



Story by [Keith Barry](#) · Edited by [Justin Miller](#) · 3.25.21

The Lost Prince of Yacht Rock

P icture yourself in 1978, behind the thin plastic steering wheel of your brand-new Chevy Nova, stuck in traffic on the 10 freeway. There’s smog obscuring the L.A. skyline and the smell of exhaust in the air. Over the crackle of the AM radio, the newsreader says something about Iran, a bright-voiced chorus promises that *Coke adds life!* and a DJ reassures you that you are, indeed, listening to KHJ. You reach for the cigarette lighter as the music starts — a few minor piano chords over soft, driving drums. It’s a mellow groove. An electric keyboard joins in, then a guitar, followed by a sweet, double-tracked tenor voice telling an enigmatic tale. Is it Toto? Jackson Browne? Steely Dan? It sounds kind of like everything else on the radio, but also like nothing you’ve ever heard before.

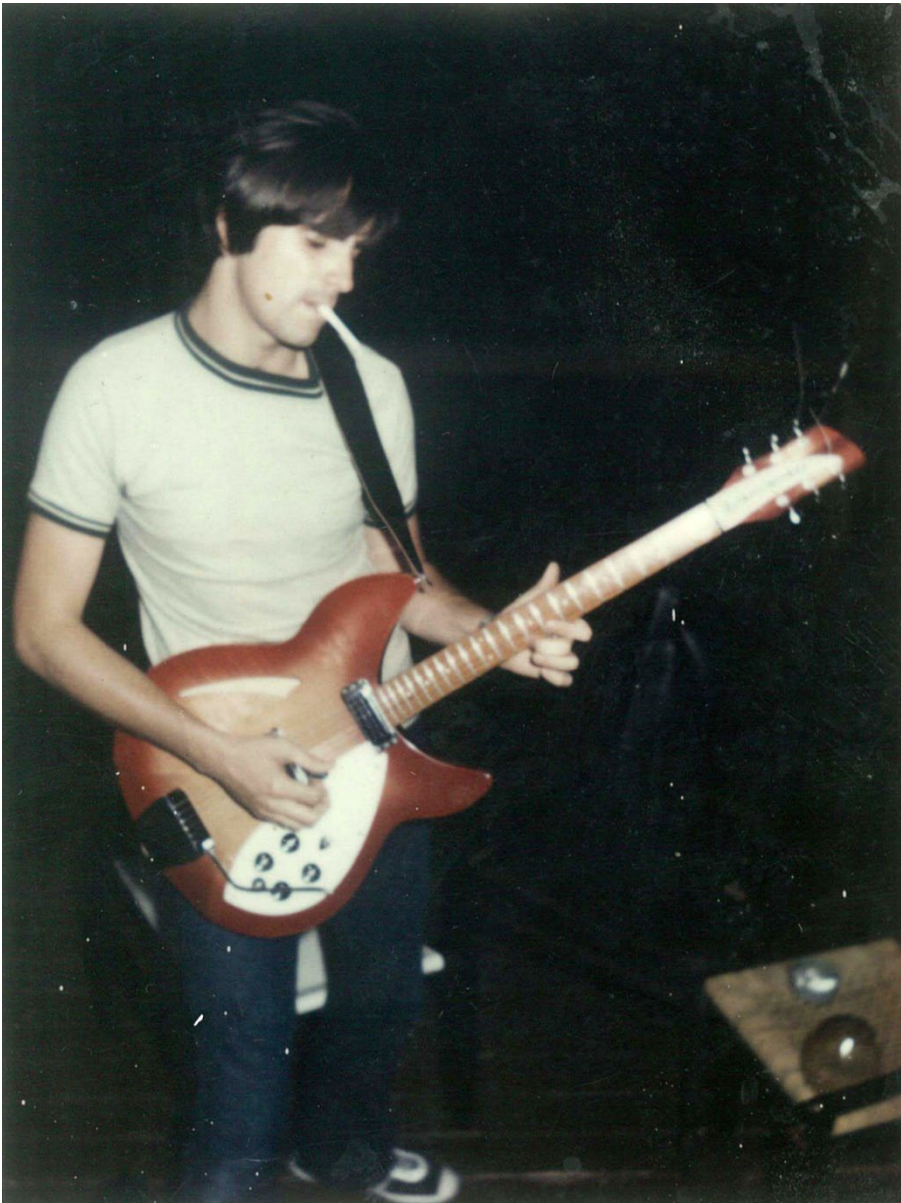
In a city of mirages, you never know who to trust

This isn’t fantasy, this is us

There’s a frantic collision of vibraphone and electric guitar, and the DJ finally cuts in to put a name to the tenor: “That was Dane Donohue with ‘Casablanca,’ his debut from Columbia Records. It’s half past eight — time to check the traffic.” You make a mental note: Dane Donohue. You expect to hear that name again.

