

music

Jeff Daniels can play more than acting roles

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Actor Jeff Daniels loved making "The Squid and the Whale." But he was also jazzed that the 2005 film's soundtrack included a couple of songs by Loudon Wainwright III, the veteran singer-songwriter and humorist.

Not only is Daniels a respected actor - his credits include "Terms of Endearment," "Dumb and Dumber," "The Purple Rose of Cairo" and "Good Night, and Good Luck" - he's also a music aficionado. And a musician. It all goes back 1976, when the fledgling actor moved from Chelsea, Mich., to New York City and bought a guitar.

"It was one of those things where I wanted to learn to play," said Daniels, who plays three Colorado shows this week, "but the more I look back, it wasn't just playing the guitar or wanting to be a rock 'n' roll star. I wanted to write songs."

Writing music is more hobby than secondary career, but Daniels has fun with it. So does the audience: One of the instant reference points for Daniels and his music is the quirky Wainwright.

The songs that dominate his two CDs, "Live and Unplugged" and "Grandfather's Hat," aren't great artistic statements. They're self-effacing ditties about his lack of musical skill, his beloved and beleaguered Detroit Tigers, his wife, his life and Michigan upbringing. They're off-the-cuff tales best told on a back porch. He writes them during downtime on movie sets, which is never in short supply, even for leading men.

Daniels is aware of the dynamic driving his musical dalliances. He knows he's a movie star. He knows why you're familiar with his face. He knows why you're buying his CD and coming to his shows - and it's not because of his music.

"I don't think you can walk on stage, having done a whole bunch of movies, and ask the people to forget all that or say, 'You need to take me seriously as a serious musician based on the fact that you've seen me in the movies,' " he said, referencing any number of Hollywood musicians. "You can't ignore that baggage. So I embrace it. What fun is it to be able to write a song about being shot and killed by Clint Eastwood?"

"It's a nice marriage of what I do and what I can do with a guitar. A lot of the other guys are working too hard to be serious about it, but whatever. I just raise my hand and go, 'Hey, we're all known for something else ...' "

Consider his seasoned laughter, "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too." It's all about the pop culture references, but the shticky song hardly defines his show. The song "Kathy" is a poetic tune about his wife, and it brings to mind the early songs of James Taylor, of whom Daniels is a big fan.

"He plays the E chord in a way no one else can play it," he said.

Looking back through his diaries, which also served as songbooks for his early (and now embarrassing) songwriting efforts, Daniels isn't surprised by his penchant for penning songs.

"I look back through the plays and the movies I've done, and I never was that interested in what the directors were doing," he said. "But when I was around the screenwriters - Woody Allen, Jim Brooks - I was always around them, watching them cross things out and add things in. I really wanted to know why Woody was cutting that and adding this."

When Daniels moved back to his native Michigan in 1986 to escape the madness of New York and further his film career, he also created a professional theater company under the same principals of New York's Circle Repertory Company, which gave him his big break. Twenty years later, the Purple Rose Theater - Daniels is founder and unpaid executive director - is one of the Midwest's most prominent theaters.

Daniels' main goal was to create a regional theater for regional people. He could ask his movie-star buddies to come in for leading roles and limited engagements, but he focuses on local talent: actors, designers, playwrights. Daniels hasn't acted on the stage before, but he has written for it. Currently playing the Purple Rose through Jan. 20 is "Escanaba in Love," Daniels' 11th new play and the sequel to his successful "Escanaba in da Moonlight."

Credit the theater for Daniels' musical excursions being made public. After working with Daniels for a number of years at the Circle Rep, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lanford Wilson saw him play at a bar in the East Village in the late-'70s. Years later, the Purple Rose commissioned Wilson to write a play. The playwright was visiting Chelsea, Michigan, where he asked Daniels to improvise a set when he noticed the bar's singer-songwriter was taking a break.

"I didn't want to, but Lanford said, 'Yeah, get up there,' and so I got up there," Daniels said. "It was a back porch kind of thing. The theater people there had no idea I played. And Lanford told me that I really needed to share this with the people."

Daniels planned a series of fundraising concerts at the Purple Rose; those eventually led to the "Live and Unplugged" CD, which stills benefits the theater. His performances grew in size and notoriety, and eventually he took his show on the road - playing on weekends away from movie sets.

The shows and the CDs "gave me some credibility because I wasn't hiding behind a band," he said. "It wasn't recorded in a studio where maybe I'm playing and the voice is fixed or maybe I'm not playing and it's somebody else."

There's also an element of immediacy to playing solo and live he can't get via his other creative outlets.

"It's fun to walk onto a stage in Denver or Austin or Indianapolis or Boston or wherever I'm going, and I'm standing there in front of a bunch of strangers," Daniels said. "Can I take them for a ride for 90 minutes? On a movie screen I'm taking them for a ride, and in a play, as the playwright, I'm taking them for a ride.

"But standing there in front of them, alone, can I take them for a ride?"

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Jeff Daniels

Jeff Daniels will play three shows in Colorado in the next 10 days.

TELLURIDE|Sheridan Opera House; 8 p.m., Tuesday|\$50-\$75; through tellurideticket.com

ASPEN|Wheeler Opera House; 8 p.m., Jan. 5|\$25; through wheeleroperahousetickets.com

DENVER|Soiled Dove Underground; 8 p.m., Jan. 6|\$25; through soileddove.com