# INTERVIEW

BY LARRY LESSER

## DAVID WILCOX

# Facing Fears And Listening To Language Of The Heart Leads To Big Horizons— Music And Metaphors With A Message

PHOTO BY LARRY LESSER

Since seeing David Wilcox win the 1988 Kerrville Festival New Folk contest, I have been inspired by David's originality, integrity, attentiveness, graciousness, joyfulness and sense of melody and purpose. You know what Larry means if you have any of David's four albums (the first is on the independent label Song of the Wood, the rest on A&M) or if you have seen him give concerts over two hours long, complete with his cutaway capos, creative tunings and humorous often-rapped song intros. David's songs combine the warmth of James Taylor with a courage to face difficult issues such as addiction or family dysfunction.

Before his recent performance at Austin's gorgeous Paramount Theatre, David was kind enough during the hour before the opening act took the stage to share his insights and steamed vegetables in his room at the Omni Hotel, as the trills of an opera singer in the cavernous lobby frequently reverberated outside his overlooking window.

A shorter version of this interview originally appeared in the April 1994 newsletter of the Austin Songwriter's Group. May all of you find the same passion and purpose in your songwriting that David clearly has.

**LL:** Your four albums have used five producers—your current album [*Big Horizon* on A&M] has two producers. How great a role did each producer have in helping set the mood and of keeping the focus on the acoustic guitar and voice?

**DW:** This time, with Richard Gottehrer and Jeffrey Lesser, it was really a treat. The performances came out so good because they really know how to concentrate on that part of it.

**LL:** In the ten times I've seen you, you were accompanied by another musician only once—at Kerrville in 1988. Is this a decision you've made to keep the contact with the audience intimate and intense?

**DW:** It is something that I tend to do pretty well. I like playing with a band when I'm at home [Asheville, NC], but I'm a mediocre band leader.

**LL:** Why do you say that?

**DW:** I haven't been doing it for years and I don't really know how. But I think my playing solo is really more effective emotionally. I really enjoy it.

**LL:** How would you say that your performing and writing enhance each other?

**DW:** Great question!

**LL:** The feeling of being in the moment that you manifest on stage, do you find a way to bring that into your writing and recording sessions as well?

**DW:** That aspect of the question is interesting, but the inverse is also amazing, how the performing makes the writing possible. Obviously, when you put a lot of emotion into a song when you write it, it makes it much easier to perform because you can access that emotion on stage. The other way that they work together really well is if I didn't have a chance to go out and play my songs it would be much harder to write them in the first place, because it would be hard to imagine them really getting to the ears of the people. When I'm writing I need to imagine them hearing it and feeling it. It's like the in breath-out breath kind of thing, the writing and the recording is all real inside and then the performing is very much focusing on how the audience is feeling. It's a nice balance.

**LL:** Most of your songwriting seems driven by metaphors. Is that because metaphors are what naturally come first to you, or is it because you have found from your experience that metaphors are the most effective way to communicate a delicate feeling, or both?

**DW:** I love having songs that remind me of the best that I've found and I love having the images be stuff that's in my life every day, because then, when I see those images, I'm reminded of the song. Like when I'm stuck in traffic, I can remember the song "Four-Lane Dance" and kind of get some sense of humor about it.

I like it when songs work on a lot of levels. When you first get to know a song, it's like when you first meet a person, there'll be something about the way they look that is intriguing, but then as you get to know them the personality comes out more and more, and I like it when a song has a depth of personality. You know, you can get the surface story and then you can apply it to something in your life, and then you can apply it to something bigger, so I like it

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when songs read in that depth.

**LL:** Is it important to you or difficult for you to have your songs respected for all of their levels and not just be labeled by any one of them? I mean, if other people say, "oh this is a recovery song" or "this is a Christian song," do you say, "well if you want to think of it that way, that's fine" or do you wish that it doesn't have to be limited to that?

**DW:** I used to worry about being misunderstood. I'm getting more relaxed about that now. I can try to be the good shepherd and make sure that everyone follows the song the way I want them to, but it's not as scary anymore to realize that not everybody's going to get it the way I intend it.

**LL:** In that vein, I notice that this is the first album for which you printed the lyrics, but you don't include descriptions to introduce the songs [as 1991's *Home Again* did].

**DW:** It was one or the other, there wasn't space for both.

**LL:** I think you made a good choice. I find that many songwriters who attempt to write in such deep parts of the pool can easily become too confessional or judgmental. I'm wondering if you're aware how you've been able to avoid this?