Donohue himself is just a few miles away in his room at the Beverly Hills Hotel, sleeping off a night out on Santa Monica Boulevard after another interview with another radio station that promised to play his album. He’s been riding high the past few months, and who wouldn’t be after recording a self-titled

album jam-packed with the most talented, in-demand musicians in the world? Stevie Nicks and Don Henley sang backup, for chrissakes! His managers broke Aerosmith into the big time, and the very same producers who put together his album turned the Eagles and Boston into megastars. Now, they were going to do the same thing with Dane Donohue — a kid from Mansfield, Ohio, who never had to dream about his big break because he always knew it was coming.



Young Dane Donohue playing his guitar, 1967.
Photos courtesy of Dane Donohue.

You'd be hearing a lot of music that sounded a lot like Donohue's on the radio in the coming years, even after you traded in the Nova for a more reliable Corolla, after you switched to KIIS-FM when KHJ went country, and after America embraced MTV and trickle-down economics. But after 1978, unless you lived in Mansfield, you wouldn't hear anything else from Donohue himself. How could such a talented musician and songwriter with the backing of the entire music industry slip through the cracks?

To find out, I figured I'd ask him directly. It was easy to find his address online:

Daryl Dane Donohue

Inmate #61201-060 Federal Correctional Institution

PO Box 1000^[OBJ], Morgantown, WV

Donohue's only album fits squarely into a genre that's now commonly called "yacht rock," a neologism for a sound you're probably familiar with even if you weren't alive in the 1970s. Think Michael McDonald's husky "I Keep Forgettin'" or the shuffle beat of Toto's "Rosanna." The genre has cycled through popularity, ridicule, nostalgia and respect, all the way back to popularity again: There's a "yacht rock" station on SiriusXM that plays '70s soft rock hits, and hipsters in captain's hats sing Christopher Cross's "Sailing" at karaoke. There's even been a yacht rock-themed Peloton workout.

Since its release in 1978, *Dane Donohue* has gained a cult following among yacht rock fans. That's because it's a seminal work in the development of the genre, says "Hollywood" Steve Huey, a former AllMusic critic. Huey would know: Along with JD Ryznar, David B. Lyons and Hunter Stair, he co-created [the mockumentary that gave yacht rock its name](#). They also hosted the *Beyond Yacht Rock* podcast, and they are writing a book about the genre too.

"You can hear this older kind of David Geffen, Asylum kind of sound — it sounds like the whole Laurel Canyon kind of scene, the early '70s stuff," Huey says, referring to the Los Angeles neighborhood where folk-rockers like the Mamas & the Papas and Joni Mitchell lived in the '60s and early '70s, and where the Eagles honed their sound. You could mistake the first few songs on Donohue's album for Jackson Browne. But then you hit songs like "Woman" or "Can't Be Seen," and it's a total paradigm shift. "You can also hear where the music is going, where the Southern California sound is about to go over the next few years." More horns, more rhythm, more jazzy chord progressions.

Dane Donohue was lucky enough to be in the studio at an important moment in the L.A. music scene, when studio musicians started merging the tight ensemble work of funk and Motown, the screaming guitar solos of rock, the creativity of jazz, the rhythms of Rio, the blues-tinged R&B of Stax, and the introspective singer-songwriter melodies of the Laurel Canyon era, while superstar producers started using the latest technology to make slick, flawless recordings. And Donohue's voice — which blended the airy twanginess of a Nashville tearjerker with the drama and clarity of a Broadway first act finale — was an ideal vessel to cross over between the old and new worlds of Southern California soft rock.

Yacht rock lyrics tend to deal with divorce, male loneliness and suburban ennui — a far cry from the vitality of war protests and civil rights anthems of a decade earlier. But more important, yacht rock is a sound, and that sound was defined by the tight-knit group of studio musicians who inadvertently created the genre. The guys behind yacht rock — and with the exception of a handful of backup singers, it was always guys — were among the most talented in the business. They made names for themselves as “first call” musicians, who artists and producers would specifically request for their albums. And the best of the best played on *Dane Donohue*.



Rick Danko of The Band playing on stage as Donohue, far right, watches from behind the stands. Danko was one of many high-profile musicians who worked with Donohue on his album.

Critics dismissed what came out of the Southern California studios as radio-friendly soft rock, but it permeated popular music for nearly a decade, its influence seeping into every genre from disco to hair metal. Some of the musicians on Donohue’s album were already famous, while others would go on to

write, record on or produce some of the best-known songs of the 20th century. Put together, they would win more than 30 Grammy awards during their varied careers.

