

VERY VERY LONG AND RAMBLING BIO "FACTS":
[this is taken from an interview in NYC, 2001]

Danny's not your ordinary kook. He's, in fact, quite a unique kook . . .

He grew up in Austin, TX -- just out of frame of half the scenes in the movie Slacker. "They said I looked too motivated," is Danny's explanation. "Those folks were my heroes growing up. They were a few years older than me and I really admired the ease with which they didn't do anything."

Eventually he attended the University of Texas. Then eventually he quit . . . one semester before he was to graduate. Why? . . .

"I think the better question might be: ' Why did you eventually attend the University of Texas?' than ' Why did you quit?'" answers Danny. "I attended school in the first place cause I didn't know what to do with myself. I quit when I knew what I wanted to do."

What did you want to do?

"I wanted to join a commune. So that's what I did. I fulfilled every parent's nightmare. I moved up to the Ozarks to live with about 100 wahoos on a farm. I know that makes it sound like I was running away to join the circus, or something. But it wasn't running away at all. I was searching for a more sensible model of people living together and living sensibly on the earth than what I'd experienced. And really, the communal model seemed better to me than corporate capitalism. Or the Greek system."

What was life on the commune like?

"Really, it was not half as 'hippie' as people picture. It was just a bunch of regular people -- well, generally smarter and more-questioning than your average regular person -- but pretty normal folks all just working hard on the farm and in the businesses, and helping each other out with the kids and the chores, and bickering about petty stuff sometimes, like a big extended family. And then partying down real good when the sun went down. I brewed eight cases of beer a week and put them out for the community in this old Coke machine from the 60's -- you know, the kind where you open the little door and pull the bottles out of their little collars. They loved me there.

"And we played a lot of music at night. What else are you gonna do, really? You're wrapped around by these Ozark hills. And you've got this Ozark sky and a good fire -- and you're sharing laughs and hours with a whole gang of really fine friends and musicians . . . and you've got eight cases of homebrew you've gotta plow through before the next batch is done. . . "

Yes -- on the topic of music. Was this when you really started honing your musical and songwriting skills?

"No."

Ok. Um, care to elaborate?

"Ok. I was terrified of singing. Scared to death of playing in front of even my friends. Didn't know the words to any one single whole song. Had certainly never tried to write a song. I just wasn't really 'honing' anything. I mostly banged on drums and strummed some chords with other folks. I did make a steel drum, though -- using a 55-gallon peanut oil barrel, an acetylene torch, and a ballpeen hammer. I swear to god, there were neighbors 10 miles away that knew when I was done making that thing."

So was it not til you left the community then that you started to write songs?

"That's actually an interesting question. Cause you could say that they were almost one in the same event. I fell in love with a woman I met while I was out here in Virginia just on a visit. Went back home just smitten as a dog. Just about jumping out of my skin. Didn't know what to do with myself. I swear I almost had a nervous breakdown once cause the mailman didn't show up for four days in a row -- the first day was Sunday, the next was a national holiday, and then this nasty ice storm hit our little neck of the woods. And come that fifth day, I was a wreck -- just a mess. I needed a letter from her like I needed oxygen. I was up waiting for the mailman out by our box, a quarter mile up the road. Pacing frantically back and forth, and panting and chucking rocks at trees. Just muttering: ' Through rain or sleet or snow, or mutherf**cking ice storms, mutherf**cker! ' -- just over and over again like a killing mantra.

"So anyways, I had a lot of energy in my body and a lot to express. And no amount of letters, or banging away on a steel drum was enough to let enough of it out to allow me to function as a civilized human being. And one afternoon a song just popped out, and -"

I knew this was getting around to songwriting.

"Ha! Yeah. You knew it would eventually, didn't you? Nothing in real life happens in soundbites, you know."

True, true. Alright -- so songs started popping out of you . . .

"Yep. Love songs. All sorts of love songs. Take that damn smirk off your face. You think I'm joking. I'm not joking a bit. I remember distinctly, the first song I wrote -- and I swear to god, I swear it -- I had never even thought about writing a song before that. Never even crossed my mind. So I remember just walking down the path thinking about this girl in Virginia -- cause that's all I did anymore at that point. And I was right at the edge of the garden, by the kohlrabi . . . you think I'm bullshi**ing you. . . Shut up. . . it's true. That's where I was when I started singing the first two verses to Cliff Song. Like it was some old song I already knew that just popped into my head. By the time I got where I was walking -- I had the whole song written out on the back of an almond butter label. [note: East Wind Community makes natural peanut and almond butters.] It was a song about trying to talk her through her fears, and trying to sway her into allowing me to move out to Virginia to be with her. Remember your damn question about leaving the community and writing songs? Well there you go."

