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Tuning in

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By **GARY GRAFF**
Of The Daily Oakland Press

On the opening track of his new album, "Live and Unplugged," Jeff Daniels declares that "If Williams Shatner Can, I Can Too" - referring to the "Star Trek" icon, who was one of the first actors to beam up into the music world.

Daniels' song goes on to mention others who have tried the same thing - Russell Crowe, Kathy Lee Gifford, Billy Bob Thornton, Adam Sandler, Jennifer Love Hewitt ...

"It's ever-changing," Daniels notes. "I've got David Hasselhoff in there now. I've got to have Ashlee Simpson's lip-synching in there, too."

And maybe the Hollywood actor and Ann Arbor-area playwright will even add himself now that he has an album of his own.

"I'm battling the Shatner thing, sure," the 49-year-old Chelsea resident acknowledges as he sips some post-breakfast coffee at the Beverly Hills Grille after a full morning of radio and TV appearances. "I'm battling the musicians who sit out there and see us (playing music).

"But I have great respect for the guys who have been doing this as long as I've been an actor. And I work really hard at it; I want to get better and better."

A 'relaxing' hobby

Music was not part of Daniels' design; he even notes that "I was the last one to sign off" on releasing "Live and Unplugged," whose proceeds will benefit his Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea. But music has certainly been part of his life, since he taught himself to play guitar in the mid-1970s and subsequently started to write songs; Daniels came up with "Kathy" in August 1978, after his first date with his wife.

"When you're in New York and starving, this (music) is how you fill your day," says Daniels, who earned a degree in English from Central Michigan University before moving to New York to act on stage before his subsequent return to Michigan.

"A couple of friends and mine, we played in a couple bars in New York. It was never anything I was going to do (as a job), but I always kind of had that. It was relaxing."

It's not like Daniels has had to fall back on music, either - not with an acting resume that displays a savvy mix of artistic taste and an eye for commercial hits via roles in "Dumb and Dumber," "Ragtime," "Terms of Endearment," "The Purple Rose of Cairo," "My Favorite Martian," "101 Dalmatians," "Pleasantville" and the Civil War epics "Gettysburg" and "Gods and Generals." His own scriptwriting has yielded, among other productions, "Escanaba in da Moonlight," a theatrical hit that he adapted into a film.

But singing and songwriting became a way for Daniels to raise funds for his other love, the Purple Rose Theatre, which he established to provide a home for Midwestern actors and plays. The theater's annual holiday concerts began in 2001.

"We're constantly having to raise money," explains Daniels, a devotee of singer-songwriters and blues pioneers ranging from Robert Johnson and Son House to Jackson Browne and Keb' Mo'. "Because we're dark at the end of December and the first weekend in January and there are all these people in town visiting relatives, the people I work with said, 'Why don't we push you out on stage with a guitar, and if people pay to see a train wreck, we

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get the money.' "

"I mean, I'll work my a-- off on it, but it's not what I'm known for. As I told the first audience, I'm somewhere north of 'Kumbaya' and south of (Andres) Segovia."

Humor with heart

The truth is that Daniels doesn't need to make any apologies for his music. As demonstrated at the Purple Rose shows and on "Live and Unplugged," he's a warm and engaging performer with a gently direct and often humorous touch both in his songwriting and his singing. He's genially wry in songs such as "If William Shatner Can ...," "You Can't Drink an Ugly Girl Pretty" and "The Lifelong Tiger Fan Blues," which is a song not likely to be played over the Comerica Park P.A. system in the future.

The lengthy and hilariously delivered narrative "Recreational Vehicle," based on a true family vacation story, is cut from the same epic cloth as Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant," but Daniels also knows how to tug a heartstring with the tunes "If You're Comin' " and "Momma Never Left Her Oldest Boy Alone."

Likewise, he doesn't apologize for his guitar work, either.

"I survived the first year, and then the second year I kinda understood it, the third year was, 'OK, I know what this is, and I know what it could be,'" Daniels says. "I mean, I didn't pick up the guitar six months ago. I'm not up there doing three chords and strumming, y'know? I don't apologize for that.

"There are a lot of people who come and see the show, and it's so unexpected that I can actually pull this off. I'm not supposed to be able to sing, right? And I'm doing stuff on the guitar, plus the humor, the entertaining. ... So it's all working."

Daniels may well record more in the future, though that's subject to his "day job," which has been busy of late. He plays Blue Man in the TV adaptation of "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," which airs Dec. 5 on ABC. Next year, he'll be on the big screen with "Imaginary Heroes," a drama with Sigourney Weaver and Emile Hirsch, and in the family drama "Because of Winn-Dixie," which also features musician Dave Matthews, who complimented Daniels' guitar playing on the set.

Nevertheless, the actor/ playwright/director/theater operator does feel that music has now become an active part of his creative quiver.

"Yeah, I feel like I'm making whatever contribution to the audience that's sitting there," he says, adding that he continues to study different guitar techniques. "I'm not wasting their time. I can actually say things through song that reaches them, that is different from a play or acting a role.

"And I'm still kind of discovering this, how to do it on stage and continue to make that connection. It's definitely something I'll be pursuing, sure."

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