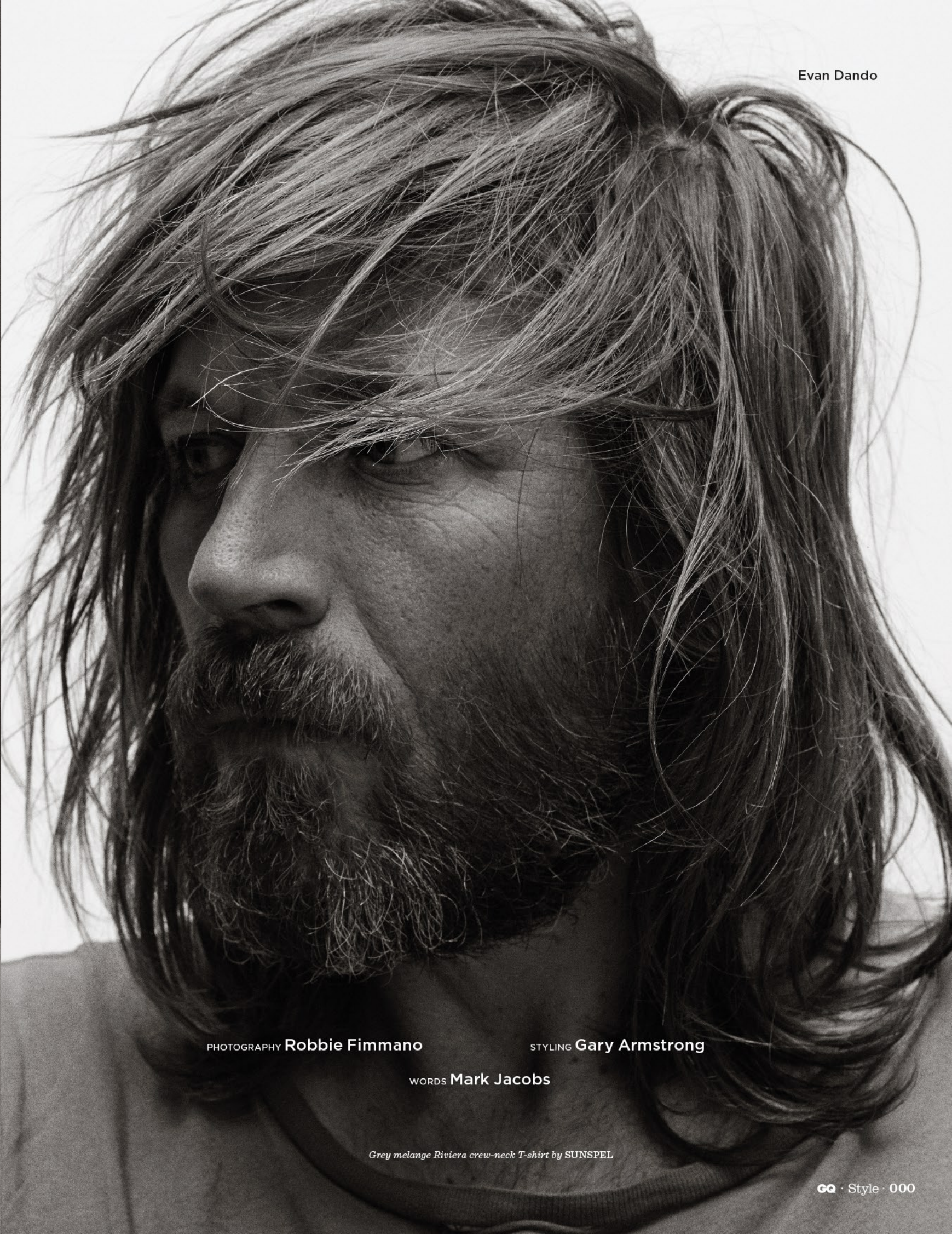


E V A N

D A

N D O

Once the doe-eyed pin-up boy of Nineties grunge, Evan Dando played the fame game with a wry detachment, but the irony soon wore thin. Now all grown up, his maverick style still catches the eye