Daryl Dane Donohue was born in 1948. His father, Sylvan “S.M.” Donohue, had grown up poor in Kentucky, and like many others in his time he’d moved to Ohio to find work. “He was right out of Woody Guthrie,” Dane tells me. S.M. tried his hand as a country singer in Nashville along the way, and when that didn’t work out, he settled in Mansfield — a boomtown on the Lincoln Highway, home to steel mills and factories that churned out appliances for Tappan and Westinghouse. He bought a farm and set up a construction business that thrived.

Dane’s own introduction to music came after a bout of rheumatic fever at age 15. The Beatles were brand-new, and the bedridden Donohue used his free time to play along with the songs he heard on the radio. “I became obsessed with the guitar and learning to play every Beatles song — like every other kid in America,” he says. By 1966, that inspiration led Donohue and some high school friends to start a band called The Britains.

Donohue went off to Ohio State University and started to sing with a guy named Jeff Fenholt. They called themselves Jeff and Dane, and they played at a popular club in Columbus. That’s when Donohue’s first big shot at stardom opened up. After rave reviews, Jeff and Dane got invited to join the touring cast of *Hair*, but Donohue was still in college and had just married a girl he knew growing up in Mansfield.

“I had one quarter left at OSU. I was afraid it would take me forever to finish. So the following week I was down there playing by myself,” Donohue says. Fenholt eventually got cast in the title role of *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Broadway and was on the cover of *Time*. (He also had an affair with Salvador Dali’s wife, joined Black Sabbath, and became a televangelist. He died in 2019.)

After graduation, Donohue auditioned in Columbus for one of the many touring companies of *Superstar* that sprung up in the wake of the Broadway show’s success. This one, led by a company called the National Rock Opera, was one of the most prestigious and ambitious. An impromptu performance of “Triad,” David Crosby’s ode to sexual acts with multiple partners, got Donohue and two friends from Ohio spots on the tour: Andrew Smith and David Getreau were in the band, and Donohue landed the lead role as Jesus.

They traveled to a different city every night, crashing at Holiday Inns after the show, closing down lobby bars from Wilkes-Barre to Shreveport. The show drew huge crowds in small towns, where it was considered controversial. Local newspaper critics hailed Donohue’s performance, and one reviewer noted that he bore a “striking resemblance to world-renowned paintings which depict the visage of Christ.” But the tour came to an end in 1971, and Donohue was tired of acting. He wanted to write his own songs. So he went back to Ohio and worked for his dad’s construction company, playing in local bands at the dreary Keg Room bar at a Days Inn and writing with Getreau and another friend, Mark Fisher.

“We had a boom box sitting on top of an old upright piano in an apartment somewhere in Columbus, David playing the piano, me standing there singing lyrics, Mark Fisher writing on a spiral notepad,” Donohue recalls.

In 1975, Donohue tried out once again for the part of Jesus — this time flying out to New York for a chance to fill the role Fenholt originated on Broadway. He didn’t get the part, but his audition did catch the eye of the management team Leber-Krebs, who had made a household name out of Aerosmith and would go on to manage Ted Nugent, Joan Jett and AC/DC, and who got Donohue a deal with Columbia. Elliot Mazer would produce — he had worked with Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Janis Joplin and The Band — and a different star-studded cast of musicians would back Donohue up. Columbia really wanted to play up Donohue’s Midwestern roots, so much so that they held his signing ceremony at Malabar Farm State Park near his childhood home.

But Mazer and Donohue clashed over everything from song choice to production values. Even with all the talent in the room, Donohue didn’t like how the finished product sounded, and neither did Mazer. The album was scrapped. “It was an absolute disaster,” says Donohue. “I wasn’t happy with it, and management wasn’t either, which I thought was going to be the end of my career right there.”

Still, Columbia gave him a second chance to record a first album, this time with Terrence Boylan producing. “Boona,” as everyone called him, brought in Jai Winding, a first-call session keyboardist who played on 22 albums in 1978 alone — squeezing in Donohue’s debut alongside superstars like Olivia Newton-John and Donna Summer. “There was a lot of cross-pollination going on,” Winding tells me. “If one producer used a musician like me, the word would get around.”



Donohue posing with a couple of models for a promotional shot in San Francisco, 1976.

When Donohue stepped into L.A.'s renowned Westlake Studios, he found himself face-to-face with legends and heroes — and that was just the horn section. Dick “Slyde” Hyde had played trombone with Count Basie’s big band, and the blistering opening notes he played on Cheryl Lynn’s “Got to Be Real” were currently filling dance floors across the country. Sax player Ernie Watts had toured with everyone from Buddy Rich to Frank Zappa. And trumpeter Chuck Findley had already recorded with B.B. King, Neil Diamond and Dionne Warwick. They worked hard, spending long days and evenings in the wood-paneled, sound-deadened studios, doing take after take until the result was perfect.

