

A black and white portrait of Danny Schmidt. He is wearing a textured flat cap, a dark jacket over a light-colored t-shirt, and a necklace. He has a beard and is resting his chin on his hand, looking thoughtfully towards the camera.

# DANNY SCHMIDT

*Casts a Musical Net*

BY MATT WATROBA

**D**anny Schmidt writes songs that are rich with lyrical imagery and bejeweled with craft, but the Austin singer-songwriter's emergence as an artist increasingly lauded and celebrated throughout the folk community would better be described as more accidental than planned. In fact, Schmidt insists that the word "career" – when it refers to him anyway – should always be accompanied by air quotes or italics. Now, it *is* Danny's nature to be a bit self-deprecating and even a little shy, but when it comes to his *career*, much of it came about through a series of fortunate and unfortunate events ... a lucky series of circumstances for lovers of smart, thoughtful contemporary folk.

Not surprisingly, the intricate lyrics and plaintive melodies didn't spring forth fully formed. Fascinated by music early on, Danny bought an electric guitar with the money he amassed at his Bar Mitzvah ... and immediately began delving into the world of heavy metal. While he learned to shred with the best of them, he eventually "matured past the heavy metal stuff" and began listening to the jazz-rock fusion styles popular at the time, especially Austin's own Eric Johnson. This led him to Texas guitar hero Stevie Ray Vaughn, and eventually to Jimi Hendrix. And through a curiosity about those guitar heroes, Danny eventually found his way towards rootsy Chicago blues greats like Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy.

"Muddy was a good bridge between electric blues and country blues because he came from the country blues background," Danny said recently in an interview after a house concert in Tampa, Florida.

"When I got an acoustic guitar, I got into Mississippi John Hurt, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, and Reverend Gary Davis. Musically, it all came from that guitar background," he remembered with a nostalgic grin.

"When I was sixteen, I got into Dylan and the writers. They were important to me as musicians, but they were *also* important to me as guiding lights for the world in general. I would write index cards of lyrics that meant a lot to me and stick them up on my walls so I wouldn't forget."

Danny Schmidt performing at the 2005 Southwest Regional Folk Alliance Conference.



© Jim Dirden

Danny headed off to college, but ended up dropping out and moving from Austin to the Ozarks for an experiment with communal living. He landed in the East Wind Community in Southern Missouri.

"It wasn't a hippie commune," Danny explained. "A bunch of academic intellectuals had founded the place in the mid-1960s. They were sort of utopian theorists, and considered it a social and economic experiment in cooperation."

Danny remained a closet guitar picker throughout that period, but he didn't play with others much. And singing for people didn't come easily for him, either. "I was terrified to sing in front of people ... more than your average person who says they're scared. It was like my whole body shaking. I couldn't eat for a whole day if I knew I was going to have to sing a song."

**B**ut music was just a natural part of the social fabric of country living. He lived in the Ozark community for about 18 months and then went to Virginia to check out a similar community called Twin Oaks. There, he met a girl there and fell madly in love. A letter writing exchange resulted in Danny responding with a song, which he sent to his love. No surprise that the first several songs were love songs – personal and private – not meant for anyone else to hear. And it was while living in that community that a friend there shared a big Neil Young songbook with Danny that really inspired him.

The communities were nurturing and encouraging places to conquer his fear of performing and they offered a lot of

support, but the nervousness continued. "When I started performing my songs live, I still struggled with the nerves. I would pace up and down on the sidewalk in front of the venue saying, 'Why do you do this? Why did you pick this? What are you doing?', ranting to myself that I had picked the dumbest thing I could be doing."

Danny left the Twin Oaks Community after a few years and moved to Charlottesville, Virginia. "I fell in with some really great songwriters," he recalled. "We were all just kind of stepping out in public for the first time. Paul Curreri, Devon Sproule, Jan Smith, a band called Nickletown ... we just naturally bonded."

It was among these friends that Danny started paying attention to songs and songwriters. Music was still a sideline though. He recognized it as an important part

of his creative expression, but still didn't see himself doing it for a living. Most of the early shows were collaborative efforts with the other up and comers in the area. But Danny wasn't depending on music for money.

"We were all pushing each other business-wise, helping each other to get gigs outside of Charlottesville. It's hard when you're just starting out. You don't have much leverage or draw in many places to dictate the terms of the shows you're playing, so you have to play a few Starbucks and places that don't really care about the music. They can be great, but it's really kind of a crap shoot."

After a few years slugging it out in Virginia, Danny decided to give it up and move back to Austin. He never gave up making music, but doing it for a living didn't seem realistic. Once home, he ran into a string of bad luck. The job he had waiting for him fell through, and after about three months back in his hometown, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

"The way it first showed itself," Danny recalled, "it seemed to indicate that it was leukemia or something more serious that was farther along and had started to spread. That would have been really dire. After a long weekend of tests, when they determined it was just testicular cancer, it was like a huge relief. From a medical and health stand point, most of that was pretty easy to deal with. I felt lucky the whole time – more like I had a close call."

