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Daniels not playing around

Actor takes gig as musician seriously

By Mark Brown, Rocky Mountain News
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You're not going to believe this. In fact, Jeff Daniels knows you're not going to believe it, and he's fine with that.

But the guy who played Harry (Dunne) in *Dumb and Dumber* and the other Harry (Temple) in *Speed* is actually an extremely skilled singer, songwriter, guitarist and raconteur.

He has two albums (*Live and Unplugged* and *Grandfather's Hat*) and is serious enough about music that he's actually touring the U.S., including a show Saturday at the Soiled Dove Underground. And he totally expects to be blown off.

"The odds are people are just going to dismiss it due to the day job," says Daniels from his home in Chelsea, Mich.

His odds of musical success are low because plenty of others have tried this before and severely poisoned the well. In the song *If William Shatner Can, I Can Too*, Daniels ribs stars from Russell Crowe to Billy Bob Thornton for taking themselves a bit too seriously as musicians, including lines like:

"Now that Adam Sandler's got more money than God / I hope he takes his guitar and just goes away" and "It's safe to say that no one wins / when you listen to the Olsen Twins."

Daniels' musical defense? He's actually hilarious, yet at times poignant. Does it get annoying when people come up to him surprised that he's genuinely musically gifted?

"Annoying? No. It's a wonderful surprise, better than neutrality and no one saying anything, which means you're just another actor singer/songwriter. Especially on the first (album) I was just floored, to be honest, by the reaction."

With songs like *If I Weren't So Stupid, You Wouldn't Be So Smart* and the hilarious travel tale *Recreational Vehicle*, Daniels puts you off-guard with his wit and self-deprecating humor. "Self-deprecation, I've turned it into an art form, yeah."

But then he can turn around and tug at your heart with songs such as *If You're Comin'* or *Mile 416*. Some of that comes from his musical heroes, including Lyle Lovett and the late Steve Goodman.

"Steve Goodman, I saw him at the Bottom Line. Walking out with just a guitar and with comedy and then doing a 180, making you cry. There's a structure to what he's doing and I was too young to really understand. But I was interested in it," Daniels says.

And he understood that it was quite different from acting.



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"I like the purity of it. There's no one else who gets their hands on it," he said, referring to how music differs from acting. "That doesn't happen when you walk out with the guitar and you sit there and you've got 90 minutes and it's just your material. All the blame, all the glory."

When Daniels moved to New York City to act in 1976, he bought a guitar that he wrote songs for himself on, including *Kathy*, a song for his wife ("I was just trying to write her a great song so she'd marry me").

After some movie hits, the couple moved back to his hometown of Chelsea in 1986 (population of about 5,000), where he eventually started a theatre company, The Purple Rose Theatre, named after his breakthrough Woody Allen movie.

"It seemed I'd have at least a short film career. I said, 'Why don't we move back home?' L.A. scared me. New York was just too tough to live and bring up the kids. We went home and I was the one who went to the airport and flew away and came back."

The writing continued. Influences were vast, but guitarist David Bromberg inspired him to become more than competent on the guitar and comedy.

"The guy is (funny) and then he's doing things on the guitar and you go, 'Holy (expletive)!,' " Daniels says. "I wanted to go beyond the four or five chords and be able to kind of get around, not just to entertain the people there to see the movie guy, but the players who are sitting out there - 'Oh, he can get around.' "

Sometimes film and music merge. In the film *Blood Work*, Daniels is the bad guy killed by Clint Eastwood, and he wrote a song about it called *The Dirty Harry Blues*.

"They want to hear what it's like to get shot and killed by Clint Eastwood, and who else is going to write that song? There's a way to bring what I do to the stage with a guitar instead of ignoring it and trying to convince everybody 'I need you to take me seriously as a musician right now.' "

- Et cetera: Daniels started The Purple Rose Theatre company in Chelsea, Mich. Learn more at: www.purplerosetheatre.org

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