The recording sessions stretched out over more than a year, and Boona ordered multiple takes with different musicians. For “Woman,” Boona flew the whole crew out to Bearsville Studios, outside of Woodstock, New York. Steve Gadd — if you don’t know the name, you know his opening riff from Paul Simon’s “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” — was on drums, cymbals crashing like waves over Winding’s piano. The night before the recording session, in the parking lot of the Bear Cafe, Winding slammed his hand in a car door. He rushed to the

hospital, and a doctor drilled a hole in his thumbnail to let out the pressure. “It fucking hurt like hell,” Winding remembers — but he still did the session.

Fleetwood Mac was in the middle of the *Rumours* tour and just about to record *Tusk* when Stevie Nicks stopped by to sing on “Woman.” By then, Donohue had spent plenty of time in the studio with the pros, but Nicks was on a whole other level. She and the other background singers layered harmony upon harmony, with Nicks’ distinctive voice adding new texture to the song. “They worked hard for hours into the evening until they got what they wanted,” he says. “It was just great. She was just fantastic.”

Occasionally, Donohue lost his confidence. “I can remember one episode where you go through these moments in your head, ‘What am I doing here?’” That happened when Nicks was at a recording session along with JD Souther, who co-wrote hits for the Eagles. Souther was frustrated, trying to come up with a part, and he asked Donohue to weigh in. “Man, I don’t know, I’m just a local guy,” Donohue demurred. Souther didn’t have time for self-deprecation. “I’m from Phoenix,” he told Donohue. He pointed to Nicks. “She’s from Texas. What do you mean?”

“He put me in my place real quick,” Donohue says. Even now, there’s a starstruck quality to the way he describes the sessions with Stevie Nicks and Don Henley. It’s unexpected from a guy who had the chutzpah to get himself a record deal in the first place. “I got to be a spectator and really watch what they were doing,” he tells me. “It was just amazing.”

On the day that Henley was supposed to show up to record backing vocals on “What Am I Supposed to Do?” Donohue left the Beverly Hills Hotel — “a real small room — it sounds glamorous, but it was very reasonable back then,” he assures me — to find that the three-months-long argument he’d been having with the front desk over parking had culminated in his rental car finally getting towed. When Donohue got to the studio, breathless and worn out, he saw a roomful of glum faces, none of which were Henley’s. Turns out Henley’s manager was in a dispute with Donohue’s manager. “He’s not coming,” Souther said. So Souther got on the phone with Henley and negotiated. “Let’s not take it out on him, man,” Donohue remembers him saying. Eventually, Henley relented. “He showed up, and stayed there and worked very, very hard on a song,” Donohue says.

Like all of the famous names on *Dane Donohue*, Henley stayed in the background, did his job, and went home at the end of the day.

Across hundreds of sessions for various artists, the studio guys all got to know each other more than most co-workers would. Donohue, despite occasionally being starstruck, fit in quickly, and he even kept everyone’s spirits up when things got heavy. “He was like the class clown; he was always trying to keep you laughing and keep you smiling,” Winding reminisces. “We’d do impressions of record executives, and it was hysterical. We were all kind of late-night party animals. We clicked immediately.”

When they were done with a long day’s work, everyone would head to Dan Tana’s, the West Hollywood red-sauce, red-booths eatery where the Eagles held court. Just over a mile up Santa Monica from Westlake Studios, it was the hangout for the session guys and the stars, who all knew each other. Suddenly, Donohue was hanging with that crowd too. “You’d work long hours. And the good thing about Tana’s is you could go there, have a drink, and see people you know,” Winding recalls.