Danny admits to being a low income, low output kind of person. However, with the recent job falling through and the thousands of dollars of medical bills on the way, he had to learn to deal with a whole new economy of scale.

"It was important to me not to take money or charity. I felt like I had made the decisions in my life consciously, and to [take charity] would have been admitting irresponsibility and bad decisions. I needed to feel as though I earned the money. Music was my best avenue to that. It was a good lesson. I had built up an e-mail list over the years and I felt genuinely supported by my community."

Danny put it out to the list that he was having health problems and that he was going to be out of commission for a while. He announced that he planned to sell some homemade recordings and do a couple of house concert tours to



(Right) Danny at the 2007 Kerrville Folk Festival and (opposite) at NERFA in 2006.

raise the money he needed for his medical bills. It took him about a month after surgery to get back on his feet. After that, it was about a month of radiation and about six months of more recovery. He followed through with the recordings and the house concert tours, eventually raising the \$35,000 he needed for medical expenses. This experience propelled Danny back into his career as a performer. He remembered, "It made me value that network of relationships as an asset. It's like this invisible asset. You can picture a little thread between you and everybody you have contact

or are in a relationship with in your life, and you realize that there is a net underneath you from that whole thing. I had never been that tangibly in touch with it before. That gave me more faith in doing the music thing – it gave me more faith in general. I'm not one of those guys who says God will provide or the universe will provide. I feel like we will provide for each other."

The home recordings were largely the songs that became the critically acclaimed CD *Parables and Primes*. His house concert tours got him back into the routine of booking and touring again. That's when it became a full-time job.

Danny's writing just keeps getting better. His deep poetic sense has drawn comparisons to Leonard Cohen, his use of allegory and symbolism brings to mind Dave Carter, and the pure images he creates would surely have Townes Van Zandt smiling in the wings.

"There's kind of two phases of it, for me, anyway," Danny mused about his process for writing. "The first one is like being a kind of fisherman. The net is your consciousness and awareness. I feel like we all have lots of little tunes popping into our heads all of the time and little snippets of lines or dialogue. For me it's dialogue. I think I talk to myself a lot – or I'll have two people talking in my head, and I process ideas through conversation. So the writing process is about noticing this conversation and catching an interest-

## DISCOGRAPHY

*Live at the Prism Coffeehouse*, 1999, Live Once #1109

*Enjoying the Fall*, 2001, Live Once #5102

*Make Right the Time*, 2003, Live Once

*Parables and Primes*, 2005, Live Once #9449

*Little Grey Sheep*, 2008, Waterbug #79

*Instead the Forest Rose to Sing*, 2009, Red House #216



## CONTACTS

**MANAGEMENT:** Ethan Bessey, Bessey Artist Management Group, P.O. Box 151736, Austin, TX 78715; Ph: 512-535-4742 or 512-922-5756; Fx: 512-532-6789; E-mail: <ethan@besseygroup.com>.

**BOOKING:** (US) John Laird, The Americana Agency, 2708 Augusta Drive, Durham, NC 27707; Ph: 919-489-4824; E-mail: <johnlaird@americanaagency.com>; Web: <www.americanaagency.com>. (UK) Richard Guy, Coventry, England: Ph: +44-0781-743-7210; E-mail: <rich@thetinangel.co.uk>.

**ON THE WEB:** <www.dannyschmidt.com>

because he finds a whole lot of it and it stops being worth anything to him. Then he re-finds value in it when he sees how much good in the world he can do with it. I realized at some point that *Serpentine Cycle* was a cynical sounding title for a record that's fairly light, for me anyway. It's a little bit up-tempo and humorous in parts, so that didn't represent the tone of it for me. The line in the song, 'Instead the forest rose to sing,' is sort of this revelatory moment in the song where the guy has this new vision."

Danny Schmidt's initial reluctance and eventual succumbing to a life in music is starting to pay off. His new vision for what it means to create music in a nurturing and generous community seems to foster his ability to weave lyrics and melodies that spin narratives capable of gently focusing the listener to consider the beauty of real things – real things like illness, relationships, art, and the joys and complications of being alive.

