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By j.s. houck

The Quick Six: Q & A with Actor/Musician Jeff Daniels

Jeff Daniels will make you laugh. Never mind his ludicrously funny role in 1994's *Dumb & Dumber* as Harry Dunne, who many quote as one of his most comedic characters on screen. The man's a natural; he's got the gift of comedy, which ironically is serious business for him. This truth also reveals itself in his music—yes music. This fall, Daniels takes to the road to perform his one-man acoustic brand of life's trials and tribulations, with its many pratfalls. He's long been a performer on the music stage, his annual 2 weeks of Christmas-time benefit shows at the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea, Michigan (which he founded) serving as the proving ground for upcoming tours. You can catch the light 'n' insightful side of Daniels this October 10 at Rams Head OnStage in Annapolis (410.268.4545). He recently wrapped up filming of a comedy, *R.V.*, co-starring Robin Williams, which is slated for a March 2006 release, and we caught up with him.

What's Up? Annapolis: Jeff, many of our readers are familiar with your film career, but not your music. Could you talk about your influences and schooling?

Jeff Daniels: I've been playing since the early '70s. Self taught, though everywhere I go I have some Stefan Grossman instructional DVD or Dave Van Ronk tab book I'm slogging through. As for songwriting, I've always admired Christine Lavin, Steve Goodman, John Prine, Loudon Wainwright, and Keb Mo, to name a few. Recently, I even had a guitar lesson from Keb,

which is like studying at the feet of the master. I've also enjoyed studying the various Delta blues players and even made the pilgrimage to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to stand at the "Crossroads." Unlike Robert Johnson's, however, my guitar playing didn't instantly improve so, I went back to the tab books.

WUA: You'll be performing at Rams Head OnStage in Annapolis, a fabulous intimate venue. How did this tour come to be and why?

JD: Late this summer I was supposed to do 6 weeks throughout the Midwest and over to the East Coast. I got a film (R.V.) that I couldn't pass up, so the tour went away. Still, I enjoy playing and Rams Head came up as one of the great venues, so we came back to them and they were nice enough to welcome me back.

WUA: What can audiences expect from a Jeff Daniels performance, in terms of stage setup, music genres, etc.?

JD: I'm pretty simple. A guitar and . . . well, me. Lots of original stuff, many songs and stories about Hollywood, recreational vehicles, road rage, Clint Eastwood, and sex. Y'know, your standard fare. The show changes every night, depending on the crowd. I'm very big on making sure the audience gets entertained, as well as, maybe, takes a thing or two away from the show. Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry.

WUA: The sense of humor in many of your songs; is that Jeff being Jeff?

JD: Humor is a great way to connect with an audience. The best gig for a stage actor is being in a comedy that works. You hear the people laugh and you feed off that. Same with singing and playing. Again, people like Chris Lavin, Steve Goodman, Randy Newman, and Arlo Guthrie made it okay for me as a songwriter to chase that. Throw in a few songs about Hollywood and you've got me being me in various keys.

WUA: Are there any future projects, music wise, on your horizon?

JD: We've had a lot of success with this first CD (jeffdaniels.com, CD Baby, and iTunes) and we easily have another 20 songs

recorded live ready to go. I'm constantly writing new stuff and have several I'm going to pull out at Rams Head. We record every show, so I imagine we'll add a few live performances from this show. Also, Chris Lavin is putting out a CD called One Meat Ball. She asked songwriters to send her an original tune having to do with a favorite recipe. I'm sending her something called "Tomato Puddin'." It's actually a side dish that my family serves every Thanksgiving. Honest. I'll be playing that at Rams Head so we have a live version. We'll also be doing a studio version with a band. This will also be the fifth consecutive year where I do my ten shows over 2 weeks at the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea, Michigan, around Christmas and New Year's. Lots of new material will be unveiled and recorded live. Other than that, I'm just going to find sporadic nights around the country where I can play in between film jobs. I have great respect for those who do this for a living. Because I don't, it allows me to enjoy myself and have fun with it. Hopefully, that's reflected in the show.

WUA: A final question, perhaps a touch off subject; your favorite or proudest moment on the silver screen?

JD: You mean aside from sitting on a toilet in Dumb & Dumber? Let's see. Several favorite moments. Chamberlain screaming, "Bayonets!" in Gettysburg. Moon-walking like the white man I am in Something Wild. The scene on the porch with Mia Farrow in Woody Allen's The Purple Rose of Cairo, where I talk about being a Hollywood star. That one stands out because Woody had encouraged me to ad lib and, as we were shooting, I could see him out of the corner of my eye cracking up. For an actor, making Woody Allen laugh is a great achievement.