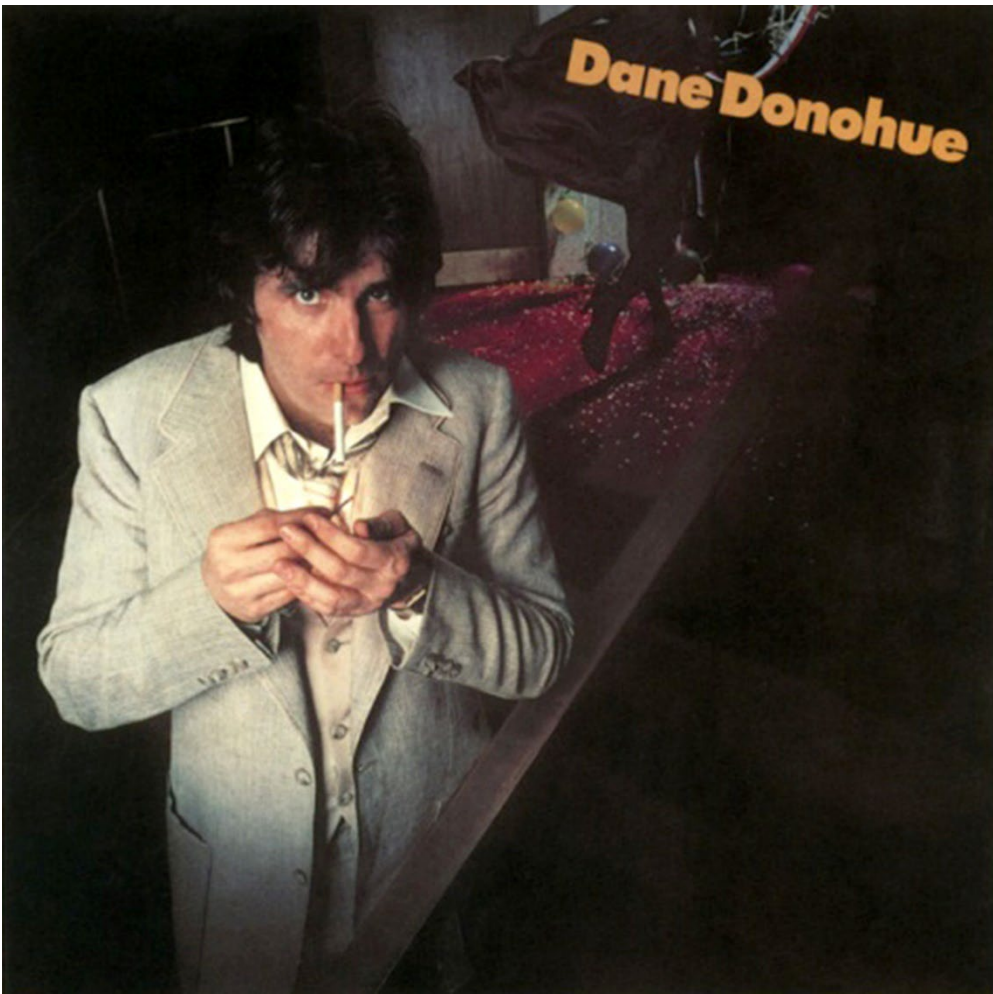
It was a tight-knit group, except for Boona. A bit of a loner, he disappeared for months at a time. Tensions got high after Donohue refused to give him a songwriting credit on “Casablanca” and argued with him over the horn arrangements on “Tracey.” Donohue — maybe out of naiveté, maybe out of defiance — decided to take things into his own hands and continue recording in Boona’s absence.

“Instead of sitting there and calling the record company and saying, ‘You need to get a hold of Terrence,’ stupid me, I went into the studio and started recording, just like nothing ever happened,” Donohue says. A few weeks later, he got a furious phone call from a vice president at Columbia. “He let me have it for that ... I shouldn’t have done it.”

In his absence, Boona’s brother, John, who worked for a rival record company, stepped in to produce a few tracks, and Jai Winding produced a whole half of the album. Donohue credits Winding with rescuing the whole project. “That guy was the glue that held it together,” Donohue tells me. Winding knew how important the album was to Donohue. “It was his shot at stardom,” he says.

Eventually, Donohue patched things up with Boona, the album got mastered, and the session musicians dispersed, getting back to work with other artists. Donohue was thrilled with how the album turned out. “Everybody has a moment in time — regardless of how short or long that period is — where everything comes together perfectly,” Donohue tells me. *Dane Donohue* was his.

The album went on sale in September of 1978, just after Dane’s 30th birthday. On the cover, he is wearing a white three-piece suit — “I kind of got that idea from Boz Scaggs,” he says — shielding a cigarette from the wind as he lights it, looking very much like the kind of guy you don’t want your kid to date. Ads proclaimed, “DANE DONOHUE SEES RIGHT THROUGH YOU.” Newspapers back home ran articles about the local musician who made it to L.A. and recorded an album loaded with stars. Sales started out strong, and *Dane Donohue* even sold out in record stores in Ohio. “It’s as if Hank Williams produced Steely Dan,” Donohue told reporters across the country. “Casablanca” got airplay in major markets. “Dance with the Stranger” made Billboard’s Top Singles Pick.



Dane Donohue's debut album cover.

But by early 1979, the album was starting to get lost. Disco was hitting its zenith, and Toto — the captains of yacht rock — owned the charts with an album that included “Hold the Line,” an instantly recognizable jam with a red-hot guitar solo from Steve Lukather, who also played on Donohue’s album. *Dane Donohue* was good, but it just didn’t have that same kind of memorable hook, says Huey, the music critic. “With music that’s kind of subtle and sophisticated like this, it might just boil down to, were these songs hooky enough to play on top 40 radio?”

