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Poptone

We met up with Poptone for an exclusive photoshoot and in person interview in Los Angeles. Inspired by a strange epiphany, the two members-in-common of Bauhaus, Love and Rockets, and Tones on Tail have reunited to make new musical magic. But to tie it all together and make it work, they needed bass player Diva Dompe.

Daniel Ash and Kevin Haskins have reunited along with Kevin's daughter, Diva Dompe, to form Poptone. They are currently touring North America playing a set of music from Ash and Haskins' years of musical partnership covering Bauhaus, Love and Rockets, and Tones on Tail. For many fans of dark alternative music, the influence of Haskins and Ash's careers is undeniably immense. The opportunity to experience a carefully curated set of songs from Haskins and Ash's oeuvre is not to be missed. The live set is a celebration of songs from what many consider to be the least well-known outfit of their three major collaborations, Tones on Tail. So far, the shows played along the west coast have been very well received and new tour dates have been announced on the east coast with (hopefully) more shows to come. We sat down with the band to talk about their tour, what inspired this reunion and the state of music now.

So why now? I remember reading that you wanted to stay away from performing and Coachella came calling and you said, "no, not the right time."

Daniel Ash : Oh, that was like three, four, five years ago, we were offered Tones for Coachella. We got excited about it for five minutes and then, um... you see, the original bass player lives about 8,000 miles away. You know, that sort of... people ask "well why this" and "why that" with Glenn and I think, well actually there is a practical reason. I haven't seen him in years and he lives 8,000 miles away. I think maybe if he was actually around it would have worked out differently.

But this means that Diva came into the picture to fill that space.

DA : But not only that, we are not only doing Tones on Tail tracks but Love and Rockets [and Bauhaus] as well. And knowing Glenn, he wouldn't want to play Dave's basslines.

Kevin Haskins : Well, it makes sense to have someone, you know because it's three bands, to have someone neutral on bass. [to Diva] Not that you're just neutral, you're very much more than neutral.

DA : Yeah, it did sort of work out, I mean, you know they are father and daughter. KH : Diva's brought so much to this. A lot more than I than I had envisioned.

Diva, did you do programming? You're doing keys for the live shows as well?

Diva Dompe : Yeah, for "Lions", I did the programming for that. I sampled parts of the song and then I'm playing the kick and the keyboard part on that one and then I'm triggering for two other songs. Normally you think, "oh, they are all going to have backing tracks," but only two [of our songs] have backing tracks and the rest is live.

When you were selecting the set list was it planned to change each night or was the plan to have the same setlist throughout your tour?

DA : No, it doesn't change at all. We were rehearsing solid for about eight weeks and then, the setlist actually fell into place really quick. The third version of it was like, "yep, we've got it now." Songs on the end of the list were changing a little bit but we pretty much got it four weeks in from what I remember. We thought, "okay, we are going to try this out with an audience," but it worked with the audience and it is paced really well, I think, as good as it can be actually. So we got back together quick.

How did songs make the cut?

DA : Real simple. You know what? Everybody wants to hear that one, that one, that one, that one... they are so obvious. There is always going to be some tracks

that people say, "oh, they're not playing 'Burning Skies'" or "they're not playing that" but pretty much everything we chose I think works as a set and also what people want to hear to a large degree. There's always going to be somebody who wants something that you're not going to do.

DD : We also only picked things that Danny wrote or sang on. So there were a lot of Love and Rockets songs that we didn't do because they were David's songs or he did half of it. And also what logistically works live. I love "Rain", it's one of my favorite Tones on Tail songs, but that one is really hard to do live.

DA : It was all done with backwards reverbs and everything. It's not a live track, it was completely made in studio.

DD : More of like a live production thing, you know?

DA : We'd hit a brick wall with the track and then somebody thought of reversing to give it something... [looks to Kevin] oh, was that you?

