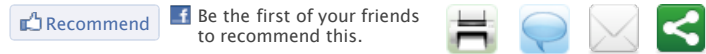




MUSIC PREVIEW: Jeff Daniels takes a break from acting for music tour

By **Chad Berndtson**
The Patriot Ledger

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You probably know him best from “Dumb and Dumber” or “Gettysburg” or “The Squid and the Whale,” and Jeff Daniels understands that. He also understands that he’s hardly the first actor to pick up a musical instrument, and that the ranks of actors-turned-musicians have yielded a great many more misses than hits.

But listening to Daniels as a guitarist, singer and songwriter – especially on his 2009 album “Live at the Purple Rose” – reveals a musician who’s studied the idioms of folk and Americana as intently as anything else he’s ever done. And Daniels is nothing if not a “keep moving” type: He maintains the nonprofit professional theater he co-founded in his childhood home of Chelsea, Mich.; he’s in this fall’s “Howl” with James Franco; he wrapped a second, strongly reviewed run in “God of Carnage” on Broadway earlier this year; and he remains an active playwright and nationally visible arts advocate.

But he’s taking a break from all his other selves to focus on music, at least for a few weeks. He’ll come to Cambridge’s fabled Club Passim for two shows next Thursday, and The Patriot Ledger caught up with Daniels as he prepared to embark. Excerpts of the conversation follow.

Q: You’ve been playing and writing songs for a long time, but I understand it was only in recent years you felt comfortable enough to perform as a musician. Why?

A: I got out of the gate as an actor in New York, and then movies started for me, and that was a runaway train. It took years – it wasn’t overnight – but that was the focus. So the guitar and the songwriting were literally something I did to keep me sane, and that’s something I was very aware of as I was coming up.

I observed guys like Telly Savalas putting out an LP, Terry Bradshaw put out an LP, and [William] Shatner, so it just seemed like OK, this is something I’ll do. I never thought I was a good enough musician, but it was great therapy to write songs and put them in a notebook. It allowed me to stay creative between the phone calls. If you’re waiting for Hollywood to call you and say, “We’re ready for you to be creative,” and if you’re waiting for five months, what are you going to do? So creatively I kept moving, like a shark. I wrote songs and got better on guitar. I had Stefan Grossman’s (tablature) books and Doc Watson, and I saw Steve Goodman at the Bottom Line (in New York), and just put my creativity out that way.

Even playwrighting playwriting, that’s just something that I was interested in. It was something I could go away and work on and maybe come out with if I was ready to come out with it, and if not, maybe it would be something that was a hobby.

It wasn’t until the Purple Rose that anyone pushed me out on stage as a musician. It wasn’t me saying let me go out and play for you. After a little while, I was comfortable. I’d do it once a year, and I would get ready for it for 11 months. And by the third year, the terror was gone, the fear was gone. That feeling of “Oh my god, I have no character to hide behind up here and I’m doing my own material, not someone else’s words,” that took some adjustment. I’d hid behind characters my entire year. But somebody said, you’re better than you think. That’s when I applied myself to the guitar and tried to get better at that. When the chops are there and the songwriting is there and the performance is there, that’s where the actor comes in. I’ve been on stage in front of people for decades, I know how to do that. It was working hard for the 10 years needed to get the guitar up and the songwriting up.

Q: Do you think you feel more pressure as a musician and performer because of the perception that people are coming because they know you as Jeff Daniels the actor?

A: Well that's a fact. That's the audience. That's a portion of the audience, anyway: "I liked him in that movie, he was very entertaining, so how bad could it be?" Maybe they hear it's funny. They'll buy a ticket and see if it works, and I know going in that's what many expect. I can't just rely on that. I want them to see that the songwriting is there, that there was a craft – a learned craft – behind that. They say, "Hey, this isn't something he just picked up two years ago."

You know, Stefan Grossman, he helped me a lot. His tab books were the ones I grabbed in the early '80s, and it wasn't until three or four years ago, when I stopped at the Martin factory in Nazareth (Pa.), that I met him. He was in the lobby and I thanked him and I told him, you helped me so much. We went to lunch and I've been to his house a few times, taken a few lessons, and he invited me to (Eric Clapton's) Crossroads Festival this year. That was like going to grad school, when you're sitting 10 feet away from Stefan Grossman and Keb' Mo' working out Mississippi blues together. Grad school. Guys like that who tell you, no, OK, you can play, you can write, your songs are there.

