You Tube. But we had a great contract and the video budget was not fully recoupable and blah blah blah. It's actually a good video, though, and we're all sitting around waiting to watch it on MTV and it's like, "Next up! The debut of the brand new song from Harvey Danger! Remember them from a year and a half ago?" And sure enough, they played "Flagpole Sitta." Someone played the wrong tape. We should have quit right then because that was the perfect illustration of how wrong everything was going to go from then on.

SS: It's the kind of thing, if you saw it in a movie, you'd think, no, it's too obvious.

SN: And I was crestfallen. I don't think I slept that night, mainly because the symbolic ramifications were so blatant and screaming. [Laughs.] Because the only thing we wanted was to have *one* other association, just anything. And then MTV, which had been such a big part of our success, did that, out of gross incompetence. And then you just feel impotent and powerless and that you're wasting your time and you're wasting your life. And that you should have been an accountant. And touring for that record was bad. It just felt cheap, like recycling whatever remnants could be found from the previous success, rather than what would have been smart, to tour around not to just where the radio stations were, but to tour other place and build up a--

SS: -- more organic audience.

SN: Yeah. There's no way to make it totally organic, but there could have been a few more gestures toward building an audience that wasn't just a radio audience or MTV audience. But yeah, we lived through it. [Laughs.]

SS: You talked about this last week, how part of the reason you're a DJ at KEXP and the music editor at MSN and a blogger for the Stranger and writing a book about Joni Mitchell for 33&1/3 and making Nelson Sings Nilsson and the fact you have so much going on at any given time is a direct reaction to this. Is it that you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket again?

SN: It's a combination of things. I've always been interested in doing music and writing and dabbling in film and theater. I'm interested in a lot of things. The sacrifice is that it takes a lot of endurance and I don't have a lot of leisure time, but the benefit is that I get to do a lot of interesting stuff.

SS: One of the things I've liked about your work is that you don't limit yourself. I think it's silly when artists think they can only do one thing because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

SN: I think some artists are really good at one thing. I don't think I'm blindingly brilliant at any one thing, but I'm good at more than one thing.

SS: You're clearly gifted at more than one, so why not pursue it?

SN: Right. And in a way, I feel like that's my big project, is being polymath. And doing the things I do well. But I tend towards a neurotic over-commitment, towards trying to do way more things than I can do, mathematically. That, I think, is the result of having felt defined by one thing for so long. It was one song and within the song, a joke. I don't mean the song was a joke, but part of the song is that it's like telling a joke. And the person who tells one joke is really funny when the joke is fresh, but as soon as the joke is over, is such a drag. So I definitely feel like I have to prove to the world, if the world is interested, that I have more to say than that one thing. I'm definitely terrified of having "I'm not sick but I'm not well" engraved on my tombstone. [Laughs.]

SS: On your blog, I read about the girl who had one of your lines tattooed

on her arm.

SN: It's a line from "The Same as Being in Love," from *King James Version*. She actually flew out from upstate New York to see the show the other night, because it was the first time we played "Same as Being in Love" since 2000.

SS: That's impressive. Obviously, you would have been a smart kid. And everyone who was the smart kid, it becomes their identity. So it had to be really demoralizing knowing you were smarter than the bullshit going on around you, and to have the band being treated as a punch line, when you know you're capable of so much more.

SN: It was like prison in a way. But it was totally a minimum security prison. [Laughs.] The deli trays were always fully stocked and there was lots of money around and lots of attention, but it always felt like the wrong kind of attention. Have you ever seen the movie, *Head*?

SS: No, but I've heard of it.

SN: It stars the Monkees, who I love on a very terrifying level. [Laughs.]

SS: That I knew.

SN: In the Monkees movie *Head*, there's a black box and it represents television. And they get locked in the black box and they bust out and have these psychedelic adventures that lead them to this factory, where they get led back into the box. And one of them, Peter, is like, "Guys, I don't think we should get in the box!" and just as he says it, the door slams behind them. That's what I really felt like when we re-signed with London/Sire to get *King James Version* off the shelf and out into the world. We signed with the exact same people who didn't really get us the first time. Barsuk wanted to put it out, but they weren't equipped at that time for some of the touring aspects and putting it out on a major meant we got another huge publishing advance so we could have money for another couple of years. That was a significant factor. But I definitely tried to have an appreciation for the absurdity of the situation, and then found that no one else shared that appreciation. I was so completely alone that the absurdity was no longer enjoyable. It was terrifying. I don't know how it changed my life, but it changed my perception of things so much. Now I feel like that the work we did then is really valuable. We did a lot of stuff that I don't love, but we do a lot of stuff that I do love and that I'm really happy with. But yeah, being

trapped in an intellectual's perception, in an environment that has absolutely no time or patience for an intellectual, is hell. And I thought with Harvey Danger, that it was fun to apply intellectual ideas to rock music, particularly rock music that wasn't super erudite or brainy.

SS: It's really accessible.

SN: Yes. And to have puns and wordplay I thought was interesting and funny for rock. It's not true that nobody appreciated it because we'd be playing to thousands of people, and there'd be one kid who would come up afterwards and say, "I got your reference to--

SS: --"Fitzgerald."

SN: Yeah, exactly. "And I want you to know that I heard that and I figured it out and I read the book." Or "I bought that Brian Eno record that you referenced and I really love it and it's changed my life" or whatever. And that kid would always come around. They couldn't offset the nightmare, but they definitely made me feel like it wasn't completely in vain.

SS: It's that Kurt Vonnegut line, "Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer. Many people need to desperately to receive this message, 'I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people don't care about them. You are not alone.'"

SN: And now it's way more gratifying. Sometimes we play these goofy shows because we get offered a lot of money to play them. And those shows are sometimes strangely enjoyable. And when we interact with people at these shows or on Myspace or on the web site, it means so much more than it did because people have to come seek it out.

SS: I gave *Little by Little* to my seventeen year old cousin and she loves it. And she missed all the baggage associated with the first record. She just thinks you're really good.

SN: I think our message that we're a little rock band at heart somehow got through.

SS: Your line in "Happiness Writes White"? "I've never been a confident man/ I've been in the tall grass/ all my life"? Do you ever have moments where you realize that you are good? Do you get the flip side? There are still times

when I hear that line from "Diminishing Returns", "and you're so tangible/ like a nitroglycerine tablet/under my tongue" where I want to email you and say, "Dude. You wrote that. Nice job."

SN: I have those moments and they're always a surprise. But yeah, I do. And it doesn't take much to make them go away, but I have an enormous sense of pride in certain things that I've done. Maybe "pride" isn't the right word, but I feel an enormous sense of accomplishment. And that line in particular, "You're so tangible/ like a nitroglycerine tablet/under my tongue"—I think it's a good little image. It's absolutely true that twelve years ago when I started writing songs with the guys in Harvey Danger, I was convinced that song lyric writing was the great art form of the twentieth century. Pop songs. Three and a half-minute songs that, there was nothing that couldn't be expressed in that form. I just thought that was the quintessence of expression. It took several years until I felt like I was even close to good. But there are lines that are scattered throughout all three of our records that I feel like are really right on the money. But the people who appreciate our stuff, sometimes they appreciate a line I like and sometimes they like a throwaway line. So you hope the lines can be contextualized into a larger body of work. That's actually part of why I do so many things. I want the song lyrics to be taken a *little* bit seriously. I want them to be available to be taken seriously, I guess.