KH : Well, I think you'd been wanting backwards reverb. So in the old days we would have to take the tape and put it on backwards. So the track was playing backwards and I said, "well, that sounds really good backwards," so then we decided we would do the whole track instrumental backwards and then segue it into the forwards sections.

DA : Yeah, plus they have all those backward "ooh ahhs" which sounded like a cow it was crazy you know "ooOOooohhh" but in a really good way. I love backwards stuff. Because, you know backwards reverb stuff, Siouxsie and the Banshees had used it a lot in the 80s. It's that thing where it goes "chochochocho" and in the old days you would actually turn the tape around and you would record whatever. I mean, Marc Bolan did it once with that song "Woodland Rock", and on the guitar, when I was a kid but it was all backwards reverb. It's a guitar lick but the solo has been turned backwards and it gives this wonderful effect.

Is that stuff hard to reproduce live?

DA : Yes, it's impossible. You can't do it.

So those were out, any songs that had reverb?

DA : Well you can use backing tracks. There's some things that we do little tricks, like everybody uses backing tracks but we are only doing it on two tracks. But because Kevin is so good at triggering all those sounds people might think it all sounds like it's on a backing track.

When you think about writing music and how physical the process was to create those sounds twenty-five years ago versus now... you can reproduce almost anything digitally.

DA : You still have to know how to do it though, because you can have all the tools in the world but if you haven't got the talent to put it together it's going to sound like crap.

That ties into the question, "why now?" Why play these songs live now? Why was this the right time to bring these songs out? And you know that everyone wants to hear this stuff live.

DA : Yeah, especially the Tones stuff.

DD : Danny had a revelation.

DA : I had an epiphany about nine weeks ago [about a week before the band began rehearsing]. I'd never thought about doing this again. I thought, "I'm done. I'm done. I'm too old to do that," and it's time to move on and do something else and so I haven't done it in seven or eight years at least [performing] live. So I've been DJing for like twenty years and doing that, but anyway. So, I think we all do this... I was at the computer one night, headphones on, YouTube on full blast in my headphones, drinking wine, smoking, looking at the [screen].

This sounds like a normal night. [everyone laughs]

DA : Normal night, yeah! So I nodded out, and I woke up... I must have nodded out to Brian Eno, "Before and After Science", it was getting late. I was woken up at four in the morning by Motorhead's "Ace of Spades" and it jolted me! I remember now because for a while I didn't remember what the song was and then

it became crystal clear because Kevin said, “what was the song?” and I suddenly realized it was that. And I love that song, it’s great.
 KH : And then he heard the voice of Lemmy, “Danny, get the band back together!”
 DA : It was like a Blues Brothers thing, “got to get the band back together!” No, I mean, I’m hearing the “Ace of Spades” on number eleven, fucking loud, you know as I play loud in my headphones.

This is just a song that popped up in YouTube’s autoplay feed, right? But hours after you dozed off?

DA : Exactly. I probably dozed off at midnight and I was, boom, “Ace of Spades”, you know that riff that comes in... and it hit me like a bolt of lightning: it’s so obvious what you should do. Get back to playing live! And that song, and Lemmy, you know good old Lemmy. I don’t know if he’s channeling, it sounds silly. But I met Lemmy a handful of times and we got on really well. I’d often scrounge a cigarette off him when I’d see him because he’d always have a pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Last time I saw him at a motorcycle event in LA, we got on really well, this was obviously before he passed. So anyway, “Ace of Spades”, it just hit me and everything changed. My confidence, I had no confidence. That completely went 360. I just had this lifting feeling. And then I thought, “I’m stoned, I’m drunk, this is bullshit, I’m going to think totally different tomorrow.” But I didn’t, and the next day I calmed down a bit and thought, “what was I thinking.” But then the day after that and week after that I thought, “no, this can work. I can do this, it feels right.”

You didn’t immediately call Kevin up and say, “hey, let’s do this?” You waited a few days?

