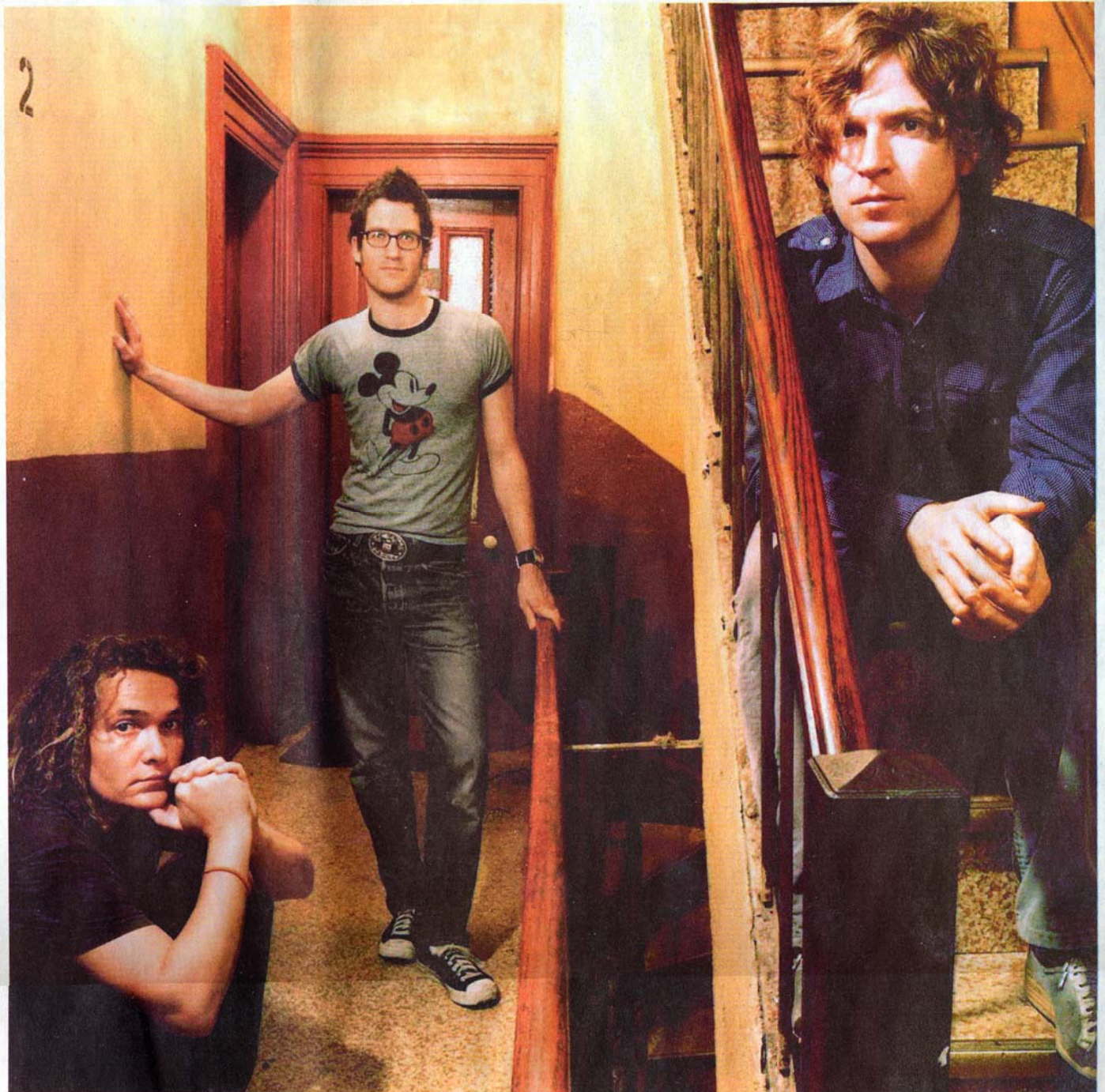


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Rennan Cavanaugh

A Band Just Now Recovering From Success

By ETHAN SMITH

REMEMBER Nada Surf? MTV viewers with long memories (if that's not a contradiction in terms) will recall that in 1996, the winkingly ironic video for this New York trio's equally tongue-in-cheek anthem "Popular" was a fixture on the channel, one of its 10 most-played clips for much of that summer. Chances are, that's all they'll remember.

Now, after years of obscurity, Nada Surf is back with "Let Go" (Barsuk), an album of deeply satisfying, unpretentious, difficult-to-categorize rock. Having briefly tasted fame, Nada Surf's members have stuck together through several rough years during which they returned to the life of a struggling young band, camping out in recording studios to save on hotel bills and working day jobs to support themselves.

"It felt more like a first record again," said Matthew Caws, the group's guitarist and singer, who was sitting in his small apartment in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. "There was a lot of time, and we had to do it by ourselves."

Judging by the results, the adversity has agreed with Mr. Caws and his bandmates, the bassist Daniel Lorca and the drummer Ira Elliot. Released in Europe last September, "Let Go" has been named one of the 50 best albums of 2002 by Mojo, the British music monthly, and has landed the band on magazine covers in France and Germany.

But it's not obvious that the acclaim the album has received abroad will be repeated in this country, where it will be released on Tuesday. Though many young bands might assume that wall-to-wall play on MTV is a ticket to the big time, the success of



Jesse Perez

Daniel Lorca, top left, Ira Elliot and Matthew Caws of Nada Surf; above, Mr. Caws in the video for the 1996 hit "Popular."

