

CD displays more sides of Jeff Daniels

Bob Needham, Ann Arbor News

The list of big-name actors with side careers in music seems to get longer and more embarrassing all the time.

William Shatner. Kevin Bacon. Hilary Duff. Billy Bob Thornton. Minnie Driver. Don Johnson. Russell Crowe. David Hasselhoff.

A few of these folks get by musically without totally humiliating themselves. None of them are great. Most, though they may be fine actors and nice people, are pretty awful.

Jeff Daniels gets this. So why on earth would our own hometown movie star insert himself into their ranks?

Well, he wouldn't. And don't let his now annual "Onstage and Unplugged" shows at the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea make you think any different. And the same goes for his recently released album culled mostly from recordings of those shows.

If you haven't heard Daniels' music, here are some things to know:

He's actually good. It's not like he chose the wrong career or anything, but he has a pleasant singing voice, and he's quite talented at playing the guitar.

He performs almost entirely songs he's written. Like any songwriter, he's done some stinkers. But in the shows and especially on the even more selective CD, we only hear his best. Many are funny; some are very touching.

It's all done in the name of the Purple Rose Theatre, the residential professional company Daniels founded in Chelsea, his hometown. All profits from these ventures go right to the theater.

"I was the last one to sign on" to the CD project, he said in a recent interview. The live shows have been recorded all along, but he felt some trepidation about taking the next step - until realizing, as with the concerts, "There's money in this thing for the theater."

Setting the tone early - and making a tongue-in-cheek point about his motivations at the same time - Daniels opens the album with "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too," which really doesn't need to be explained.

Other favorites from the concerts include "The Lifelong Tiger Fan Blues," also self-explanatory; "Kathy," about his romance with his wife; and "Recreational Vehicle," a sprawling, hilarious, "Alice's Restaurant"-style number that just needs to be experienced.

The style is sort of folk-country with a dash of blues, what you'd expect from a music fan who talks about Lyle Lovett and Keb Mo, Steve Goodman and Skip James.

My favorite part of Daniels' live show may be toward the end, when he has performed a lump-in-the-throat rendition of "Here Comes the Sun" on a guitar signed by George Harrison.

Closing the album, however, is an unexpected gem: "Michigan, My Michigan," the Civil War-era words by one Winifred Lee Brent set to the tune of "O Tannenbaum," the one cut on the disc not from a live show.

"It was a nice way to finish it, and with Iraq and Afghanistan, still appropriate," he said. And it underscored Daniels' approach to the CD and his publicity tour, which is confined to the state.

Throughout the disc, there's a sense that Daniels will never take this totally seriously, even though he acknowledged that bringing his music public has spurred him to work at it a little more.

"You're constantly going to school, every time you write to play, and it's the same with songs," he said. "If I ever go further than this, which I would enjoy, I'm not going to change how I do it...It's not me trying to get a top 10 hit."