



## SOVEREIGN SOUL: DAVID GANS

**David Gans** likes to multitask. He's taking his solo electric show out on the road for 16 dates between now and the beginning of May, including a visit to the **Suwanee Springfest** in Live Oak, FL. There is also a fresh batch of songs written with **Robert Hunter**. When he is at home in the Bay Area there is his regular radio show, *Dead to the World*, on KPFA FM in Berkeley, CA and that's in addition to his nationally syndicated show, *The Grateful Dead Hour*, which is nearing its twentieth year on the air. And oh yeah, he just finished a stint listening to and choosing material from the Jerry Garcia archives for the upcoming April 20 release of the six-CD *All Good Things: Jerry Garcia Studio Sessions*.

Given all the projects he's got his hands on, now seems like a good time to check in with David and ask a few questions.

**JamBase:** Your shows are like mini-journeys each night. How much does the audience influence what you play and how the narrative goes?

David Gans: My show is all about interacting with the audience. Sometimes it's explicit--in the right sort of venue, I'll actually talk with the audience, and of course people can call out requests. But more often, it's a nonverbal sort of interaction: a quiet, attentive house will allow me to play more contemplative material.

Another major factor is the evolving internal narrative. I am constantly discovering new things about my own songs and the songs I cover, and occasionally--sometimes prompted by audience interaction, sometimes just from inside my own cavernous memory--an old song will pop up that turns the tale in some new direction.

I am not always conscious of the Big Story. Sometimes I am telling it, and sometimes it is telling me.

**JamBase:** I've noticed that there is a topical dimension to your lyrics. Have the past few years brought a more heightened sense of politics to your new material and what you cover onstage?

David Gans: My songwriting is what it is. Sometimes I can get an idea and see it through to completion as originally conceived, but much more often the idea I start with has gone through a lot of changes by the time it becomes a finished song.

My political point of view is part of who I am, and who I am on stage is pretty much identical to who I am in real life, so it's inevitable that I'll open my yap about the things that matter.

### **JamBase: What's the biggest source of inspiration for your muse?**

David Gans: I don't know! My own songwriting is so slow and deliberate. I wish I were the kind of guy who could write a song every day, but I'm not. I think my songwriting is iceberg-style: the vast majority of my creative work takes place below the surface. Once I get started on a song, though, it's all I can think about for days at a time.

I will go for weeks or months thinking I'll never write again, and then I'll get an idea and run with it, and the next thing I know my songbook has a new entry-- something that didn't exist before. It is a miraculous process, and I wish I knew how to encourage it to happen more often.

### **How do you feel about the sound of your songs with a band as opposed to doing it solo?**

I have played with bands for thirty years. As much as I enjoy what I'm doing now, I would really like to have a band again. There are things you can do when you're up there alone that are much harder to do with a band, but the reverse is also true, and then some.

I have a lot of songs that just don't work in the solo mode, and of course making new music happen with other players is one of the highest things that humans can do.

I guess my ideal touring situation would be a short "solo electric" set, featuring the shorter, more lyric-driven songs, followed by an electric set with the perfect band of musicians who can jam like angels but also understand that the song is the thing.

### **You've written a few songs with Robert Hunter. How did that come about?**

The first one came in email. I checked into my hotel room in Michigan before a gig, downloaded my email, and there was a letter from Hunter. "David: I've been reading your online journal, and I thought you might like this." It was a lyric, "Like a Dog," that read as though he had crawled around my psyche for a week. There was way more in the song than he could have gleaned from my tour diary. The man knows how to dig deep.

I played the gig, charged back to my hotel room, and spent the night writing the music. The next day I drove to Ohio, where I was opening a show for the **Dark**

**Star Orchestra.** On an inspired whim, I corralled a few of the DSO guys, showed them the changes--and with no rehearsal at all they joined me on stage to play the song. At the end of the tour I played a recording of that performance on my radio show. Hunter heard it, and the next day I got email from him with a kind word for the composition and another lyric: "Shut Up and Listen," which I included on my CD *Solo Acoustic*.

I am planning to include "Like a Dog" on my next CD, which I am recording on tour in early April. That all happened in July 2000.

Our second wave of collaboration took place a few weeks ago, when Hunter sent me a lyric titled "Trumpets of the Ocean." This was a long, convoluted work that required a great deal of study and contemplation before I started working on it. I did a lot of deleting and rearranging to get it down to a manageable size, but I must have kept the right stuff because Hunter again praised it and sent me a new lyric before I worked up the nerve to ask him for one.

The fourth song is "I have Always Lived Here," which required virtually no adjustments at all. I read it many times over three days or so, and then one evening I sat down with a guitar and achieved the melody and chords of the verse on the first try. The B section came easily a couple of days later, and I actually performed it without the bridge a couple of times before that part made itself known. I wish more of my songwriting experiences were like that one!