Well done.

"Thank you."

So don't leave me hanging, what happened?

"I sweet talked her incessantly. I recorded the songs I wrote for her on this little four track in the back of a trailer. And what I lacked in finesse I made up for in gumption and persistence. I guess I wrote about 4 or 5 various love songs, employing different persuasions and tactics in each. And I'd send them to her. She loved em. My friends at East Wind laughed at me while cheering me on, you know. I was better than TV for several months. But ultimately, it all worked. . .

"I moved out to Virginia to be with her. Kept writing songs. It's funny, though -- she wasn't so crazy about the songs as our relationship moved past the honeymoon phase, but things kept getting documented and processed through the tunes."

Hmm. . . the 'artist as mirror' didn't sit well with her, kind of thing?

"Yeah, something like that. Or I think she saw it more as a 'boyfriend as bonehead' kind of thing."

So what happened with this relationship?

"Too long a story. And I'd have to draw you diagrams and stuff."

Well what about the songs?

"That's kinda interesting, actually. Well, I don't know if it's interesting. I think it's pretty interesting, personally. Is that self-consumed to find something about yourself pretty interesting?"

No, no. You are a singer/songwriter afterall.

"Ha! Alright buddy, this interview is OVER . . ."

Just teasing. Tell me what's so damn interesting.

"OK. Since you asked and since you're interested. . . I think my two albums have sort of paralleled that relationship, if not directly documented it. The first album [Live at the Prism Coffeehouse] is chock full of innocent, open, vulnerable tunes -- it has a definite theme and feeling of 'opening up.' Which, in my mind, you can hear that starting to turn in certain corners of that album -- starting to darken, starting to age, starting to fall apart, really. But just at the corners. We'd broken up not long before that recording was made, but most of those tunes date back along the path of when we were together."

You can hear that in the album.

"Yeah, I think you can. The second album [Enjoying the Fall] is fullblown dark. Looking back onto that collection of songs, they seem like snapshot images of what the world looks like when you just almost drowned in a shipwreck and you fight your head up out of the waves gasping, and you've still got salt water in your eyes and lungs. They're not mostly self-pitying and inward-looking songs, though. It's not

like 'gosh, I feel so bad I almost drowned.' It's more like 'Damn those shoreline mountains with the storm clouds sure look creepy through all this brine.' You know what I mean?"

Yeah, I think I do. Like the world through a dark lens.

"You're so good. That -- or like painting landscapes when all you have is gray and dark purple paint."

So backtracking a little. The first album was recorded live. The second one was a studio recording. Tell me about that.

"Well, I admit that's kind of a backwards way to go. It all made perfect sense to me, at the time. You know, quite frankly, the decision to record the first album live in one night from one show was really mostly a financial one. I didn't have much money, and I didn't have much in the way of production skills -- so I didn't feel like I had the means necessary to record an album in a studio setting and pull it off the way I would've liked. But I did have these songs ready -- and I'd play them live -- and folks seemed to like them -- so I just figured I'd go out and do what I do, and record it. Plus I told everyone ahead of time I was gonna record this show and make it into my first CD, and they oughta come out and be part of the recording. And if they liked how it went, they could sign up on this list and pre-purchase a CD, and that would be the money I'd need to finish the production of it. The scheme worked out real well, actually. Got a bunch of folks at the show, and sold a bunch of CDs in advance, and was able to finish the project. The second album followed a more tradition model, though."

You produced it yourself, though.

"Yeah. I'm a control freak. And by this time I'd learned enough about production -- and listened enough -- that I felt like I could pull it off to my reasonable satisfaction."

OK -- now take a deep breath, I'm going to ask you some questions that you'll probably think are stupid questions. OK? But I've got to ask this stuff.

"It's your job, I understand. Some people are lawyers. . . ."

Very funny. OK . . . for people who haven't heard your music before, how would you describe it?

"God, what a stupid question. No. Um, let's see . . . I'd describe it as like the sound of John Lee Hooker kicking Kenny G's ass. In a nice room with hardwood floors and high ceilings."

Great. That's about what I expected.

"Am I gonna be graded on these answers?"

Yes.

"Am I gonna fail?"

You're zero for one, so far.

"Uh oh. Can I try again?"

Sure. You get one do-over.

"Ok. How would I describe what I do? . . . I'd say that, musically, it incorporates elements of old country-blues and old mountain barroom gospel, with a little dash of 60's protest pathos. Thematically, I think it falls somewhere between Ingmar Bergman's dour ethereal searching, Vaclav Havel's optimistic realism, and Rosanne Barr's personal candor. How's that?"