Evan Dando

PHOTOGRAPHY **Robbie Fimmano**

STYLING **Gary Armstrong**

WORDS **Mark Jacobs**

Grey melange Riviera crew-neck T-shirt by SUNSPEL

Just before ‘alternative’ first became so big it threatened to become the new conformism, there was Evan Dando. As the frontman of Nineties folk-rockers The Lemonheads, he was among the first of the grunge generation to straddle that perilous divide between underground cool and mainstream appeal. Over a quarter of a century later, Dando has long since become *the* Lemonhead, the group’s singular constant (save for the short time he joined the Blake Babies with long-time friend and sometime muse Juliana Hatfield) since it started as a high school band in the upper-middle class suburbs of Boston in 1986. A lanky, square-jawed pin-up with poet’s eyes, Dando was the model for his decade’s slacker bohemianism. He arrived at a moment when sensitivity and self-damage were exciting space for the collegiate set. Most formidably, Dando possessed enviable talent to write simple, heartfelt songs and a honey voice with which to sing them: the stuff that can elevate a Kafka-reading tenth grader into a decadent ‘alternative’ rock star.

Today, Dando is at his *GQ Style* photo shoot in a Venice Beach studio. He first comes into view between set-ups, hustling up a flight of stairs barefoot with a bathrobe over his clothing, the long flat hair of his formative years now a thick mane. When he finally lands for the interview, it is in a seat on a narrow outdoor patio with only high walls separating him from the early evening boardwalk sideshow. Dando easily proves his reputation as one of rock’s great socialisers; while sometimes appearing to be thinking faster than he can speak, he is always engaged, only occasionally apologising for speaking too much.

One of the first topics we stumble upon is his 1993 appearance on *Live! with Regis and Kathie Lee*, the exclamatory American morning talk show. After being introduced as ‘a young, giant star and getting bigger by the moment’, Dando slouched agreeably through pleasantries, discussed beaded necklaces, and then took up his guitar to perform The Lemonheads’ hit ‘It’s a Shame About Ray’ so magnetically that he instantly quieted an absurd scene. ‘It’s funny right? Thank God they let me sing. I’ll take that as a metaphor for a lot of things,’ he says. ‘My manager and I were ruefully realising that rock’n’roll is all about compromise and pussyng out. But as long as you get something real in there – somewhere – it’s worth it.’

Beaded necklaces inspire discussion of the ‘Dirty Hippie’ post-rave necklaces Miley Cyrus crafted and showed with Jeremy Scott’s SS15 runway. ‘They say money can’t buy happiness and it’s totally true,’ she told a reporter about the project. ‘Money can buy you a bunch of shit to glue to a bunch of other shit that will make you happy, but besides that, there’s no more happiness.’ The sentiment at least skims the value set of the alt rulebook – and it’s easy to imagine Dando taking Wayne Coyne’s role of Miley’s rainbow in her Art Basel Miami performance of ‘Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds’ – so it is repeated for Dando. ‘That’s brilliant. She really is awesome. That’s the way I feel about a lot of things. She said it right there,’ Dando exclaims and begins strumming

‘Rock’n’roll is all about compromise
and pussyng out. But as long
as you get something real in there
- somewhere - it’s worth it’

a note-perfect cover of ‘We Can’t Stop’ on his guitar. ‘Red cups and sweaty bodies everywhere, hands in the air like we don’t care,’ he sings. The defiant hedonism of the lyrics suits him.

The Lemonheads – initially called the Whelps and founded by Dando, Ben Deily (guitar and drums) and Jesse Peretz (bass) – quickly became prominent faces on the Boston alt-rock scene after releasing their first album in 1987, the punky *Hate Your Friends*. They received pop attention in 1989 for their loud, snotty cover of Suzanne Vega’s sensitive Top 40 hit ‘Luka’, which they originally performed live as a joke, but which their label strong-armed them to record for their third album, 1989’s *Lick*. They signed with Atlantic Records in 1990 and delivered their major label debut *Lovey* later that year. ‘And then Nirvana got really big and all of a sudden all of my friends got signed and played to 2,000 people everywhere,’ Dando recalls of the record industry’s ‘alternative gold rush’.

