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JAZZ, ROOTS, & BLUES MUSIC | Shatner He Ain't

No, Jeff Daniels blows Captain Kirk into outer space

By Sara Miller

You're probably scoffing right now, looking at Jeff Daniels' familiar mug evoking "singer/songwriter" as he hugs the neck of a guitar, and thinking, "What a *novel* idea — a movie star with a guitar. Too bad Russell Crowe/Keanu Reeves/Jared Leto have already done it."

Well, it's too late to pierce Daniels' self-deprecating, elephantine hide — in fact, the first song he's played at nearly every show since his musical stage debut in 2000 is a witty little lampoon of himself called "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too," with lyrics like "Russell Crowe was on the Leno show / Singing some song that nobody knows / He's got an Oscar, now he's got a guitar / Just like that, he's a rock 'n' roll star."

"The opener ["Shatner"] is the disclaimer, where I rip on everybody who is in one form of entertainment and then tries to do another," Daniels says, speaking to the *CP* from his home in small-town Chelsea, Mich. "I remember playing Birdland in New York City. Talk about a tough crowd. They're just there to see you blow up; they paid to see a train wreck ... before I had even played a note, I said, 'You guys are already judging me, aren't you? You've already decided,' then I launched into 'Shatner' and then I was OK. Had 'em."

Daniels may not be breaking new ground musically with his guy-and-a-guitar melange of blues, folk, and song-storyin', but by all accounts he does a damn fine job in his latest role. Although he's played guitar since he got his first one in 1974, Daniels had never played for anyone but friends and family until 2000, when his old friend, the playwright Lanford Wilson, suggested that since there are so many people around the Chelsea area (which is roughly 10 miles from Ann Arbor) during the holidays, Daniels should play for an audience and "see if people would pay money to see it."

Being the affable fellow that he is, Daniels immediately thought of playing to raise money for the Purple Rose Theatre Company, the nonprofit outfit he founded in Chelsea in 1991 and tries to write an original play for each year. In 2000, he played a couple of shows over a weekend during Christmastime. The response was so strong that he's continued to play more shows each holiday season, pulling in just under \$100,000 at multiple shows over two weeks last year with songs like "Shatner," "Dirty Harry Blues" (about being shot by



Daniels gets folky and folksier at the Charleston Music Hall

Clint Eastwood in the 2002 movie *Blood Work*), and "Michigan, My Michigan," his paean to the state he's remained steadfast to through the ups and downs of his decades-long movie career. Last year he released a CD, *Jeff Daniels Live and Unplugged*, with proceeds from sales of the album going to the Purple Rose.

After repeated prodding from his sister and brother-in-law, who live in the Charleston area, Daniels decided to bring his current "An Evening with Jeff Daniels" tour through town. Those going to the one-night-only performance can expect a wholly entertaining evening with the self-effacing, Oscar-nominated (for his masterful portrayal of a selfish, loathsome literary father in last year's *The Squid and the Whale*) actor who once gleefully stuck his tongue to a frozen metal pole (see *Dumb and Dumber ... no, really, see it!*), all in the name of truth in performance.

"It's not me up there trying to be Bob Dylan or trying to write a song that'll be Top 40," Daniels says. "It's more club-oriented, more interaction between me and the audience. I get people up on stage dancing with me. I like to mix it up. The film career is full of comedy and then drama, and the show is, too. Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry: it's basic entertainment."

AN EVENING WITH JEFF DANIELS • Piccolo Spoleto's Charleston Music Hall Series • \$35 • June 3 at 8 p.m. • 2 hours • Charleston Music Hall, 37 John St. • 554-6060

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