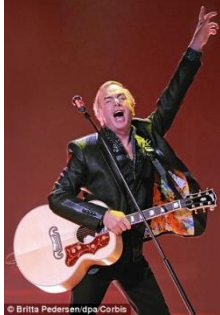


'I've finally stopped torturing myself': Ten years of therapy and a third wife almost 30 years younger than him have given Neil Diamond the peace he craved at last.

By CHRISSEY ILEY
October 4, 2014



Neil has battled with his guilt for most of his life

Neil Diamond has had a lifelong relationship with guilt. Guilt about his role as a father, about the collapse of two marriages and a ten-year relationship, and about his conflicting needs for love and loneliness.

'I guess I'm a little over the top generally,' he says. 'I'm a super-sensitive kind of person.'

This burden has inspired a catalogue of songs – pop classics such as Solitary Man, Hello Again and Sweet Caroline – that have spoken to the lovelorn for almost 50 years.

They've been covered by everyone from Elvis and Cliff Richard to Deep Purple and Dizzy Gillespie and shifted more than 125 million records, making him one of the world's best-selling artists of all time.

But his new album, Melody Road, his first studio album in six years, seems to take in all parts of his life, merging the present with the past, the pain with the pleasure.

Critics have already said one song, The Art Of Love, is among the best he's written and there's a sense this album has vented some of the turmoil he's carried for so long.

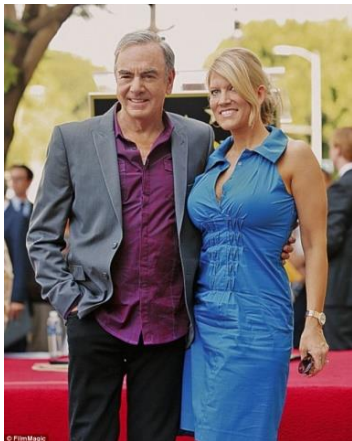
'The songs I've written are supposed to answer questions I've had, or come up with an answer that works for now,' he says.

'It's an emotional thing that I'm doing. I'm an incurable romantic. That just seems to be part of my life, my way of thinking and feeling. Partly because I'm amazed by the idea of romance and what it means. I'll come to understand these songs over the next year or two when I do them on stage.'

The reason for this creative nirvana is the happiness he's found with Katie McNeil, the manager, he fell in love with and married in 2012 when she was 42 and he was 71. They met a year earlier when she was working for the management company to whom he'd signed.

It wasn't love at first sight, it was business – until she wove her way into his heart. There must have been an instant knowingness, though, when he and Katie met? 'No, there was nothing. She was just another business person handing me work to do and another business person I was trying to get away from.

I stopped trying to get away after a year or so, once I got to know the person she was, and I liked that person very much. Katie's got a big heart and she's very transparent. I can read her heart from a mile away. She does a terrific English accent too, which makes me laugh every time.'



Neil with his wife Katie McNeil, who he says is the reason for his creative nirvana

Did Katie teach him The Art Of Love? 'A few of these songs in particular were either inspired by her or she caused them to be completed. They were waiting for her and I don't know whether she liked that too much. She said, "Some of these songs were written for somebody else" and I said, "Maybe, but I can't remember who or why." But they were waiting for her so that I could complete them. She settled for that and definitely three or four were written for her.'

One of them is called Marry Me Now. 'I really wanted to play that song at our wedding and I had this vision of teaching it to the band and dancing and how everybody would be there, but I couldn't finish it in time. I got nervous, I became more like a groom, I became scared and distracted. So I didn't finish it until after the wedding.' So how did he propose then? 'I just asked her, "Hey, how about you and I get hitched?" That was all it took. I didn't want to linger on the question because I might have got the wrong answer.'

The more we talk the more sensitive I realise he is. He's often spoken about how his past relationships have suffered because he was driven by his song writing. So how does it work when his wife is his manager?

'We're still working on that because there are times where the work will interfere with our personal relationship. There are times I want to talk about something and we might be in the middle of having breakfast. I'll want to talk about something coming up and Katie doesn't, she wants to do the crossword and have breakfast, so she'll say, "Can we talk about this later or can we set up a meeting to talk about it?" And I have to say, "OK. We'll talk about it another time."

NEIL BY NUMBERS

\$1m - The amount in dollars he's said to have been paid for starring in 1980's The Jazz Singer with Sir Laurence Olivier (below).



1962 - The year he released his first single, You Are My Love At Last, with high school friend Jack Parker. It wasn't a hit.

32 - The number of studio albums he's released, starting in 1966 with The Feel Of Neil Diamond

£108m - His estimated worth

'We're still working it out, but she knows the business and that lets me not be drawn into the business part so much. It allows the creative part of me time to blossom, to write songs, time for me to do what I do best.'

When I'm writing an album I'm very intense and focused. I'm glad when it's over. It's like sneezing. You've got an itch in your nose and you don't know what to do with it and finally you sneeze and it's a lot better.

'It's my nature as a person. I can vent feelings, disappointments, anxiety, enthusiasm in the writing of a song. It's natural for me. I've been doing it since I was a teenager. It's part of a discovery process. I don't know if that's to find out who I am or what the purpose of it is, but it just seems to want to be expressed. It's a kind of lonely job.'

He and Katie met after he ended his long-term relationship with Australian production assistant Rae Farley, whom he met a year after his divorce from Marcia Murphey in 1995. Their 26-year marriage began the year he divorced his first wife, high school sweetheart Jayne Posner, in 1969. He felt a lot of guilt about the failure of his marriage to Marcia, but only now has he addressed it in song. Before, he couldn't even think about it. So much so that he didn't bother to correct rumours that he paid his wife \$150 million, said to be the biggest ever divorce settlement at the time.

