



David Gans: Stories from the Road... and the Real World, Too

It somehow seems appropriate that "Shove in the Right Direction," the first track on David Gans' wonderful new CD, *The Ones That Look the Weirdest Taste the Best*, kicks right in with a hot instrumental jam, with careening fiddle, clucking banjo, bopping mandolin, driving acoustic guitar, thumping bass and cracking drums, all locked in and dancing together. "Shove in the Right Direction" is a tale of uncertainty and perseverance in strange times that sounds like it could have been plucked from this morning's paper. For although during the past several years David has established himself as the consummate troubadour, traveling the country solo with just an electro-acoustic guitar and a few gadgets, he's always been an amazingly sympathetic ensemble player. So there's something about this new music that just feels right. Out of the gate, track one announces that this disc is going to show us a different side of David Gans.

Some of the songs may be ones you've seen him perform solo in your local club or at one of the many summer and fall music festivals that have become part of his touring regimen, but chances are you've never heard them played like this. After releasing a series of fine solo recordings the last several years, for this outing David has surrounded himself with a helluva group of great players. The extremely versatile core band is 4/6 of the adventurous jamgrass unit Railroad Earth—violinist/harmonica player Tim Carbone (who also produced the CD), mandolinist and pianist John Skehan III, multi-instrumentalist Andy Goessling, and bassist Johnny Grubb—who also perform together in a side group called the Shockenaw Mountain Boys.

"I've been friends with Railroad Earth basically since they started," David says, "and I've played both with them and the Shockenaw Mountain Boys. A couple of summers ago I did a bunch of gigs with [the SMB]. They'd back me on some of my songs, and we'd also play mutual favorites like 'Wild Horses' Old & in the Way-style. I really liked what they did with my songs, and they're great guys, so later I asked Tim if he'd be willing to produce a record for me, and he said, 'Absolutely!'" The album was cut in two sets of sessions, several months apart, at engineer Don Sternecker's Mix-o-lydian Studio in rural western New Jersey, near the Delaware Water Gap. "It was a wonderful place," David enthuses. "I slept in the guest room and I'd wake up in the morning to sight of deer munching on the grass nearby."

Tim's buddies from the Shockenaw Mountain Boys happily joined the fray, contributing all sorts of cool instrumental textures—Andy alone played autoharp, banjo, acoustic guitars, ukulele, clarinet, bass clarinet, National steel guitar, baritone sax and background vocals. A handful of

the SMB's talented friends also helped out, including Buck Dilly, who laid down some amazing electric guitar, pedal steel, lap steel, and organ; drummer Ned Stroh; and, on more than half the tracks, bassist Lindsey Horner, who's known for his work with an instrumental jazz trio that plays Bob Dylan songs, called Jewels and Binoculars. (In addition, one song, David's playful ode to organic food, "Bounty of the County," was recorded at Closer Recording in San Francisco, across the bay from David's Oakland home, using mostly Bay Area players.)

As you might surmise from the range of instruments on the CD, David tackles a broad variety of styles on *The Ones That Look the Weirdest Taste the Best*, from acoustic folk rambles (like Jim Page's charming homage to the Grateful Dead, "Down to Eugene") to spry country-rock ("Headin' Home Already") and the rockin' Dylanesque "Like a Dog" (which David co-wrote with Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter). I hear Hawaiian slack-key guitar influences in "That's Real Love," the sumptuous guitar instrumental "Echolalia" and the opening of "It's Gonna get Better." But "That's Real Love" also features a bridge that finds Andy Goessling playing "two clarinet lines, each doubled twice, plus bass clarinet, so it sounds like a 1930s cartoon," David marvels. The bittersweet love song "Autumn Day" shimmers with a tremolo-laden guitar and ethereal atmospheric like something out of a Daniel Lanois production. And "Like a Dog" gets some of its kick from the unusual combination of honking baritone sax and banjo. In short, musical chances are taken, and without fail, they pay off.

Still, as David is quick to point out, "this is, above all, a songwriter's album and the songs are the main thing." He covers a lot of ground over the course of eleven incisive songs born from his experiences, observations and fantasies—sometimes all three at once. He describes the overall tone as "spiritually positive and socially critical," but within that range there's humor, anger, despair, delicacy and a million other emotions we've come to expect from the deep well of David's soul.

