



SONGWRITERS & PUBLISHERS - Words & Music

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Words & Music: Song Hall Picks New Crop; Daniels Acts Like A Writer

By JIM BESSMAN

The Songwriters Hall of Fame will induct Steve Cropper, fellow Stax songwriting team Isaac Hayes and David Porter, John Fogerty and Bill Withers at its 36th annual induction and awards dinner June 9 at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York.

Also being inducted are Richard and Robert Sherman, the Academy Award-winning brothers responsible for the music in such beloved Walt Disney films as "Mary Poppins" and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang."

Additionally, Beebe Bourne, president of the Bourne Co. and the Music Publishers Assn., will receive the Abe Olman Publishers Award in recognition of her many years of leadership and contributions to the industry. Gibson Guitar chairman/CEO Henry Juskiewicz will receive the Patron of the Arts Award for his support for the Songwriters Hall of Fame and other industry causes.

DANIELS UNPLUGGED: Jeff Daniels was in town to do radio and perform at Jim Caruso's popular "Cast Party," the Monday night open-mic gathering at Birdland for Broadway show people. (Theaters are traditionally dark Monday nights.)

Best-known for such films as "Terms of Endearment" and "Dumb & Dumber," Daniels won an Obie Award for "Johnny Got His Gun" in 1982, when he was plying the New York stage. But he has also been quietly writing songs for 30 years and recently self-released his first CD, "Jeff Daniels—Live and Unplugged," to benefit his Purple Rose Theatre Company in Chelsea, Mich.

The theater's name, of course, comes from Woody Allen's 1985 movie "The Purple Rose of Cairo," in which Daniels starred.

"I was in musicals in high school and college," the Michigan native says, "but I basically stopped doing them when I went to New York. But I'd picked up the guitar to keep the music going and played it at a couple bars where you'd usually just invite your friends. It's kind of been a secret, until I was literally pushed onstage four years ago to raise money for the theater."

It was then that Daniels culled some 200 original songs from his songbook.

"A lot of them were just horrible, because [songwriting] was a diary, basically," he says. But he adds that songwriting "comes from the same place" as acting, and after three more annual theater benefits, "I really knew what I was doing."

He also had inspiration and encouragement from the ubiquitous queen of humorous contemporary folk singer/songwriters, Christine Lavin.

"I first saw her 20 years ago in Ann Arbor [Mich.] and have always been a fan of her music—and the way she brings validity to comedy in music," Daniels says. "In a world where art is so serious and meaningful and important, people that can write and act funny are of great value—and are certainly overlooked. She made it OK to be funny with my music, and when the CD came out, she loved it and put me on her XM radio show ["The Village"] and has been a huge supporter."

Not that everything on "Live and Unplugged" is funny, but it does open with "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too," a put-down of the many actor/singer/songwriters performing "take-me-seriously music," as Daniels puts it.

Then there is "The Dirty Harry Blues," a witty tune that reflects his role as the villain in Clint Eastwood's recent "Bloodwork" and features his dead-on Eastwood imitation.

"There are two kinds of actors: those who get shot by Clint Eastwood and those who haven't," he says. "This song is about one who has—and how great it is."

On the serious side, "Kathy" was written more than 25 years ago following Daniels' first date with his wife. "Like a lot of songwriters," he explains, "I write stuff that means something instead of writing what will sell—and tend to go to the specific instead of the generic."

Songs like "The Lifelong Tiger Fan Blues" and "Michigan, My Michigan," then, show Daniels' roots.

"I thought the only place [the album] would be of interest was local, and have been on morning radio shows everywhere in lower Michigan just to get awareness," he says. "We've sold 10,000 in two months, when we figured that if we sold 1,000 it would be great."

Daniels also sold out the 1,500-seat Michigan Theater in Jackson, so he is looking to expand his disc's distribution beyond jeffdaniels.com and the Borders Books & Music chain. He is also hoping to perform more, depending on his acting commitments, and is planning his next CD, since he has plenty of material that is "more universal" in nature.

"Coming up through the New York theater and being around playwrights like Lanford Wilson and Woody Allen and then being in the movies, I've always been interested in the writing and the writers," says Daniels, an ASCAP affiliate who has also written 10 plays.

"Then to have a guitar in your hand—in a way that's just the keyboard, the typewriter," he continues. "The guy who watched Woody write 'Purple Rose' on the set is the guy who picked up a guitar and incorporated that into his songwriting."

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