'It wasn't true,' he says now, looking down. Was she happy with the settlement she did get? 'She was. She got enough to live on for the rest of her life.' Presumably he was so generous because he felt guilty. 'Somewhat.' He almost winces. 'It's true. I did feel bad. I don't have many feelings about my divorce now because it was 20 years ago.'

He'd been lonely before he met Katie, and I wonder if he'd resigned himself to being single for the rest of his life after his two previous marriages and long-term relationship with Rae had fallen apart.

'No, but I wasn't looking. I was busy doing my work and Katie appeared. It was totally unplanned and unexpected. I think I was probably lonely. I'd much rather be in a loving relationship with a woman any day than be alone.' He says his last relationship with Rae ended unhappily.

'It wasn't a serious relationship. It was going nowhere. There were no marriage plans. It lasted too long.' Was that because it's hard to end things even though it's hard to be in them? 'I think so,' he nods earnestly, still troubled by the thought of it.



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Neil Diamond with his second wife Marcia Murphey when they met Diana Princess of Wales

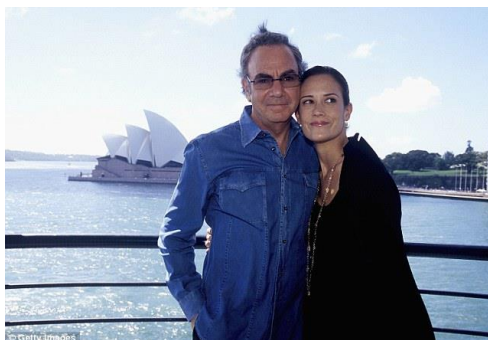
'I do have some feelings of guilt about my life. Guilt that I wasn't with my kids more because I was travelling [he has two daughters from his first marriage and two sons from his second].

But I've spoken to all of them about it. They all have good memories of growing up and I loved them completely when I was back in town. I was theirs full time.'

Maybe it makes it more special and intense to have a father that works on the road. Maybe if he'd been around all the time there would have been more bickering? 'That's right,' he says, his eyes lighting up. 'I've never bickered with my kids. I was always happy to see them and they were always happy to see me. And I think they still are.

'I've been seeing a therapist for ten years. She's very useful. I learned to express myself and I learned about myself with the help of a psychologist. She didn't make me a better songwriter, but she made me easier for me to live with. She had nothing to do with my songs – that's a solo effort. But she's made my life easier because I understand things a bit better, I'm not torturing myself. I used to blame myself for everything. I've moderated my feelings over the years. Guilt and achievement and responsibility, all these things.'

His songs cover the full gamut of emotions and I wonder whether creating them comes more easily when he's in love or when he's miserable.



Neil met his current wife Katie after his split with Rae Farley

'Misery has never been a productive stimulus. I'd rather be in a good frame of mind because you're energetic, you're outgoing. Although I've written some of my best songs when I've been down. I get unhappy if I get stuck on a song, if I can't get a line that's satisfactory or if I'm working on an idea all day and it's not working out. If one of my kids is sick, then I'm unhappy. If I'm under-worked I'm unhappy and if I'm overworked I'm unhappy.'

He says all of this with a sense of irony. Most of that unhappiness seems to be in the past. He strikes me as a very happy man, although he can move from exuberance to darkness swiftly. 'I'm happy because I'm occupied with something I love doing. Keeping busy is the most important element to me being happy and of course, having a wonderful wife makes me happy, to know I don't have to go through my life and bear it alone. I have someone to talk to about it.'

On stage he's always been a flamboyant performer, fantastical gyrations that seem impossible for a man of his age who today walks a little stiffly and sits in a hard-backed chair, a legacy of the tumour he had removed from his spine in 1979. His face is craggy, his hair more salt than pepper, but he's still extremely magnetic and the voice still sounds like gravel wrapped in velvet.

He has over 800,000 followers on Twitter, but he follows no one. 'Tweeting is expressive, I wouldn't say therapeutic, but I like to share what I'm thinking. "Here's a picture of my lucky socks" [multi-coloured squares, for the record]. "Here's a picture of my dog." It's funny.'

The Diamonds love dogs. When they made a video for his new song Something Blue, another one inspired by Katie about the things that bring out the best in Neil, they contacted The Humane Society to get puppies for the video – and ended up adopting Melody, part-boxer, part-terrier.

'She's ferocious,' he says. 'She's tiny but she wants to be the boss. My other dogs Poker and Shamrock are being worn down by her.'

Shamrock, a golden retriever, was Neil's gift to Katie when they first got together. Poker, a mixed breed, was adopted from a rescue centre when he was about to be put to sleep.

'There was something about his eyes that got to me. We're great pals. I talk to him all the time. Don't people usually talk to their animals? We haven't discussed the Bible, yet, or the meaning of life, but we have discussed, "No, Pokey, it's not a good idea to jump on the couch." And he says, "Oh, OK." He's a very reasonable dog.'

Having dogs is a big statement of domesticity. When Neil Diamond couldn't say it with words he said it with dogs. It takes a while for him to open up, both in conversation and in a relationship. But once he does he's warm, funny and candid.

When I ask him if he's in touch with his ex-wives, he says, 'I am but not on a regular basis. When it's called for. To talk about the kids. Sometimes to talk about other things. My first wife was Jewish. My second wife wasn't. My third wife is Catholic. There will not be a fourth wife by the way. I have the best woman in the world and I'm taking good care of our relationship. I'm making sure it's going to last forever.'