Columbia had also just started a new strategy of sending musicians on press tours without backing bands, so Donohue could only offer interviews, not concerts. That gave him little chance at developing a following. “Who is Dane Donohue? Chances are you’ve never heard of him,” *Boston Globe* music critic Steve Morse wrote in 1979, foreshadowing Donohue’s descent into the unknown. “He is a new artist struggling to make a name for himself. He has a new album out and he just passed through Boston trying to prevent that album from meeting the fate so many debut albums meet — obscurity.”

Dane Donohue sold a total of just 30,000 copies. By April 1979, Donohue had given up, and he didn’t care who knew. For a two-part profile for *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, he showed up four and a half hours late, forced his limo driver to do a U-turn in highway traffic, commandeered a hotel ballroom piano, and ordered a lot of champagne on Columbia’s dime. “I’ll tell you this and I don’t give a flying fistfight who sees it,” Donohue told a stunned reporter. “Boylan didn’t show up for the first meeting

and after we started he was gone for eight months working on his own album.” Insulting one of the most well-connected producers in L.A. couldn’t have made Columbia want to put extra effort into promoting *Dane Donohue*.

Some artists whose solo albums fizzled hung around behind the scenes in L.A., working their way up the ranks as songwriters and producers. Others moved to Nashville and went country. Donohue chose to go back to Mansfield.

I first encountered Donohue’s album in 2015 through a medium that nobody at Columbia Records would’ve expected back in 1978: a podcast. [Beyond Yacht Rock](#) was a love letter to the smooth music of the ’70s and ’80s — and an attempt to bring recognition to the artists whose work contemporary critics had panned. I was at a low point in my own life. Both of my parents were having health issues, a long relationship had come to an unexpected end, and I was going through the motions at a job that had me traveling almost every week. *Beyond Yacht Rock* felt like hanging out with four friends I’d just met who loved the same music I did. It was also how I stopped my mind from asking “What if?” on those long flights.

The first time the podcast played “Can’t Be Seen,” I was transported back to the suburban dive bar where I’d met the girl who had just broken my heart. We were both barely old enough to drink, and we would order cheap beer in plastic cups and listen to talented cover bands who dreamed of a shot like the one had Donohue got. But instead of tears on my Premium Economy tray table, my white-hot sadness had cooled into warm nostalgia.

While the band played raunchy rock and roll

You and me can take a stroll, nobody else will have to know

Back on the ground, I googled Donohue, expecting to find evidence of a further music career — maybe as a producer or a songwriter. Instead, I came up with court records. I wrote him a letter in prison, and much to my surprise, I heard back a few weeks later. Dane Donohue was getting ready for his next act — and he wanted to tell me all about it.

To understand how his life took some unexpected turns requires exploring what happened to Dane Donohue after *Dane Donohue*. Shortly after the album flopped, he and his first wife divorced. He played guitar and sang in cover bands on the weekends to scratch the music itch, and once again worked for his father to pay the bills. Life in Mansfield was a good fit. He met a woman named Pam who loved horses. They married and bought a house in the country, where she could go on trail rides and where he could build a music studio. He called it The Woodhouse. Pam and Dane had a son and a daughter, and he doted on them.



Donohue and his horses at home in Mansfield, Ohio.

“There was always music around, there were always musicians around, the house was full of music,” Donohue’s daughter, Falon, tells me. When she and her brother were teenagers, their friends would come over and get Donohue to regale them with stories about his time in L.A. “If there’s an audience, he’ll talk. He loves an audience,” she says.

On Friday nights, Donohue would have his own friends over; they’d knock back some Heinekens and get a jam session started. Other nights, he’d play at country clubs, restaurants and bars. When she got

older, sometimes Falon would join him as a vocalist. She was talented enough to get some of the same offers her father had had when he was her age, but she wanted a more stable career. Donohue never performed any of the songs from his album, but he got steady gigs, played a lot of events for charity, and ended up becoming president of the local musician's union. Life was really good. Dane Donohue wasn't a rock star, and Mansfield wasn't L.A. or Nashville, but he was a proud father and a happy husband, and he got to perform whenever he wanted.



Donohue with his wife and children on his 65th birthday.

One of those gigs was in the late '80s, in the nearby town of Wooster. At a bar called the Liberty House, he met a big, outgoing guy with a strong Southern accent named Ken Jackson — he was either the manager or the owner, nobody's quite sure. A tinkerer and entrepreneur who always had a side project going, Jackson loved Donohue's music, and, wouldn't you know, he had just bought a small record company in Nashville and gotten one of his artist's music videos on Country Music Television. Jackson was trying to get a TV show on the air too. Was Dane interested in helping him out? "He was fascinating, and seemed to have a lot of knowledge about country music," says Donohue, who helped Jackson put together *America's Country Magazine*, a syndicated show filmed in Nashville that ran for two seasons and featured greats such as Alan Jackson, Clint Black, Tanya Tucker and Travis Tritt.