DA : Well, Chris [Minister] suggested the obvious person to be involved in this is Kevin because he was in all three bands. I’m really excited about the idea of a new generation, more people out there getting to hear the Tones stuff. This band, Poptone, is a great advert for Tones. In fact, it sounds like a 21st century name for Tones on Tail.

I had a chance to talk to Diva a little bit before this interview and would love to hear your perspectives around how you said earlier that you wanted a neutral third party to come in and fill out that third part. What part is she playing, how did she come to be that right person, and what energy is she bringing to this?

DA : Well, I don’t know, I haven’t seen Diva in years, years go by before I see her. But I got her a bass guitar for her birthday when she was thirteen and she picked it up. That’s where it started, right? Didn’t you start playing after I got you that bass? [To Kevin] I mean, did you say she was interested in playing bass? I’m not sure of the details. But there’s the connection.
 KH : I don’t remember.

DD : I was interested in drums but I think [my mother] wanted me to play bass.
 DA : So years later when I called Kevin, the first thing I asked him was, “okay, if we are going to do this thing, who is going to play bass?” And straight away the first thing he said was, “well, Diva can play bass,” and I said, “if she can play as good as she looks or whatever, she is in because it’s gonna be amazing.” It was like a dream come true to have someone looking like Diva that can really play the bass. I love seeing that.

It works on so many levels; the connection between you two, Kevin and Diva, and that Diva is cool. I’ve looked into her guided meditation stuff and so it’s an interesting addition to have her on board.

DD : And I am a good bass player. [laughs]
 DA : I know, I noticed! I didn’t know what to expect. So anyway she got the gig. The big test was if you could play “Go” and get the sound right, which she nailed it relatively quickly. So with this setup we’ve got some good karma going our way or something because lots of things are fitting into place.

Kevin and Daniel what do you hear now when you play these songs again live? Do you feel like you are transported back to the time when you made it

or is it timeless?
 DA : Well, for the Tones stuff there is a timelessness. I think that band, the music has aged really well. I think it could have been made last week and would sound relevant. Or it could have been made in the 1950s and people could have connected with it, although not everybody back then, tracks like “Twist” are very peculiar...

Well, you did cover “Heartbreak Hotel” so there’s a connection to that era.
 DA : Yeah, but not like Elvis. I mean back then you didn’t have fuzz bass.

As a listener, I feel there’s a dark, hard element to a lot of the music that you’ve done which makes it easily categorized into dark alternative but it doesn’t necessarily fit into the mold. There’s something very fresh...
 DA : There’s a quirkiness. ...with any band, there’s always plus or minus a member over the years between those three bands. Thing is, Glenn had a very unusual way of playing bass. The basslines are unique. I’ve never heard someone play anything similar. Maybe with Mick Karn from Japan there are some similar aspects there because I know Glenn liked Mick Karn and he also liked Jah Wobble but Glenn’s got his own style. He’s not mimicking anybody and that really is the thing that separates Tones from other bands is the bass playing. It’s very peculiar.

How would you describe the bass playing?
 DA : It’s quirky. It’s not obvious rock n roll at all.
 DD : They [the basslines] are not conventional. A lot of bands, the bass is seen as something to complement or augment the guitar playing. You just follow along to what else is going on. His basslines really stand on their own as their own element.
 DA : Peter Hook is the same. He won’t follow the guitar line. I saw an interview with him and he said, “fuck that, I’m not following that line. I’m doing my own line, I want to stand out.”
 DD : I relate to that. One of the first bands I was in that I was the main songwriter of I was playing bass but I would write the songs. I would write some of them on guitar but a lot of times I would write them just with the bass. You know, this unconventional thing and really craft the songs around the bassline.
 DA : That’s really different.

You mentioned Marc Bolan earlier and I have to ask: who are your heroes? Obviously, we talked about “Heartbreak Hotel” so Elvis is in there somewhere as a musical hero, right?

