

'Sheriff of Mars' Depicts Unique Life of Jewish Country Music Outlaw

It was an era of steel strings, guitar heroes and storytellers—high on heroin, rebellious. Outlaw country music, the hallmark of Nashville's powerful and angry music scene of the 1970s, was the brew of greats such as Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Townes Van Zandt.

But there is another, little-known music hero of that era: Daniel Antopolsky. A Jewish lad from Augusta, Georgia—the grandson of immigrants who settled in the south and ran a hardware store on Main Street—the “Sheriff of Mars” fled the aggressive U.S. music scene for a tranquil life on a farm in Bordeaux, France.

Over the last 40 years, he has written nearly 500 songs. Now, for the first time ever, Antopolsky's music is being shared with the world through a new documentary and music album, the latter produced in conjunction with some of country music's finest players and by award-winning producer Gary Gold.

“There was a lost piece of history in this amazing musician who decided to disappear,” says documentary co-director and producer Jason Ressler. “This mysterious Daniel—no one knew where he went, what happened to him.”

Ressler discovered Antopolsky by chance when he was introduced to him by a mutual friend in Tel Aviv, where Antopolsky's daughter lives with her boyfriend, an Israel Defense Forces soldier. Traveling between Bordeaux, the U.S. and Israel—and different eras—Ressler ended up forging a friendship with the 66-year-old farmer. He says it was almost a year before he realized Antopolsky's talent.

“He usually would go upstairs to this little room and shut the door to write and play his songs,” recalls Ressler. “I didn’t think about it; I just figured it was some guy who likes to play guitar. Then one night, we were alone in the house, and he played downstairs. And I couldn’t believe it. He’s country, but he’s optimistic. These are some of the best songs I have ever heard in my life.”

Slowly, Antopolsky’s story began to unfold.

Antopolsky graduated college in the early 1970s and was influenced by the times: drinking and drugs, long hair and talk of revolution. One day, Van Zandt came to Athens, Georgia, and Antopolsky went to hear him play. After the show, Antopolsky introduced himself to the artist.

“They hit it off, and Townes invited him to come traveling with him,” says Al Low, who has known Antopolsky since they were in their teens. Antopolsky spent the next several years jamming across the U.S. with Townes. Legend has it that Antopolsky is Lefty in Van Zandt’s most popular “Pancho and Lefty” single.

“We were together in this hotel room and there was some kind of evangelistic thing going on so we couldn’t drive—the streets were closed,” Antopolsky tells . “So we decided to have some fun. I went outside and sat under an oak tree and he sat in front of the hotel room and we gave each other 30 minutes to write a song and then both come back and sing those songs to each other. ... That night, he wrote ‘Pancho and Lefty.’”

But Antopolsky fled the outlaw country music scene soon after that evening, after saving Townes’ life in Houston after an overdose on heroin, which left the young Antopolsky shaken. Low says that while Antopolsky was deep into the music and swayed by the times, he was never into heavy drugs and his optimistic love of life and country used to drive the brooding

singers crazy.

"I was just a young, wild hippie," Antopolsky says with his modest chuckle. "I lost my parents when I was very young but I understood from my youth about World War II veterans, about the Holocaust and the Iron Curtain. And about Israel; I love Israel. No, I was never really radical or protesting. I always loved America."

He continues, "Music has sort of an elevated place, but it is also a place to do harm. People can have a lot of hatred in songs. ... What inspires my songs is to find what is good. ... With songs, we can leap over our problems."

Ultimately, Antopolsky was in search of spirituality. He traveled around the world to find it—to Japan, to India and to Hawaii. Finally, he returned to his Jewish faith, met his wife, had twins and moved to France.

Today, on his farm, he ventures into the fields like a modern-day Rebbe Nachman and, "I just speak to the Creator, make a relationship. Rebbe Nachman taught us that we can talk to Him ourselves."

This newest venture, the one that involves sharing his hidden tunes with the public and telling his endearing and incredible story to the world, is for Antopolsky humbling and sometimes uncomfortable. But Ressler is confident that when the world hears Antopolsky there will be no going back.

"Daniel is less famous, but he is no less of a great storyteller than Townes or Bob Dylan," Ressler says.

"The Sheriff of Mars," for which there is a Kickstarter campaign closing on Dec. 15, is named for the cartoon character that Antopolsky has been drawing since the age of 4. Sometimes it has a mustache, sometimes it has guns or candy canes or stars. These images have ended up in the hands of many over the last four decades, including those of musical

icons of the Outlaw Country period. The sheriff, says Antopolsky, was always given as a gift, as a way to make people happy.

“Antopolsky is the cartoon character of happiness come to life,” says Ressler, who named the documentary that he hopes will be funded and debut soon in film festivals to help get the hidden artist’s music out.

“This is the story of a wild man with a sweet heart who has lived an incredible life like no one else has,” Ressler says. “He has put it all into his music without expecting anything to come from it. Now they are all going to love Daniel and his music.”

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