Their mainstream breakthrough came in 1992 with the release of *It’s a Shame About Ray*, 12 perfect tracks of alternately giddy and melancholic jangle-rock in under a half an hour, with Hatfield’s vocals sealing the deal on tunes such as ‘My Drug Buddy’, with its soft, stoned frankness and depressed refrain, ‘I’m too much with myself, I want to be someone else.’ Later pressings of the album included one of the band’s biggest commercial successes, a ‘sleazy, quick and early Nineties’ version of Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘Mrs Robinson’, which was originally recorded under pressure by their record label for a 25th anniversary video rerelease of *The Graduate*; Martin Scorsese later used it on the soundtrack for 2013’s *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The video for the title track starred Johnny Depp and was shot by former bandmate Peretz, who later directed a 2013 episode of *Girls* called ‘It’s a Shame About Ray’. Dando has a ‘why not?’ attitude towards Nineties revivalism. ‘I’m all for it,’ he says.

By the release of 1993’s *Come On Feel The Lemonheads*, which delivered MTV-propelled hits such as ‘Into Your Arms’ and ‘Big Gay Heart’, The Lemonheads were leading lights of the grunge explosion. ‘You’ve got to be talented but you’ve got to be lucky,’ he says. ‘The worst luck is that when it does happen it’s pretty freaky. How many mornings can you wake up with the local record company’s flowers and Champagne, and everything’s empty, and you’re with a terrible Molly (MDMA) hangover?’ he says. ‘Maybe it’s the 15th or the 16th time you wake up in the stairwell with all of these empty Champagne bottles and flowers and you just start to wonder a bit.’

‘I would say to my friends in high school, “All I need is an apartment and a guitar,” and they would be like, “Evan, shut the fuck up, you’re never going to get that.” But I did, somehow,’ he says with lingering surprise. ‘We sold a million records – that’s enough for me. All I ever wanted was to live semi-comfortably off music, travel a fucking lot, be able to rent an apartment, eat food and occasionally do something stupid and really expensive. That’s a lot to ask for but I’ve been able to do all of those things. And I did everything in the world to fuck it up because I was anti-show business.’

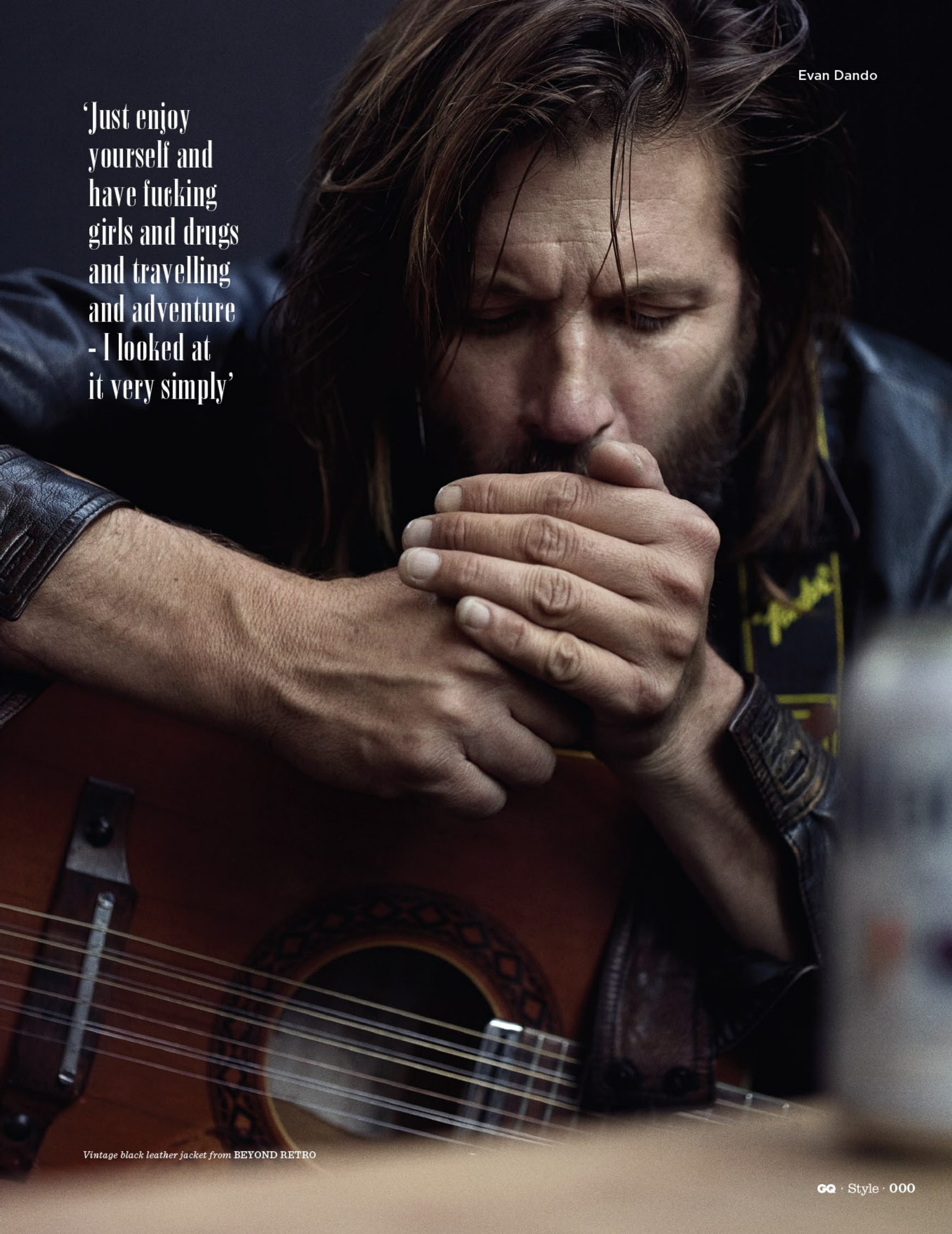
Dando points out that he was born two weeks before Charles Manson was released from jail in 1967, just prior to the Summer of Love. ‘I wouldn’t want to be born at any other time – right there at the cusp when they’re selling hippie wigs in Woolworths, at the end when the underground was all over,’ he says cheerfully. The Lemonheads happened at a similar moment, when the underground was about to be all over, all over again. One of the great tensions about Dando was the way he played the politics of ‘selling out’. He cared and he didn’t. He entertained himself with the mainstream, wise to the dissonance of being marketed as an ‘alternative’ poster boy. In his 1994 *Reality Bites* cameo, he parodies a pretty, self-centred, long-haired rock guitarist. In ►