DA : No, not really. I recorded that song because I love that song. You know how they say you’re an Elvis person or a Beatles person and I’m not one of them. I really appreciate Elvis’ stuff, the classic stuff, and I love Gene Vincent and Little Richard equally, those two in particular. I loved Gene Vincent, that sound of the echo in his voice and the fact that he rode motorcycles and the fact that he wore black leather and everything, one of the first guys [to do that]. Little Richard, because of his whole sound and flamboyance visually, I loved Little Richard for that. If you think about it, imagine being a gay black flamboyant male in the 1950s... I didn’t know this until quite recently but he was Bowie’s hero while he was growing up so you can see where the Ziggy [Stardust] thing comes in. It was the bouffant he had and the makeup, in the 1950s for a guy... that’s insane back then, beyond nuts. We all freaked out with Bowie in 1972 with the androgyny and everything, and no eyebrows, fantastic flame of red hair. But think of Little Richard in the 1950s doing that when men were men and women were women and no betweeners were going on, thank-you-very-much. Right, it was like one or the other unless you talk about underground clubs which have always existed but to the general public it must have been so extreme in the 1950s for Little Richard.

Doesn’t it blow your mind to think that there are people who look at you guys in that way, as being that prototype of someone that influenced them to pick up an instrument?
 DA : I can’t really absorb it.
 KH : I don’t...
 DA : I think some people definitely absorb that possibility. There are certain peo-

ple with egos that would definitely think, “yeah, I’m one of those people.” I’m not.
 KH : Just, I think when we reformed Bauhaus we came away with how influential we’ve been then. I mean, I met Björk and she said, “Bauhaus were my favorite punk band.” And Thom Yorke said Bauhaus was a big influence.
 DA : They never say it in interviews!
 KH : I don’t know. I mean wow, I just found that really hard to believe. But it’s really gratifying.
 DA : I’ll tell you what blew my mind: somebody said that Love and Rockets are bigger than Roxy Music in America. I couldn’t get my head around that. Because, you know, the early [Roxy Music] stuff was like “wow” to me. It’s too English to connect over here. Us being English, Roxy Music were huge along with David Bowie.

Is that what you guys were listening to when you started playing music together?

DA : Oh yeah. Well, I’m three years older than him so he was listening to The Clash, The Damned, and all the punk thing, and the [Sex] Pistols. And then I started, I was fifteen, I was exposed to glam rock with the whole Ziggy [Stardust] thing, early Roxy Music when [Brian] Eno was with them and Lou Reed around the *Transformer* time, that was my favorite period, and Iggy Pop, Iggy and the Stooges. Those two albums that Iggy made with Bowie (*Lust for Life* and *The Idiot*) there was a strict diet of that.
 KH : A strict diet of Bolan and Bowie, big time, as well. That caught me at the right time.
 DA : Right, at fourteen or fifteen, you know when it hits all of us. I remember being twelve and [hearing] the Dave Clark Five and [wondering] what was that echo on the drums and all the instruments and the vocals, this massive echo that was fantastic. That “Bits and Pieces” thing, it got me going when I was twelve. I remember when mum and dad weren’t around I turned the volume up full and I got “that close” to the screen [to watch] “Bits and Pieces” to get the full effect...
 KH : And he hasn’t been the same since.
 DA : ...I’ve been exactly the same since that day as a kid. The old television screen, black and white. Crank it right up and you get right up close [to the screen] it’s just psychedelic, it’s just complete overload of the senses, sound and vision overloaded! It was like turning up my little fifteen watt amp in the kitchen because that got the most echo. Mum and dad had gone shopping to the supermarket and I’d go, “quick, get the amp out,” and got this fifteen amp out and this telecaster copy 25 quid guitar, again everything up full and just made noises. And when mum and dad got home, we had this lovely little old lady as a next-door neighbor and she said, “hello, Mrs. Ash, I don’t know what your son is doing but all of my cutlery is falling off the shelves and there’s so many noises going on over there.” You know, the echo of the kitchen because it had marble on the floor...