"Popular" may very well work against "Let Go," by keeping listeners from taking the new album as seriously as it deserves to be taken. "Popular," with spoken interludes cribbed from a corny 1950's dating manual ("if you see Johnny Football Hero in the hall, tell him he played a great game!") and a catchy chorus that poked fun at unattainable high school dreams, was a pleasant summer diversion. But novelty hits are hardly the stuff of which enduring reputations are made, especially for a band that never intended to become a fluffy Top 40 act.

Mr. Caws, 35, summed up his band's attitude toward its hit song: "We always kind of look at it as a golden ball and chain."

Ben Weber, the band's manager, put its situation in perspective. "Usually when you start off that quickly, it's tough to continue the uphill trajectory," he said. "Most artists' careers tend to slide after

After Nada Surf's initial hit, it sank out of sight. Now, with a new album, there are new prospects.

that. That's why you've got these whole groupings of one-hit wonders. That becomes a real frustration to the artist, and most of them pack it in and go away."

The popularity of "Popular" was not matched by sales: "High/Low," the album on which it appeared, sold just over 200,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan. In fact, the song started to make life difficult for Nada Surf shortly after it fell out of favor on MTV. Mr. Caws said the group felt pressure from its record label, Elektra, to deliver hits

along the lines of "Popular" as it began work on its next album. He recalled conversations with label executives that proceeded along the lines of: "We don't just need a song that *could* do well; we need miracles! Something ironic, with a massive, massive, easy-to-sing chorus that preferably talks about sex, or high school, or both."

He said that when the group instead produced a solid but unassuming alternative-rock record, "The Proximity Effect," Elektra released it in Europe but decided not to do so in the United States. The label shortly thereafter dropped the band altogether.

Sherry Ring Ginsberg, the senior vice president of press and artist relations at Elektra, said it was company policy not to comment on contract negotiations.

Nada Surf suddenly found itself in career limbo.

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Elektra set the asking price for the rights to "The Proximity Effect" at \$75,000 to \$200,000, more than the band could raise. The group toured in Europe, where it had modest success; band members paid their rent with the royalties that continued to trickle in from "Popular."

When the money from "Popular" stopped coming in, Mr. Caws got a part-time job at Earwax, a record store a few blocks from his apartment. Mr. Lorca, 35, went back to his old job as a Web designer. Mr. Elliot, 39, did session work with bands around New York. The group got together occasionally, recording covers of songs by the Pixies and Iggy Pop for tribute compilations. And it played a fictional rock group in the movie "Roommates," which was written and directed by Paulina Porizkova, the former model whose husband, Ric Ocasek, produced "High/Low."

"It was actually kind of luxurious," Mr. Caws said of this period. "I just worked at the record store and saw my friends a lot."

In late 2000, he said, Elektra relented and let Nada Surf release "The Proximity Effect" without paying for the privilege. The album sold about 6,000 copies in America, leaving the band largely forgotten in this country. During an American tour, Mr. Caws and his bandmates were pleasantly surprised to see audiences of even 60 people — a tenth the size of those that had turned out for concerts at the peak of the group's

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popularity. (The band will perform at the Bowery Ballroom in Manhattan — its biggest hometown gig in years — on Feb. 17.)

Nada Surf also went to work on "Let Go." The band was essentially recording "on other people's time," Mr. Caws said. "If Monday was convenient for me, that didn't mean it was for anybody else, and I might have to wait two weeks."

INDEED, "Let Go" sounds less frenetic than its predecessors (and nothing like the Avril Lavigne album of the same name). Mr. Caws's voice has matured into a supple, haunting tenor. Slower, quieter songs like "Inside of Love" envelop listeners without suffocating them. The uptempo songs display a balance between offhanded humor and pointed insight. The album subtly incorporates elements from 70's power pop and 80's new wave, without relying on self-conscious shtick or coming off sounding like an exercise in nostalgia.

Given the up-in-the-air nature of Nada Surf's career, it's apt that many of the songs center on images of flight — often involuntarily prolonged. "Nothing looks right, nothing smells right, I can't land," Mr. Caws sings in "Fruit Fly," which uses an insect's point of view to illustrate directionless existence. Another depicts the singer floating free in a state that's "neither heaven nor space."

But even with the record complete (at the band's own expense), Nada Surf had to overcome obstacles. It sent a copy to its former manager in the fall of 2001. Mr. Caws recalled the manager's saying: "I'm surprised that you wanted to ... And so I thought maybe ..."

Nada Surf

'Let Go,' Barsuk Records, to be released on Tuesday. Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey Street, Lower East Side, Feb. 17.

"There were all these unfinished sentences basically saying, 'Pack it in,'" Mr. Caws added.

The manager, he said, was either too polite or too evasive to come out and say that the band was a washed-up, one-hit wonder, but that was the implication.

"The identity of the band was a problem, because we'd had some success and then we didn't for a while," Mr. Caws said, laughing at the memory. "And this was our *manager!*"

The band and manager quickly parted ways, and with the help of Mr. Weber, the new manager, Nada Surf eventually made arrangements with three different independent labels — Barsuk and Heavenly, in Britain, and Labels, in the rest of Europe — to promote and distribute "Let Go."

Nada Surf has stopped performing "Popular" in concert, but it still suffers a backlash for the song. Mr. Caws has good reason to feel ambivalent about it. He said: "I've met a lot of people who said, 'I never liked you guys because of that song, but someone played me "Let Go" and I'm really won over.'"

Nonetheless, even after the new album was garnering rave reviews in the British press, one American music-industry Web site carried a headline that reflected an attitude Mr. Caws and his bandmates will be working hard to overcome: "Whatever happened to Nada Surf?" □