

Masthead

Published Fri, Oct 22, 2010 06:42 AM

Modified Fri, Oct 22, 2010 07:46 AM

A song and act man

Jeff Daniels cringes at the thought of being lumped in with other actors who have released albums.

"I'm not trying to do what Billy Bob [Thornton] or Russell Crowe or William Shatner have done," says Daniels, a respected singer-songwriter and guitarist. "I'm trying to do my own thing. I don't mean to knock anyone who has been an actor and tried music, but I worked hard at this for over 30 years. I always wanted to get better and better as a musician."

When it comes to his day job, the thoughtful Michigan native is a respected thespian who has earned praise for his work in such acclaimed films as "The Purple Rose of Cairo," "The Squid and the Whale" and "Good Night and Good Luck." It's an enviable resume, one that includes a recent Tony nomination for his performance in "God of Carnage."

In fact, Daniels, 55, loves acting and theater so much that he has been making albums and touring in support of his beloved Michigan project, "The Purple Rose Theater Company."

"It's all pretty simple to me," Daniels says. "I don't write hits. What I do is personal. I write songs. It's what I did when times were tough and when they were good. I love doing this show. Every actor would like to have a one-man show, and that's what I have."

Poignant and occasionally humorous folk rock is Daniels' specialty. "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too" and "Are You as Excited About Me as I Am" are examples of his amusing stories inspired by celebrities with inflated egos.

On the other hand, Daniels, who will perform Wednesday at the Carolina Theatre, comes off as a regular guy, seeming genuine when delivering songs and stories. Unlike many musicians, he knows how to entertain, a quality that's becoming a lost art in the world of music. "I rely heavily on the audience," Daniels says. "I start talking to them. I try to provide a little escape for a night."

Still, Daniels realizes that most folks are coming out to see the actor, not the musician, on his tour. "What's good about that is that people's expectations are low, and they're surprised what I'm about as a musician," he says. "They think I'm going to go out there and do a 20-minute version of 'Kumbaya.' I give them a mix of comedy and music. It's all about having fun."

He exploits his excellent sense of timing, which should come as no surprise since he has worked with such masters as Jack Nicholson, Robin Williams and Jim Carrey. "You take what you learn from the stage. I've learned a lot, and I'm thrilled to be in this position. It worked out for me, and I have a theater as a result of this."

Daniels dubbed his venue the Purple Rose Theatre because of his breakthrough performance and connection with "Purple Rose of Cairo" director-writer Woody Allen.

"That was a turning point in my life," he says. "It was surreal working with Woody Allen and having Mia Farrow as the leading lady. It went very well. If I was good enough for Woody, I knew I was good enough to work with anyone. I've been fortunate that the phone has never stopped ringing for me. It's been an incredible experience."