

## Scene&amp;Heard

# The night I was shot in the head by a street gang

Neil Diamond talks openly about his wild days on the streets of Brooklyn

by Tim Cooper

**I**F you look very hard at Neil Diamond's face you can just see the scar. Below the right eye, a tiny tell-tale sign that the glittering Diamond of today was hewn from a rougher stone 61 years ago. In London this weekend for a series of sell-out shows, Diamond is now so wealthy that he reportedly gave an ex-wife £75 million without even contesting her claim. Middle-aged women go weak at the knees when he sings a string of hits from Sweet Caroline to Cracklin' Rosie. But back in Brooklyn in the 1950s it was a very different story.

As a boy he used to run with a gang. That's how he got the scar, after being shot during a street fight in Prospect Park when he was 12.

"I had a hole in my bone and I still have a scar there," he says, indicating the spot. An inch higher and he would have lost his eye, perhaps been lucky to survive. He can't remember for sure but thinks he might have been armed himself. "Yeah, I probably had an air gun."

"That was life in Brooklyn," he says nonchalantly. "Very much the life of the time. But that scared me off — and scared me straight. After that I took my chances on being alone. And I guess I have been a solitary man since then."

Ba-boom! Diamond brings us back to his music with the title of his first hit, in 1966. He grins slightly. "Segue?"

It has been a long, hard slog. Aged 10, Diamond started work in his parents' garment shop. The family struggled to survive, but he looks back fondly on weekends spent at flea markets with his father, expertly trading pyjamas and underwear ("I became an expert at putting girdles on women") for a percentage of the profit.

After school he won a fencing scholarship to medical college, planning to fulfil his parents' ambition that he should become a doctor. He paid the fees by working as a waiter and making *knishes*, the Jewish delicacy you find on the boardwalk at Coney Island.

But by now he had begun to have different plans. He had been given a guitar for his 16th birthday and all he wanted to do was write and sing songs. Dropping out of college before graduation, he spent eight years slogging away at a succession of music-publishing offices, occasionally signing record deals and releasing singles that flopped.

Finally after a year writing songs for hitmakers Leiber and Stoller, he was offered a deal with the now-notorious

Bang Records, alongside another up-and-coming singer-songwriter, Van Morrison.

Immediately, Diamond's dream came true. His first song, *Solitary Man*, was a modest hit; the follow-up, *Cherry Cherry*, entered the top 10. Weeks later, a song he had written for a new TV series about a Beatles-style pop group — *I'm A Believer* — topped the charts for The Monkees.

Bitterly, Diamond says: "I never got paid for those songs." That was the least of his worries, however. On quitting Bang Records, he had to send his childhood sweetheart, Jaye, and his daughter, Marjorie, away. And buy himself a gun. A proper one.

"I carried a .38 for six months after I left Bang Records in 1968 because they were owned by the Mafia and they were after me. That's why they were called Bang Records. I had a warning from the FBI to protect myself, so I sent my family out to my country home and started carrying a gun. Was I scared? I was scared 24/7."

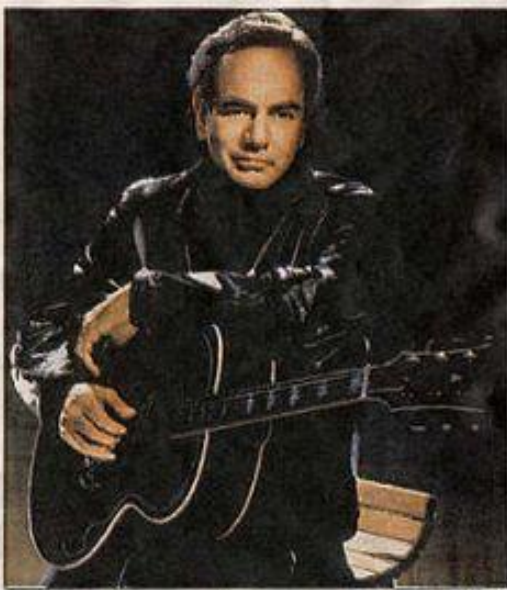
A while back, Diamond realised how differently his life could have turned out when he ran into some of his old chums from his gun-toting days in Brooklyn. "A few of my very close friends ended up in jail. Some of them had just got out."

**F**OR Neil Diamond, however, there are still ambitions to be fulfilled, despite coming to the conclusion of the longest tour of his entire career — 90 dates in cities all over the globe. "As I slogged my way through the business for so many years and tried to survive, what I missed out on is to become a content, happy person, but I'm finding it little by little." He hints that he may marry his girlfriend, Rachel Furley, whom he met five years ago in Australia. And he has finally bought a home in New York after a career-long exile in Los Angeles.

"I would like to be a happy person," he says. "I would like to be content and not driven. There is something wonderful about the ability to make music: it fends off death and makes you immortal in a way it gives you a reason for being on the planet. It has kept me going for 35 years."

But he shudders at the thought of retirement. "I have so much to learn, so much to do, and as long as I have a decent song in me I will be out there flogging it and hoping someone is listening."

● Neil Diamond plays *Earl's Court tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday*.



Solitary survivor: Neil Diamond has come a long way since his hoodlum days in New York