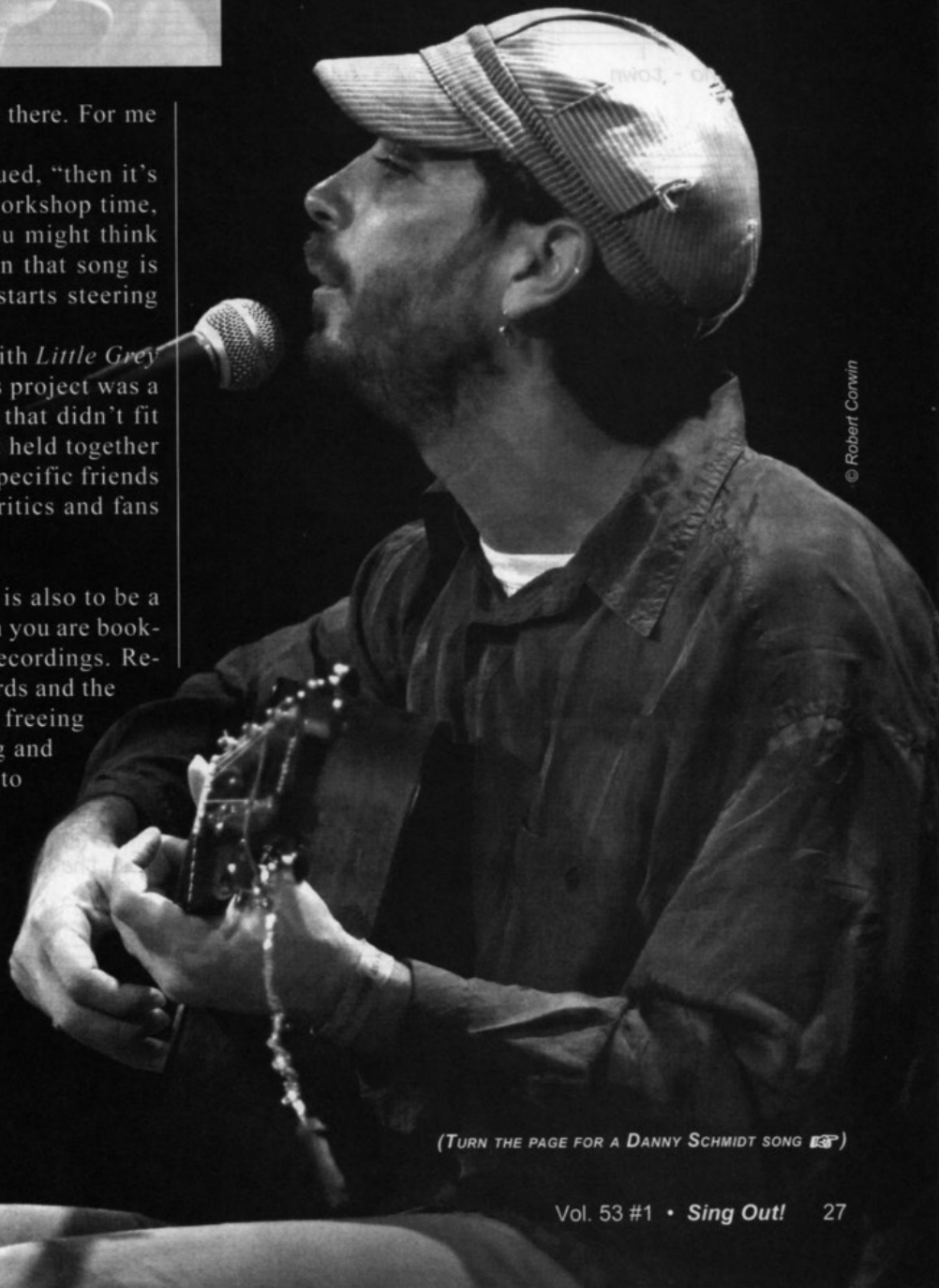
ing line when it comes by and starting from there. For me it's like the seed of the song."

"Once you've got that seed," he continued, "then it's more a matter of sitting there focused in workshop time, hammering out the lines. At that point, you might think you know, from the seed, in what direction that song is going to grow, but, as the song grows, it starts steering itself in other directions."

Danny followed *Parables and Primes* with *Little Grey Sheep*. Released on Waterbug Records, this project was a kind of closet cleaning for Danny – songs that didn't fit thematically with the other recordings, but held together because they were personal or written for specific friends or occasions. Much to Danny's surprise, critics and fans loved *Little Grey Sheep* as well.

To be an independent traveling musician is also to be a full-time office worker – especially when you are booking all the gigs and promoting your own recordings. Recently, Danny signed with Red House Records and the Americana Agency to handle these tasks, freeing him up to do the work of the artist: crafting and creating songs that transform an audience to another time and place. The first recording under these new circumstances is *Instead the Forest Rose to Sing*, released in early 2009 on Red House. The themes throughout the recording seem to bring Danny full circle ... especially concerning his, and the world's, relationship with money.

"The original working title for the record was *Serpentine Cycle*, which is a song about this guy who has a sort of circular relationship with money. He's sort of struggling with what the value of work and money is – partly



(TURN THE PAGE FOR A DANNY SCHMIDT SONG )