But the TV show wasn't paying Jackson's bills. Instead, he was running a classic Ponzi scheme — soliciting new investors whose money he'd use to pay existing ones, whose money he'd already stolen. By December of 1991, Jackson was accused of writing \$2.1 million in bad checks and defrauding at least 238 people out of \$10 million. Even worse was that Jackson wasn't supposed to be soliciting investments in the first place, as he'd been prohibited from selling securities after a 1987 check fraud conviction.

Jackson was found guilty of aggravated theft, perjury, passing bad checks, securities fraud, unlicensed sale of securities and a few other counts. He was sent to prison, and the company folded.

Once again, Donohue went back to work for his father's construction company. But after a few years, the family business started having its own problems with financial irregularities. In 1993, S.M. discovered that a longtime secretary had embezzled more than \$150,000 from the company. The company never recovered from the loss, and eventually Donohue knew he had to look elsewhere to provide for his family.

He turned to Ken Jackson.

By 2000, Jackson had been out of prison for a year and was already working on a new idea. A new federal law required hospitals and clinics to spend a lot of money safely disposing of used needles and syringes, also known as "sharps." If there was a device that could destroy those sharps altogether, it would be a goldmine for anyone who sold it. Jackson got to work in his garage building a device he called the NeedleZap, and he brought Donohue on board as "director of research" in 2000, giving him an 11 percent stake in the company. Things started off strong: With Donohue's help, Jackson's NeedleZap got market clearance from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) — and lots of publicity. But there was one problem: The device didn't work. After a massive recall and lawsuits over financial impropriety, the company was liquidated, and all of its employees — including Donohue — were laid off.

Jackson still owed millions of dollars in fines, penalties and repayments from his earlier fraud conviction. So he set up a new company, called Medical Safety Solutions (MSS), and created a new needle destruction device called the Sharps Terminator. He hired two longtime collaborators and brought on Donohue as an FDA consultant, paying him \$830 a week and promising him 500,000 shares of company stock.

It was an important role: The Sharps Terminator would need FDA approval before it could be sold. In early 2008, MSS promised investors that FDA approval would be coming very soon. By late 2008, it would definitely be approved by Christmas. Well, OK, it would *certainly* be complete by January 2009. And when that deadline passed? Don't worry — FDA clearance was imminent. In the meantime, doctors, nurses, retirees and professional investors all put their money into the product.

In 2010, miffed that he was unable to get through to Jackson, an investor emailed Donohue directly for an update on the pending FDA approval. Donohue wrote back that it was the fault of the “typing pool” and blamed it on government inefficiency. He told another investor that he'd just gotten off the phone with the FDA and that the agency had given the company “verbal approval.” In 2011, another investor told Jackson that he had a congressman willing to intervene with the FDA in order to bring the product to market. Jackson refused, saying it would “only complicate things.”

Once again, Jackson's goal wasn't really building the Sharps Terminator. What he really wanted was to raise enough money from new investors to pay off debts related to his prior conviction. That money was laundered through employee paychecks and shell companies before ending up directly in Jackson's pocket. Occasionally, he'd send out a supposed one-time “dividend check” to pacify an investor who started asking questions — the hallmark of a Ponzi scheme. He also spent a lot of time and money at the Mountaineer Casino, just over the West Virginia border.

Eventually, MSS dropped the pretense and just started telling investors that the product was FDA approved. Donohue gave out a bogus “provisional” number when anyone asked questions. (His attorney would later argue that number was given to him by Jackson.) In reality, the very first time MSS applied for FDA approval for the Sharps Terminator was on October 23, 2012 — four years after the first investors had handed over their money. The application even said “original submission” at the top.

On March 13, 2013, the FBI searched Ken Jackson's properties. They found evidence of plenty of tinkering on unrelated projects, four completed Sharps Terminators — the only ones that existed, despite promises to investors that the company was ready to fill tens of thousands of orders — and a bunch of empty boxes that made the warehouse look like it was full of product, ready to ship.

MSS folded, but the company that purchased the rights to the Sharps Terminator chose to keep Donohue on: They were impressed with his knowledge of the product and of the FDA approval process. Maybe he'd dodged a bullet.

His music career was looking up too: Sony now owned the rights to his album, which they rereleased. He recorded a few new songs with fellow yacht rockers that ended up on YouTube. *Beyond Yacht Rock* debuted. As the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac rode a wave of nostalgia from millennials who grew up listening to their parents' copies of *Hotel California* and *Rumours*, the time was right for a Donohue comeback.