A+. Well done. Number two . . . who would you say are some of your main influences?

"Musically?"

Whichever.

"Um, let's see. . . Martin Luther King. . . Townes Van Zandt. . . Albert Einstein. . . Mississippi John Hurt. . . Neil Stephenson. . . Bob Dylan, of course. . . Um, Charles Darwin -- and I guess you can't site Darwin as an influence without also siting chimpanzees. . . so, chimpanzees. Let's see . . . um, Greg Brown and Tom House in more recent years. Toots and the Maytals . . . Gillian Welch, Ferron, Doc Watson. . . Earl Campbell. . . Richard Thompson, for sure. Oh -- Ken Kesey. I love Ken Kesey. I guess Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, and Johnny Cash have to figure in there somewhere, and John Prine and Tom Waits. Oh sh*t -- Hendrix. I almost forgot Hendrix. He was HUGE. Um . . . my 10th grade physics teacher, Ms. Mack. She influenced me not to go into science. That was pretty important, I guess.

"I almost died in that class, actually. Literally. I was almost killed in this pendulum demonstration we were doing, using a bowling ball and a seven foot length of cable. I was reading the stop watch when my friend yanked my head out of the way of this demolition ball right at the last second. I could hear it go by my ear."

Whoa! That would've been awful.

"Yeah -- no sh*t. Me and my friend calculated how much force was behind that ball. I forget the number, but it was a hell of a lot. Way more than my head can generally take. Hey, I've gotta question for you. How're you ever gonna edit my rambling messes into some coherent piece?"

Edit it? No man, this is going up verbatim. . .

"Oh lord! And I've been cussing away this whole time. . . "

That's what asterisks are for.

"Oh yeah -- thank the good lord for the stars, huh. But my mom can read through those things. She'll know I said em."

You can tell her you were misquoted. OK. Just a couple more, maybe three. Talk about your guitar playing. A lot of people really seem to take notice of that element of your music. One quote here says 'Danny plays the guitar as naturally as he breathes.'

"Well, I guess that's true, cause I've done both for a long long time, and I don't really think about either one much. I don't actually consider myself a very good guitar player. I mean, I know I can do some fancy things with my fingers, but as far as really knowing my way around the instrument and understanding it, I feel like a just-competent-enough player. I do think I have a very comfortable feel with my instrument, though. My fingers have spent a lot of time fondling her and feeling her out. I don't know if you know what I mean, but two different people both picking on a G chord can have two totally different feels. I think I do sound like I've been to G Chord's house a bunch of nights, whereas some players are just more friendly acquaintances with her. Does that make sense?"

A little bit.

"I'll settle for that."

Alright. Let's talk about stage fright. I read that's something you've had to overcome.

"Overcome?! God, I wish. No -- I still get so wound up before every show that I can't eat for half the day, and my hands get all sweaty, and my mouth gets dry, and I get the shakes. Every show, whether it's 30 folks in a little room, or 300 in a big one. I just have to get up there and hideout in the songs, and try to block people out as best I can."

Is that why you close your eyes when you're singing?

"How do you know I close my eyes?"

I was at your last two shows here in NY.

"Oh -- I didn't see you."

Oh man, I walked right into that one, didn't I?

"Yeah you did."

Alright, one more question, cause I know this is important to you. Talk about your community involvement down there in Charlottesville.

"OK. Well, first I've gotta brag on Charlottesville. Or talk a little trash, really. I betcha I could line up the five best songwriters in Cville against your top five here in New York, and we'd clean house on y'all. It'd be kinda like the movie Hoosiers. Y'all have the big pool to pick from, but we've just plain got the goods. And heart."

"No, really. I've been very happy with Cville. And extremely impressed with the talent there, and the integration of the music scene, and the warmth and supportiveness of the whole community towards its artists, and among its artists. I've been there about three and half years now, I guess. And right when I moved to town I got involved with this other gang of songwriters who were also community-minded, and we started up a cooperative, called Acoustic Charlottesville, which sponsors a monthly showcase of all-original, all-local musicians and songwriters. It's drawn out an amazingly diverse group of performers -- a lot of 'closet-pickers' and a lot of ambitious upstarts. And just overall has been a great way to get more original music played out in public instead of hidden off in people's living rooms."

Yeah, right on. Well, I thank you so much for your time. It was a pleasure to get to sit and chat with you. And I really admire your work.

"Hey -- thank you. The pleasure was all mine. This was fun talking all about me! I appreciate your interest in my music. Try and make me not sound like an a**hole, alright? And come on down and visit Cville sometime. I'll buy the beers -- and I'll turn you on to about a dozen really killer musicians."

I'll do that.