Did you happen to see Iggy’s documentary *Gimme Danger*? He said at one point when he was working early on in Chicago and he was inspired to make music that provoked the same passion and intensity that he saw people responding to through dance at soul and R&B clubs. They were obviously all feeling a rhythm and feeling part of something more primordial than just hearing a beat and wanting to screw someone or get drunk or whatever the case may be. I think there’s something to be said for that; it was a seed that was planted and you are talking about something similar.

DA : Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, with him, wasn’t it the case that he had electric shock treatment when he was younger and that had an effect. Well, that was in a film that I really liked called *Velvet Goldmine*. I love that film. So, that was the whole story with Iggy and Bowie and that whole thing. In that film, they talk about giving him the electric shock treatment to, as they said, “fry the gay away,” and it just made him go bonkers every time he heard electric guitar. I don’t know if they took a leaf out of the book of Iggy there but some of those stories within that [film] were real and some were not. I don’t know if that was a real one. I was there, I was one of those kids, the fifteen year olds who went to those gigs...

In the first scene of the film where the kids are all running to the show?



auxiliary music

DA : Yeah, I was one of those guys. Me, Pete, and another guy called Joseph at school. The three of us went to see all that and it was really accurate to what it was like: the clothing, the way the kids were dressed, in other words they didn't have money and didn't get it quite right. They had great big bell bottoms flares and those horrible green shirts with the massive lapels so, you know... if you look at old footage of Top of the Pops you've got Bowie looking absolutely fabulous doing "Starman", and then you've got all these dorky guys behind him in these terrible tank tops.

So, I have a silly question. I remember seeing a 120 Minutes interview you did and you were talking about Tom Jones doing a cover of "So Alive". So I did a little research and he never actually recorded it. What was the story with that?

DA : Oh yeah! The story was he was playing it live...

Because he loved Love and Rockets?

DA : No, because he loves that song. I don't think he knows about Love and Rockets but he knows about that song. If you think about the lyric in that song it is custom made for Tom Jones! Its right up his street. He is all about chicks and [the song], it's about chicks, about a woman. We were hoping that he would record it because we would get a load of money. [laughs] No, but the story is that he was playing it live and he was thinking of going into the studio and recording it but it never happened. But he was playing it live in Vegas.

KH : That was around the time where he or some producer or manager said, "hey, let's dip into songs that are contemporary and it will be an edgy thing for you to do." Didn't he do [a cover of] Kiss?

DA : Yes, he did do Kiss and he did a whole album with stuff where they are using techno beats in the background and everything else. He did the "So Alive" thing and he did contemporary artists like Underworld from the 90s using techno beats and all that. I wish he had recorded "So Alive", that would have been great.

This is an interesting time that we are in... not sure if anybody here is a fan of Alan Cross, he's had a long-running show called *The Ongoing History of New Music*... two things he has said is the music you listen to around your adolescence is the stamp, it's the music you continue to go back to throughout your life and helps define your personal narrative. Also, he said that during conservative political times more creativity is sparked perhaps because creativity is sparked by restriction. Given that we are in a time of upheaval and political resistance, what do you think is the next stage for music or what are you excited to hear?

DA : I don't think you can answer that because it's such a natural process that can't be contrived so what's next cannot be contrived. It's completely natural in the way that it develops. You can't use your intellect to find what that is. It comes completely naturally. What that is going to be, we won't know until it happens.

What do you think is missing when you listen to radio or are watching YouTube to see who the cool new bands are that are coming out, some that don't have a label yet but they are making some really edgy stuff?