That hope ended abruptly in July 2015, with a 31-count indictment filed by federal prosecutors. Donohue, Jackson and two others were charged with conspiracy, mail fraud, wire fraud, securities fraud and money laundering. The news was on the front page of the *Mansfield News Journal*. Donohue had to tell his 94-year-old mother what had happened, and face the friends and family in his hometown who had shown support for him since the beginning, when he'd played with The Britains. "I think the biggest thing he did wrong was, there's no way he did not know that Ken Jackson was not a good guy," Falon Donohue says.

If Donohue had told the FBI that Jackson was up to something, admitted that he'd never spoken with the FDA and that he'd repeated Jackson's lies to investors, he might have escaped indictment and prison time. "That certainly could've changed his trajectory," says Julie Haymond, the FBI agent who investigated MSS.

Instead, Donohue demonstrated the same mix of naiveté and stubbornness as he had when he'd gone into the music studio without permission. "I think Dane might be unsophisticated enough not to know that, absolutely, you guys broke the law," says Andrew LaPointe, who ultimately spent years and many hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to salvage the product. Still, he seemed surprised that Donohue ended up in the same boat as Jackson and the others. "Of the four of them, he was just a gofer. He was just executing what he was told to do," LaPointe tells me.

The trial began in April 2016 — two months after the Sharps Terminator finally received its FDA approval. Donohue's name was barely mentioned, and multiple witnesses either didn't remember him or were unaware of his role within MSS. (Haymond assured me that jurors saw plenty of evidence against Donohue.) After four days of deliberation, a jury found Dane Donohue guilty on seven of eight counts. An appeal was denied, and Donohue was sentenced to 46 months in prison. The others got even longer sentences. Just after Christmas in 2016, Donohue turned himself in at the federal prison in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Even today, Donohue says he did nothing wrong. Across a series of freewheeling interviews and candid conversations, he stuck to the same line: "I continue to assert my innocence even though I served my prison term."



Donohue and his guitar in his studio at his home, which he calls The Woodhouse.

Of the 2.3 million people doing time in the U.S., it's usually white-collar criminals who end up at FCI Morgantown. But even at a prison nicknamed "Club Fed," Donohue still had to give up his freedom, and leave behind his wife, kids and grandkids. There were little indignities too: Donohue had always dyed his hair jet black, but without access to those supplies, he went totally gray. Falon almost didn't recognize him when she visited.

In prison, Donohue threw himself into his music. In a poetry class, he helped fellow inmates put their words to songs. He taught private guitar lessons. And he joined the Compound Band, FCI Morgantown's perpetual headline act. They were good. "We did everything from gospel to Motown, to some hip-hop, the Beatles, the Eagles — just an eclectic mix." Blues, too. When they played "Kansas City," the whole auditorium went crazy.

As much as it was an escape for the audience, it helped Donohue as well. Through his music, he met young drug offenders who had been away from their families for a decade. He met surgeons, scientists and attorneys. He connected on a personal level with people of different faiths and backgrounds. And

he wrote new songs for the people he met. One fellow inmate had struggled with thoughts of suicide, and Donohue wrote a song for him — one of more than a hundred songs Donohue wrote during his time in prison. On Sunday nights, he'd listen to *Mountain Stage* on West Virginia's public radio station, and dream of hearing one of his own songs play on the radio again.

“He's always been a good songwriter, but the songs that he wrote in prison — to say they're levels above is an understatement,” Falon says. “They have a clarity about them I didn't even realize he was missing.”

Donohue was released during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic — “from locked up to lockdown,” he jokes — and went straight home to his family, his grandkids, and his studio. He recorded a Christmas song he'd written during his first year away, and an old friend who had been his first manager back when he was playing the Keg Room mixed it for him. Called “Old Fashioned Christmas,” it even got some airplay on a local station in Mansfield in December of 2020. His voice has mellowed over the years, but he can still hit the high notes.

Donohue tells me he's done wanting to be a rock star, but he'd love it if someone else recorded something he wrote. Maybe his Christmas song, he says. Maybe Michael Bublé, he says. Maybe this article will open some doors, he says.

One Friday night, Donohue calls me up out of the blue, just to chat. I'm apparently one of the band now. We talk about the arc of his career, about living through a pandemic, about personal growth during a prison sentence. And he sums up his philosophy for me. “Everyone's wondering what's going on and what's their place in the world. Well, I'll tell you what — as soon as I get off the phone, I'm going to pick up my guitar.”

If there's any song of Donohue's that I hope gets rerecorded, it's a ballad he originally called “Winter Wings.” On his album, it was retitled “Where Will You Go,” and Donohue himself plays lead guitar. His words tumble out — one last plea to a lover whose mind is already made up and whose foot is already out the door. To me, it sounds like a gentle heartbreak. But to Dane Donohue's ears, I bet it sounds a little like hope.

Just like a lost bird in last winter's snow

With your winter wings, where will you go?