Red and black polka dot silk pyjama shirt by DOLCE & GABBANA; black cotton twill trousers by LOUIS VUITTON



Sky blue and white striped robe by DEREK ROSE



Evan Dando

‘Just enjoy
yourself and
have fucking
girls and drugs
and travelling
and adventure
- I looked at
it very simply’

Vintage black leather jacket from BEYOND RETRO

► 1996, he performed on the ‘So Long Slobs... Hello Hunks!’ episode of *The Jenny Jones Show*. It was part punk prank and part defeatist concession, but it was also part of the big fame party. ‘I just went for it,’ he says. ‘I was into the cliché. It was like, “enough of the whining. Just enjoy yourself and have fucking girls and drugs and travelling and adventure.” I looked at it very simply – “this is my chance”’

Dando could be irresistible, aggravating, and aggravating for being irresistible. In 1992, *Sassy* magazine, the cultural arbiter for the discerning cool girls of its time, labelled Dando ‘His Beautiful Blond Sadness’. The following year, Dando was named one of *People* magazine’s ‘50 Most Beautiful People in the World’ for being a ‘grunge god’.

Kathleen Hanna, the lead singer of the pioneering feminist punk band Bikini Kill, wrote in her 1994 ‘zine *My Life With Evan Dando Popstar*, ‘I fell in love with Evan because he is a total slut and everyone thinks it’s very cute, unlike when I was in junior high and high school and the word “slut” followed me everywhere at arm’s length. I fell in love with Evan because I don’t do drugs so I need other destructive pastimes.’ Hanna’s abstract fantasy – as she and Dando never had a relationship – was but one example of the arch reactions to the singer’s perceived entitlement. ‘I was really honoured by it. *Die Evan Dando, Die* was another one. I was psyched by that,’ Dando says. The ‘alternahunk’ nicknames were beyond him. ‘I didn’t know what to do about this way that they were labelling me so I was like, “fuck it. I don’t care. I’m not whatever they’re making me but maybe it’ll get the music heard and maybe when I’m approaching 50 I’ll still be doing it.”’