**DW:** What succinct questions, that's fascinating! I would say that when I write a song, I want to be sure that I'm offering something. I look at the reason why I would want to sing that. And most importantly, I imagine myself as a listener and why I would want to hear it. What does it offer in terms of a solution or a vision or a possible source of hope, or just some understanding of the quandary? And so, if I write a song that's just a complaining song or something that I don't think will really offer anybody something of value, I tend not to sing it, it just kind of gets recycled. So the songs that I do finish are ones that I'm looking to offer something worth giving.

**LL:** Is it easy to sing such songs when it's been some time since you were personally in that situation yourself?

**DW:** I'm lucky to say that it does not seem to be affected by time.

**LL:** Would you have any problem singing "Strong Chemistry" [from *Big Horizon*, that explores how sex can be an addiction] and then going into "Wildberry Pie" [from *Home Again*, that celebrates love and sex]?

**DW:** Yeah, it's interesting. It seems like when I'm singing an old song, I can remember the emotion, I can remember it like looking at pictures and really enjoy that time and that world view and that outlook in the song. It's an experience I can get inside emotionally, but I can still see how I've learned about the situation since then and see it from a new perspective.

**LL:** So, "It's The Same Old Song," but with a different meaning [the second and current single from *Big Horizon*].

**DW:** Exactly! [laughs] This is the most fun I've had in an interview! Everybody asks me why I do that song and I think you understand. That's great.

**LL:** It helps that I write songs, too!

**DW:** Yeah.

**LL:** Now, some of your songs happen very quickly, while you have described [in an interview in *The Performing Songwriter* of September/October 1993] "That's What The Lonely Is For" [another *Big Horizon* song] as a fourth generation rewrite. What might I recognize from the first-generation version of that song, and what kinds of songs tend to require so many rewrites for you?

**DW:** That song is different tempo, different key, different tuning, different lyric, different everything. There aren't even certain phrases that got kept. All that got kept was the idea I was trying to communicate. The images changed. It was hard to write because I was trying to get a big idea into a little song. I was trying to find a way to boil it down and make it succinct. And when I try to do something like that, it's easy to make it just too logical without emotion in it, so I have to keep saying, "why does this matter to me?" "What about it am I passionate about?" So that's the port that keeps me going around. I need to learn how to take a difficult issue and say it in a compelling way with a story that makes sense.

**LL:** Was there a particular phrase that suddenly triggered the way to see how to do that?

**DW:** For this song, I think it was "the room is there by design." That was the key to doing it this way, because I wanted to say that there's a fullness that fits, and we would not have hearts made with so much room in them if it weren't for that fullness that we can find. And so when you're feeling the "empty," instead of seeing it as something wrong, to just say that it's a promise that as much "empty" as you feel, you can feel that full with just a great joy.

**LL:** Last weekend at this hotel, the Austin Songwriter's Group hosted a workshop by

Pat Pattison, who teaches songwriting at Berklee College of Music in Boston. I think you presented a workshop there a few years ago. How do you feel songwriters can best benefit from formal instruction in the craft or business of songwriting?

**DW:** How can they make use of formal training? I'd say that discipline is sometimes a real key to preparing your life for writing great songs, it's kind of hope made manifest. You want to write brilliant songs, but first you have to write about 700 mediocre songs, and that's fine, you just start and keep going. The craft and the way of seeing that as kind of an apprenticeship and a journey is really useful, 'cause otherwise you'd start criticizing—"well I guess I can't do this"—when really it's just the process.

**LL:** In an interview with *Acoustic Guitar* (March/April 1992) you said, "I never hung out at music stores. I felt like I didn't belong because everyone was talking about *how* to do it, and I was just talking about *why*."

**DW:** Mmm hmm! I'm glad I said that!

**LL:** Why do you think it is so rare for people in the business to talk about the why?

**DW:** I think that there's lots of different kinds of people, and I think that I am particularly set up to worry about making sure that my intentions are good, because if my intentions are good, then I will kind of go the right way. I think that other people just work differently; I'm just real intuitive...I don't think that it's necessarily "better." I just know that for me that was the way I had to do it. I've known some wonderful people and had memorable conversations with folks who talk in broken English and really have a hard time putting together a sentence with any kind of grammatical correctness, but I remember the things they said because they had so much to say in terms of the feeling behind it. I always thought it was the same thing with music. I've gone to hear music where all the notes are kind of put in the right place where the notes ought to be and it sounds just like a song, it has everything that a song has, and yet I think, "Why is it important for them to tell me this? What am I supposed to get out of this?" You know, I think there's another reason, a better reason, a simpler reason. I think I wasn't very good at it. I didn't want to look at the how because I knew I couldn't do it as well as a lot of other people. I only knew that I loved it and I wanted to try because it felt really important to me. That's probably a better reason! [laughs]

**LL:** In that same interview, you said that singer/songwriters' music "has less of a feel of tradition than it does of revolution. We can't trust the industry with our music; we have to take it into our own hands." By being on A&M, you are proof that one can have major label distribution without compromising the songwriting. Do you consider yourself a lucky exception or do you think there's a new trend towards room for more people like you?