### **You cover a few of your contemporaries. What interests you musically out there right now?**

I have made it part of my mission to turn the world on to **Donna the Buffalo**, for example. This is very special music, combining elements of country, reggae, zydeco, string band and rock sounds with lyrics that are spiritually positive without being annoyingly hippy-dippy.

Being a songwriter myself, I am always on the lookout for great songs. I am fond of **Railroad Earth**, a great bunch of pickers surrounding a terrific songwriter named Todd Sheaffer.

I am also a fan of **Acoustic Syndicate**, particularly songwriter Steve McMurry. Here in Northern California, there's a band on the rise called **Free Peoples**--again with great songs and terrific pickin'.

The **David Nelson Band** remains the most brilliant and most tragically under appreciated band on the scene.

### **Can you describe your guitar style and the gear you use on the road?**

I don't know how to characterize my guitar style. I do some traditional finger picking with thumb pick and metal fingerpicks, but that is not the central feature of my playing. Touring as a solo act (because I can't afford a band!), I use a pedal board whose principal feature is the Boss RC-20 Loop Station. This device allows me to record what I'm playing and then play it back repeatedly. I am not

primarily a loop artist (Keller Williams being a brilliant and engaging practitioner of that art)--to me, the song comes first. Everything I do centers around the song and the story being told by the songs.

I will use the Loop Station to record the changes while I sing the first verse of a song so I can play a solo in the appropriate place. That's the most fundamental application of the tool. In a song like "Terrapin," I use the Loop Station to create a three-part loop to solo over; I play the first part, hit the pedal to record that, then I play the second part and record it; while the two parts are playing, I lay the third one on top. Once I have that all set, then I kick in some other effects--typically an overdrive box and a digital delay that is controlled by another pedal that allows me to lock the echo to the tempo of the song.

Sometimes I will start a jam by turning on the echo and using it to create a rhythm, and once I get something interesting happening that way I'll sample it into the Loop Station and do some improvising over that.

I also have an octave divider that drops the pitch down one or two octaves, and if I'm feeling really brave I may try to do a sort of bass line with that and add it to the loop.

**On April 20 there is a boxed set of Jerry Garcia's solo work coming out. You were involved as a producer, what can you tell us about it?**

I was the lucky SOB who was recruited to listen to every scrap of multi-track tape in the Garcia archive. I in turn brought Blair Jackson in, and the two of us had a merry old time going through these great sessions. We made lists of the best stuff, and then we mapped out a six-CD set: the five solo albums, each with appropriate bonus material, and a sixth disc of even more wonderful outtakes, jams, and alternates.

Then they put the great Tom Flye to work on the mixes, with Blair and me lending an ear and helping with various creative decisions.

I am thrilled to have been part of this project, and I am delighted with the results.

**What still excites you about doing your nationally syndicated radio program, the Grateful Dead Hour?**

I still love that music deeply, and it still has a lot to teach me and the world. It's been my privilege and responsibility to put the Grateful Dead's best foot forward on the radio every week.

In the last few years I have been slipping other good stuff into the show. There's so much other great music that deserves to be heard, and I have a few bands whose music I connect with deeply.

Making the decision to bring in a little non-Dead music helped to keep my batteries charged, but the core mission remains: the Grateful Dead created an

utterly unique body of work that deserves to be explored, and I'll keep exploring it as long as people keep listening.

**With the increase of free music downloading sites and new technologies like FLAC and bit torrent downloads, more artists are getting a voice and chance to share their music with folks who otherwise might not hear it. Do you see the direct marketing of music over the net in its various free and pay forms a long term solution to getting more music out to the masses, or will the corporate giants who dominate the business successfully co-opt it and squeeze the independents out? Will the download revolution continue?**

I am not in a position to predict. Technology will march on, and the tools will continue to develop faster than the rules. Technology is value-neutral, for the most part, and the easier it gets for people to move good sound over the net the harder it's going to be for creative people to control their output and therefore profit from it.

A guy like me benefits from the availability of music over the net: people can hear my show for free and decide if they want to pay money to see me do it live. But I think it's also true that a certain segment of the population will just stay home and listen to music coming through the fat pipe and not be so interested in going to the club or the auditorium to be there when it's created. That's a shame on a number of levels, not the least of which is that the people who create music need to be able to earn a decent living from it.

**Singer/songwriter, touring performer, record producer, radio host, author, magazine editor, husband... Anything you still want to accomplish that you haven't?**

I'd like to be able to earn my living from my own music. I'd like to make a "real" studio record that really puts my songs into the sort of audio contexts they deserve. I'd like to have a band that knows how to both serve the song and explore uncharted territory in between the songs.

I'd like to write fiction some day.

– Robert Meme

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