The Ones That Look the Weirdest Taste the Best (the title comes from a line in "The Bounty of the County") is just the latest chapter in David's long career as a media multi-hyphenate: singer-songwriter-guitarist-radio producer/host-author-journalist-record producer-photographer. That he can juggle so many balls in the air is nothing short of astonishing; that he does it with such skill, passion, assurance, wit and grace is even more remarkable.

Known far and wide as the light behind the widely syndicated Grateful Dead Hour radio program, several books on the Dead and a number of intriguing CDs relating to the band and its music (see discography below), David has in recent years developed a solid following nationwide for his compelling songs and music. In fact, despite the economic downturn, David says he's had his best year ever out on the road: "I'm having great gigs! Creatively, I'm as satisfied as I can be. I'm in complete control of my own musical destiny and I'm doing it on my own terms. I don't have any executives telling me they 'don't hear a single,'" he laughs. "I'm not at anybody's mercy."

But "skilled solo performer" fills only one page of David's artistic resumé. Besides playing in all sorts of bands through the years—from the fondly remembered Reptiles to the Honky Tonk Hippies, to his

recent forays jamming on Beatles songs with Chris and Lorin Rowan (and friends) in a group called Rubber Souldiers—he's also sat in with an amazing range of fine musicians, such as Phil Lesh, Donna the Buffalo, Henry Kaiser, New Riders of the Purple Sage, Ollabelle, the late great Vassar Clements, Jim Lauderdale, The String Cheese Incident, Peter Rowan, and moe., to name just a few. He has also written songs with a host of others, including Jim Page, Lorin Rowan, and Robert Hunter. And his live repertoire is peppered with an incredibly broad (and unpredictable) range of cover tunes by old and new musical heroes. Pressed to list some of his own songwriting influences not too long ago, David reeled off Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Neil Young, Jackson Browne, Steve Goodman, John Prine, CSN, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Holland-Dozier-Holland, Mann & Weil, Carole King, Gram Parsons, Elton John & Bernie Taupin, Robbie Robertson, and the Grateful Dead; quite a list. But he'll also tell you that in recent years, as he's toured extensively and played with so many superb musicians at festivals and in other settings, he's discovered a whole new generation of songwriters and players who are inspiring him.

As both a player and a fan, he understands the indefinable transformative power of music—how it feeds our very life-force, bonds us together in obvious and unseen ways, teaches us, heals us, makes us better citizens of this fragile planet.

As David notes, “I came up in the time when we thought music could change world, and I still think it can—the only way the world can be changed: one person, one soul at a time.”

He's definitely doing his part.

- *Blair Jackson*

Publicity: Ellen Weis • The Broadside Group • eweis@setlernet.com • 510-813-1903

Booking: Phil Simon/Simon Says • phil@simonsaysbooking.com • 978-544-5110
or Nancy Lewis-Pegel/Brilliant Productions • npegel@mindspring.com • 404-373-2299

Perfectible Recordings

a unit of Truth and Fun, Inc.

484 Lake Park Ave. #102

Oakland CA 94610-2730

www.dgans.com

November 2008

Gansography

As artist/performer

Home By Morning (with Eric Rawlins; 1997); "Monica Lewinsky" (CD single – David Gans and the Broken Angels); *Solo Electric* (2000); *Live at the Powerhouse* (DVD; 2002); *Solo Acoustic* (2003); *Twisted Love Songs* (2007); *The Ones That Look the Weirdest Taste the Best* (2008). cdbaby.com/all/dgans • www.dgans.com/discography

As producer

The Music Never Stopped: Roots of the Grateful Dead (1995), *Grateful Dead: So Many Roads (1965-1995)* (1999); *Might as Well: The Persuasions Sing Grateful Dead* (2000); *Stolen Roses: Songs of the Grateful Dead* (2000); *Postcards of the Hanging: Grateful Dead Perform the Songs of Bob Dylan* (2002); *All Good Things: Jerry Garcia Studio Sessions* (2004); *Live From Berkeley: Performances from KPFA's Dead to the World* (2005); *Well-Matched: The Best of Jerry Garcia and Merl Saunders* (2006)

Books

Playing in the Band: An Oral and Visual Portrait of the Grateful Dead (with Peter Simon (1985/1996); *Talking Heads: The Band and Their Music* (1985), *Conversations with the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book* (1992/2002); *Not Fade Away: the Online World Remembers Jerry Garcia* (1995) www.dgans.com/books

Photography

www.flickr.com/photos/dgans



David Gans
www.dgans.com