DA : Well, the stuff that I'm hearing, I could go to something that's not that new like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Phantogram. Just the simplicity where they are not having to do stuff that is musically complicated. That's something I was doing. I would just do something on the bottom E string and just use the one string. The [guitarist] from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs does that and I like that and that is acceptable now where you don't need to know all of these chords and all that bullshit. A lot of guitarists wouldn't do this [one string] in the past because, "you would look like a wanker," and you've got to do all of this flashy shredding thing. It's like Mick Ronson where he would just howl on two notes. If you listen to the solo on "Moonage Daydream", the album version, one of my favorite ever solos, he's only going on two or three notes and he just hits that note and doesn't go anywhere else; he just leaves it and then he hits it again. It just sends me to heaven, especially

on that fade out, I want to cry when I hear it. That's just it, for me. I like things that are simple like that. So with that guy from Yeah Yeah Yeahs he does the same thing, he just plays on the one string and I can totally relate to that. It just gets a really good tone on that string, screw the other five, and you've got this real direct, powerful, simplistic thing.

KH : There's a band called POW! that are going to support us. Lola, my other daughter, her boyfriend is the singer. I just love them and it's just lucky I love them, it would be awful if I didn't. It's like this je ne sais quoi. There is another band called SURFBORT... I occasionally go to these cool gigs at these backyard parties in LA that got shut down by the cops, this thrown together thing, and there was just this energy and all of these young kids... they [SURFBORT] are just a punk band but it's just this energy or this vibe. It's just that certain thing you have and I don't know that you could bottle it. Then it wouldn't be special.

DA : That's what I was saying before, it's all a natural process. You can't manufacture and you can't contrive a movement. Punk happened because everyone in England was pissed off, we were all broke, shit weather, shit food, and no work. We were sick to death of the pompous old farts. You know, those progressive rock bands, God they were repulsive. And that was the status quo back then. So, suddenly these guys were getting on stage, well actually it started with the whole glam thing where guys were not afraid to say they were very conscious about what they looked like. They didn't just have a shit haircut and wear Levis and trainers and an old baggy T-shirt. They were actually taking pride in the way they looked. When I saw that at fifteen years old I thought, "at last, something magical." It was like the perfect art school band for me because I was just going to art school. It was wonderful, it was just this world where I wanted to live. I remember going to see Roxy Music in London and the audience looked as fabulous as the band. I was looking around and you couldn't tell the difference between the girls and the boys and I was in heaven. It was this fantasy land that I wanted to live in.

Did you both go to art school?

DA : Yeah, we all did. I did graphics and silkscreen printing and commercial art and then I went into doing industrial design which meant I could do whatever the fuck I wanted to do.

DD : About music now, I grew up in LA so I'm pretty intertwined with the underground music community in Los Angeles. I find it very inspiring. I'm part of an internet radio station called dublab and that's a really great community. Most of the people there are also musicians in bands that play around. My husband also has a record label called Leaving Records and he puts out a lot of really great new music. Some of the things I see is freedom with genres. I think that back in the day in the 80s people really stuck to their genre and stayed loyal to it but now I think there is a lot of freedom to play with all different kinds of genres. I think there is also a trend towards, and this is for music and for the whole world and something that we are all facing right now, the voices of traditionally marginalized people being brought to the forefront. Even though you would think that would be present in music always but it hasn't been so that is something I'm seeing now, people talking about those narratives through their art and creativity. There's this great punk band in LA and they are an all-black queer femme punk band called FUCK U Pay Us (FUPU). They are awesome and the have been gaining a large following here. Also, there's amazing funk and soul music and a lot of my friends and myself included have been making new age music and that's not looked down upon. Whereas if you guys tried doing new age music in the 80s it would have been looked down upon.

DA : But new age music started in the 80s with Brian Eno. But then there were the people doing the pseudo new age music and they didn't quite get it right...

DD : There were so many people making private issue new age in the 80s that was really just calm recording of weird electronic music. It just got labeled as new age. And that's another thing with technology, I'm getting into experimental sound design. I think with technology people have such access to exploring that and creating new genres and forms of music through that, too, so I think there is a lot of potential for a lot of new stuff to be exploding. **A**