Last night, at a show with the Psychedelic Furs and Royston Langdon at the Fonda Theatre in Hollywood, Dando fronted The Lemonheads again for an excellent set of guitar fuzz and acoustic

Vintage sleeveless denim jacket by LEVI’S; black cotton twill trousers by LOUIS VUITTON; grey melange Riviera crew-neck T-shirt by SUNSPEL



sentiment that succeeded in distracting the audience from their middle-aged selfies. ‘I enjoy it more now and I don’t take it for granted,’ Dando, now 48, says of performing. ‘Because there were times when I should have been really happy – when instead I was like, “I’m fucking playing for another 2,000 people that paid for tickets to get in here.” When you’re 24 or 25 you think you’re going to die soon anyway. You’re like, “whatever.” You’re just so cool. Now I can just take simple pleasure in the fact that I can still do this. I really love playing music. I love it so much. It’s how I comfort myself. If that comforts other people, that’s amazing.’

Back at the photo studio, Dando scrolls through his phone to share what has been comforting him after gigs. ‘I’ll show you exactly what I’m doing,’ he says, pulling up a series of photographs that he abstracted in iPhoto, which are, pleasingly, surprisingly digital considering Dando’s more analogue sensibilities. One looks like a saturated Peter Saville cherub. ‘I call them paintings,’ Dando explains. After attempting to demonstrate his process on a small touchscreen, he retrieves and opens his laptop, revealing a keyboard that he blacked out with a Sharpie marker. ‘I thought it would help me type but it’s actually making it really hard,’ he explains before blowing out a scene of fireworks with his touchpad. ‘I like touring. I like the funny shit that happens on tour. I’m really much better off when I tour a lot because I have trouble with self-discipline for sure. And so if I just see time yawning out in front of me I’m like, “somebody better plan some shit for me because I don’t think I’m going to do anything otherwise, you know?” I could call the drug dealer again. I can fall into that once in a while and that sucks. But it’s a good scene right now for me.’

With Dando, drug use is often on the table, sometimes literally, like in a 2012 photo he posted to his Twitter account of a white powder cut up into lines with the text, ‘Just finished a pretty fun gig in Phoenix.’ Dando is also candid about his arrest at a Sydney airport in 1995 that inspired him to tell *The Daily Telegraph*, ‘Looking back, I’m glad I lost it completely at least once.’ ‘I was doing dope in England and I didn’t have a habit yet and stopped doing it and was taking speed, and then took E the next night and stayed up and then I took acid the next night,’ he rattles off. ‘A little bit of semi-withdrawal kicked in and I lost it completely.’

In the 20 years since, Dando has intermittently toured and recorded with The Lemonheads and solo. He’s been based out of Martha’s Vineyard, a privileged New England vacation island, for the last five. He describes an idyllic life of fishing, swimming and friends. ‘I hang out with a lot of younger people and make music,’ he says. ‘A lot of people my age don’t really want to do stuff any more like they used to. I guess that’s why I’m going towards studio arts because eventually I’ll have to chill out a little bit.’

There are those who click into the corporate way, and those whose lives are stripped for moodboard swipe by those who click into the corporate way. With a different set of choices, Dando could have been playing black tie rainforest benefit concerts with Sting. ‘I look at the people who do all of the right things all of the time,’ he says, ‘but sometimes you want to be a little bit naughty.’

He says he is more open to making ‘right’ decisions. ‘For a long time I was consciously into doing the wrong thing. But I’m over that now. Life’s good these days and it’s fun to hang on to,’ he explains. ‘I saw some old friends last night – [Babes in Toyland drummer] Lori Barbero and [former Hole drummer] Patty Schemel – things are the same, they don’t seem different.’

He pauses, pondering on his unlikely survival, physically as well as creatively. And maybe wonders how he ended up still being considered a style icon some 25 years since his first hit.

‘It was nice to see some old friends,’ he continues. ‘And also it was like, “Wow. Can you believe we made it this far?”’ **Q&A**

Caspian-rice-live-red riga printed silk popeline printed shirt and pyjama trousers, both by GUCCI; black and white checkerboard vintage Vans from Jetrag; navy and red wool hat Evan’s own

Groomer Rob Tully at The Magner Agency Photo assistants Eric Hobbs and Ryan Lopez Stylist’s assistants Florence Raymond, Hannah Tindle Digital technician Luca Bellumore On-set production Camp Productions Production KO Productions Lighting Milk Studios Location The Focus Studios



Evan Dando