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David Gans – Workingman's Artist

Randy Ray
 2005-08-09

A common mistake is to label one by how one earns a living—needlessly trapped and pigeonholed by a brand that is easily identifiable but incorrect in total assessment. Perhaps, most damaging, is the need—especially in Western Culture—to peg a person as indivisible from their work. **David Gans** is best known as the host of the Grateful Dead Hour. If you grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area like I did, you may have felt that Gans was almost as important as Captain Trips himself. My New York friend, Erik Brown, opened the Dead doorway and I walked through. It was Gans who week after week, marathon after marathon, year after year, would expose countless tape decks to hundreds of shows from the best of Jerry Garcia and the good ole Grateful Dead. These tapes, made by the men and women who revolutionized the art of music appreciation (and, in many cases, took great risks), would have been left to the basements of yesteryear if it hadn't been Gans and his great taste in selecting countless gems. Therefore, it becomes very easy to think of him as the man behind the mike at Berkeley's KPFA, delivering sonic Dead gold while we weekly shout: "God Bless the Tape Pioneers!" (Don't forget—there weren't any taper's sections until the early 80s.)

Alas, Gans would become more than a man who continually delivered the Dead goods. Like most people, I have a habit of wanting to know as much as possible about a subject that tweaks my interest. That doesn't come from writing—although, the ten people who follow my work think that's what I do. Let's just say that my other occupation requires a great command over figures. (No, I'm not a pimp). After the demise of Garcia in August 1995 and the subsequent collapse of the Grateful Dead, I continued to listen to Gans on a weekly basis but I became more interested in Gans himself, instead of his program. Ironically, it would be this ten-year period—from 1995 to 2005—that would see the artist become much more than a radio personality. I finally decided to ask him for some discussion time after almost 20 years of listening to his voice, reading his books, groovin' to the albums he worked on as a producer and his own amazing recordings with lyrics that aren't afraid to dig deep into an issue to reveal raw truth. To my delight, Gans did not hesitate. He asked if we were going to cover Dead activities post-1995 or his career and I quickly replied: "Yours."

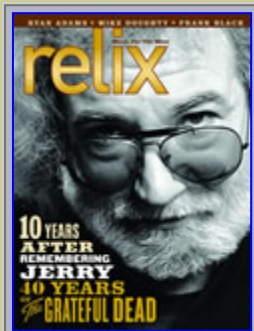
RR: Although you work for a public radio broadcasting station, I know you have had to struggle over the same issues that other mainstream stations face.

DG: I don't actually work for a public radio station. The GD Hour is carried on both public and commercial stations. I also do a show on KPFA, the very first community radio station. So I deal with the upside and the downside of each type of station. Mostly I keep my head down and concentrate on delivering a quality program.

RR: What challenges have you had to overcome to continue delivering quality radio broadcasts on KPFA?

DG: None at all, really. I made a decision a while back to stay out of the political struggles and concentrate on doing a good show and raising money for the station with my annual Grateful Dead marathon.

RR: As a radio host with your own program, what shows do you like the most: guest musicians? Interviews with your favorite artists? What fuels your muse at this



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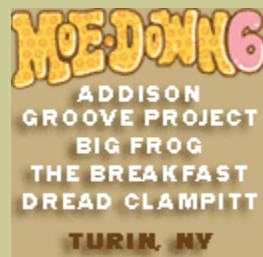
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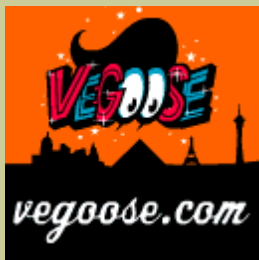
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DG: It is a great privilege to be able to present live performances from the KPFA studio. Everybody wins - the audience gets something unique; the performer gets an opportunity to reach out to a new audience. I also appreciate the opportunity to turn the audience on to music they may not have heard before. I usually come home from my own tours with CDs and/or live recordings of artists I've enjoyed, some of whom are well known in one region but not elsewhere. For example, I've been playing Donna the Buffalo on KPFA quite a bit over the last few years, hoping to build an audience for them so they'll come out here more often. It is a wonderful thing to have pretty much unfettered access to the airwaves, both locally and nationally.

RR: How has your radio work informed your work as a songwriter and musician?

DG: I get a lot of music in the mail (and hand-delivered, too), and that has allowed me to hear music I might not have encountered otherwise. That can't help but enrich my own musical consciousness. I suppose I have gained some advantages from my status as a radio host - invitations to festivals, invitations to sit in or open shows, etc.

RR: You have grown as a musician as you have branched out in the last ten years. What are your studio and live highlights as a songwriter, musician and producer?

DG: Co-producing *Might as Well: The Persuasions Sing Grateful Dead* with Persuasions leader Jerry Lawson was a most precious and life-changing experience. Being present, and being able to assist, while they learned those songs and made them into Persuasions songs, taught me a great deal about how music is made, and shed new light on a group of songs that have been dear to my heart for years. As for my own performances, I have had more high times than I can enumerate. I've been writing songs and performing, solo and in bands, for more than thirty years; since I started touring in 1997 I've been on stages and in living rooms (and back yards), in front of audiences ranging in size from the low one digit to upwards of five thousand, alone and with other players. As long as there is someone to connect with, I'm happy.