Q: Your songs are funny, very wry at times, and you don't keep things too heavy, which doesn't mean the material doesn't have weight, but you explore the comedic side more.

A: There's comedy and tragedy, and there's an art to doing both. I've always resented Hollywood's, and maybe the New York theater's, attitude toward comedy as a second-class citizen. The Oscars treat it as such, and yet every year, they hire a comedian to run the show. But last I looked, the Greeks were holding up two masks.

There's an art to doing comedy, and a craft. Christine Lavin, and Loudon (Wainwright III), and Stevie Goodman, they do it in a way that isn't just thrown together. And Utah Phillips. I saw him at the Ark in Ann Arbor; my manager said, "You have to go see this guy." His first song was 20 minutes long. He kept stopping and ad-libbing all these asides and observations. I thought, this guy can ad-lib better than anybody, and I found out later that it's all worked out and scripted, every word. But he made it look like it was happening for the first time. That's what an actor does. We did 256 shows of 'God of Carnage' on Broadway, and number 256 has to look like it's happening for the first time. That's what informed me walking out with a guitar and making sure the audience felt that, and feels that.

Think of comedy as a wonderful way to set that up. Think of Robin Williams, or Woody [Allen], or Jim Carrey. If each of them picked up a tomato and they did two minutes on it, it'd be different: only Robin, Woody or Jim would do it that way. So the audience relaxes, and then you drop in a serious piece and it hits them twice as hard. It's basic theater: set 'em up, knock 'em down. I find comedy to be not only the equal of tragedy as an art form, but perhaps even more moving.

Q: Do you ever see a time when your music takes up as much of your artistic life as your acting?

A: It's changed a lot in the last five years or so. As an actor, I've focused on writing. Smart writing. I want the writing to be smart, or I'm bored after 10 days. I've done enough movies, I've done 55-plus, I don't even know what it is. But I've been around long enough that I'm just not going to job-in. I'm going to do the stuff that interests me and challenges me.

The movies aren't necessarily there anymore. Occasionally you get to be in a "Howl." Sometimes you get small movies where the script is good, but those don't pay any money and they don't know how to distribute them anymore, so what's the point? Where can I go that creatively is interesting to me? I'm basically telling movie and TV agents that I'm not available to anyone or anything for the months of this tour. This is the first time I've ever said that to the acting side of my life. I've been out about four weeks already, and I go out again in another 10 days or so. And I know I'm lucky, I'm not a guy that needs to depend on this for a living.

Q: I read about the growth of the Purple Rose, and how [National Endowment of the Arts chairman] Rocco Landesman spent some time with you in Chelsea to look at it as a model for cultural centers in smaller cities and towns. Talk about that a little bit.

A: You know, we get so enamored of coasts, with Los Angeles and New York as the end all be all. They're not. Art is local. Not always, but you go to these corners of the country and there are very talented people in all forms of art that are there and just stayed there. They're doing their sculptures or painting and they're there. So it's more a kind of looking around and getting people and committed people – people who spend their lives being creative – and bringing them together. Giving them a professional setting: "This is your Broadway."

For us, the audience has taken to it. We do new work more often than not. That's all I did at Circle Rep in New York [in the late 1970s], and I loved that. So instead of staying busy thinking what New York thinks is good, let's write for the people sitting in our seats. Write about Boston. Write about Michigan. If you're only writing for yourself, you're going to play to an audience of one, as Marsha Norman said. We try to write about us and there's the fact that we also know how to do comedy.

Q: Life is funny, too and we need to laugh.

A: Absolutely! Otherwise we'd all blow our brains out. We all laugh. It just amazes me how we just don't...I don't know, maybe we all hide behind a joke, and with drama and tragedy there is no joke. But I love the art of telling the truth through comedy.

Q: You seem happy with the time you're taking to focus on this.

A: Well, I was on Broadway with "God of Carnage" for a year and a half. When you're doing eight shows a week, there are no movies, it just takes over your life. But I'm in development right now with Showtime, writing what I hope is a series. I have hopes of pilot; Tim Busfield and I are co-creators and he's going to write and I'm going to write. But I'm happy to be on hiatus, yes.

JEFF DANIELS With Krista Detor. Two shows at Club Passim, 47 Palmer St., Cambridge (Harvard Square), 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 21. Tickets: \$33-\$35 at the box office and via www.clubpassim.com.

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