RR: Do you have any songs that you've written—like the masterpiece "An American Family"—that are especially dear to your heart?

DG: Kind of you to use that word to describe it! I am proud of that one on a couple of levels: after writing a series of songs that were deeply personal, I set out to write a song that was pure fiction. I thought I was writing a character sketch of one person, but it wound up being something more than that: a snapshot of the American zeitgeist as personified by a husband, wife and son. So it helped me get out of a songwriting rut, and it has proven to be a successful literary and polemical work. I am a pretty slow songwriter. I wish I could be more prolific, but I take what I can get from the ol' muse. The good news is that just about everything I do finish and put in front of people is a keeper.

My three most recent songs came in pretty rapid succession: "That's Real Love," for my wife of ten years, was finished just before Christmas; "Shove in the Right Direction" was written in one afternoon in early March by Lorin Rowan and myself; and "It's Gonna Get Better" was more-or-less finished in April (with some tweaking over the next few weeks). I am happy with the positive themes of all three songs. Every new song in the book has the potential to change the shape of the narrative and the energy level of the performance. This is something I learned from the Grateful Dead: every performance has a narrative structure, an overarching story that is being told. I have discovered over time that the cover songs I choose are ones that further my personal narrative - sometimes in ways that are not clear to me for quite some time. The three originals I have added since the first of the year have, I think, sweetened the overall flavor of my presentation as well as adding some new harmonic and rhythmic facets.

RR: What is it like to work with Robert Hunter? Does he work differently with each musician that he chooses to collaborate or is he "Hunter - the Great Writer of Our Times" at all times?

DG: I can't say much about how he works with others, although Rob Barraco recently told me that he sent more-or-less completed musical settings to Hunter and he responded with lyrics that fit perfectly without any adjustments. That's pretty impressive! My



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collaboration with Hunter has been entirely in email. He sent the first piece unprompted - said he'd been reading my online journal and thought I would like this lyric ("Like a Dog"). He was right: it spoke to a certain part of my experience as well as if I had written it myself. I suspect it also spoke from his own experience on a certain level, but we have never discussed it.

He sent the second lyric, "Shut Up and Listen," after hearing what I had done with the first. This song addresses a problem he and I both have faced: inattentive audiences! A universal concern of solo performers, for sure. Both of these lyrics required a certain amount of editing to make them work for me. Hunter did not complain about the changes I made.

RR: Describe your photographic work? How has that developed over the years?

DG: I loved photography as a kid, and started doing darkroom (black and white only) work when I was a teenager. During my years as a freelance music journalist (1976-1986), I earned part of my living selling photographs along with the stories. I gave up printing my own images in the mid-'80s after Peter Simon printed some of my negatives for "Playing in the Band." When I saw what a real photographic artist could do, I realized I would probably never be able to put in sufficient time to get really good at it. When I got into radio in '85, and started earning my living from it in '87, I gave up photography for the most part. This was partly because I wasn't selling articles and more than therefore not pitching my work to publications, and partly because I was putting so much energy into learning audio production that something had to give.

I got back into photography in a major way when I got my first digital camera a few years ago. I never lost my love of the art form, so it was great to get back into it with the tremendous power of the computer. Instead of spending a lot of money on processing and printing, I could load the images directly into my Mac and get instant results. I started posting images to my "visual tour diary" on my web site, and not long after that a friend turned me on to an excellent online photo-sharing service called fotolog.net. I had one account there for current work and another for images from my archive. Fotolog has had a very hard time coping with their massive growth, so this year I switched over to flickr.com.

This year I started designing my own tour posters, mostly using pictures I have taken in my travels. It is just awesome to me how much creative power I can carry around with my in my Mac laptop: last year, while vacationing in Utah, my wife and I took more than 700 pictures with my Canon S50, and we'd dump them into the Powerbook while our friend drove the van, so there was always room for more images in the camera. You can see a gallery of my shots from that trip at www.humbead.com/tmf.

RR: How has the San Francisco Bay Area changed politically and culturally over the last 10 years? How does that impact your artistic process?

DG: I have been living part of my life in cyberspace for almost 20 years, and so I think that much of my political and cultural awareness is not fixed in geographic space. I do appreciate the fact that I live in a place that for the most part does not subscribe to the authoritarian, superstitious and repressive cultural imperatives of the horrid, mutant "gospel of prosperity" brand of "Christianity" that is working so hard to obliterate science, nature, and the more humane forms of faith in our world.

RR: Are you working on any writing currently—short length? Long form?

DG: Just songwriting. I keep thinking I'd like to write fiction some day, but I haven't even experimented with it since I was a teenager. Maybe when I'm too old to tour I'll turn my attention to prose.

RR: Do you realize how many people you have made happy—the true sign of success?

DG: I agree with you that that is a true sign of success, and yes, I am often made aware of my effect on the culture. I meet people in my travels, and get email and letters from people often enough, that I am able to see that I've done some good in the world. And I get that awesome feedback when I put on a good performance for an attentive and responsive audience. I am a very fortunate man.



- 8/11 Nomad - Earthdog
- 8/20 Licorice
- 8/26 Big Frog (from Japan)
- 8/27 HiBus – My Friend Ben – Amun Ra
- 9/7 PHIX (Phish tribute)
- 9/16 Grace Potter & The Nocturnals – Deena Goodman
- 9/24 U-Melt