**DW:** It's interesting. It's a very complex question. There are presuppositions in your question. I'm going to just speak metaphorically. I think if you are not accepted in high school then you are able to look at the social structure of the high school cliques and kind of see that, well, it's a game that you can win but it's not really life-and-death, there's other things in life that will be really valid and important. But if you are accepted in high school, maybe that thought wouldn't enter your mind. Maybe you would be more inclined to want to win by their rules and take their rules seriously.

So the high school analogy is a tough one. I just put it in that context because everyone went through that. Imagine the trials that come with every level of when you get into a particular group—if you're winning by their rules, you might just want to stay safe in that realm and not try to see beyond it, because it would be kind of deflating. To see beyond it would be to say that you have to kind of cut through this nice, warm acceptance with the knowledge that it's really not that big a deal, it's just a little game, it's just this circle of people, and it's not really something you can rely on as a source for your own self-image. So when it applies to labels, it's dangerous, if you find some revolutionary great attitude music like Ani Difranco.

**LL:** It's funny you say that. I just bought her *Imperfectly* CD last week. It's great.

**DW:** She's got her own record label, Integrity Records. I love that, that's important, it's feels like it belongs to be this self-empowered, apart-from-the-industry kind of thing. And so Ani Difranco is going to have amazing success and be signed by a major label if she wants to, if they can offer her a better deal than what she can do on her own, and eventually everybody will be wanting to be like her, and she's defining the genre, and

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she's kind of won the game, and then it becomes bewildering because, if you've defined your integrity by being outside the system, it's kind of like what Suzanne Vega said when her song ["Luka"] was a big hit—"I felt really strange, like I must be doing something wrong."

**LL:** Would you feel strange if you had a top-10 hit yourself?

**DW:** Well. I imagine it must be a real bewildering thing. Lately I feel I've gotten more grounded in where my music comes from and why. I don't know how much it would affect how my music is grounded in just being honest to the people who get it. Tough question!

**LL:** I must ask about the tunings. Is keeping up with all the tunings you use actually easier than playing four-finger chords in standard tuning or do you use all the tunings for their unique tonal personalities?

**DW:** I would say both. I do play the easy way. I let the guitar do the work. And I do love how the tunings have such different personalities. And there are some songs that I will try in one tuning and then another and then another. And the different tunings are just so filled with emotion. Some of them are innocent, some are real cutting, some are streetwise, some are real complex and intellectual, the music just takes different personalities in different tunings.

**LL:** You have described that using different tunings is one way you use to shake the editor loose, to let the music come out. Are there other things you do like that?

**DW:** Yeah. One of the best ones I could recommend for people is if there's a song on someone's record that you really love that really moves you that really pulls at something deep, you can go inside the headphones and go inside that song over and over and just write everything that comes to your head.

**LL:** You have described music as a personal compass for you.

**DW:** Mmmm. I forgot about that. That's a great thing.

**LL:** If for some reason, you weren't able to explore your vision as a singer/songwriter, what else would come closest to being a personal compass for you?

**DW:** I would say conflict resolution or maybe some kind of other art form, theatre or painting.

**LL:** Have you done any other art forms?

**DW:** Not in any equivalent scale, but I have enjoyed messing with them.

**LL:** What's your personal favorite song off the new album?

**DW:** Different ones for different reasons. If there were one song that had to speak for my message, I would say "Show The Way." And other favorites are "Break In The Cup" and "That's What The Lonely Is For". But there are others that are a lot more fun to play and just enjoy musically.

**LL:** In "Hold It Up To The Light" [a "personal compass" song on *Big Horizon*] you address God. Was that a difficult thing to put on the record?

**DW:** There were times when I thought, "Ah, I shouldn't do that, come on." But it was just hard to make it work any other way. It was what I felt and I just had to. In the context of what the song is about, I think it's kind of fun. Because what the song is about is countering our fears that there's some kind of vengeful *Monty Hall* God who's going to say, "I'm sorry, you got the bucket of shit!"

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[laughs] I just think that's not the way it works and I wanted to express some of those fears about missing your chance. You know, you get married to one person and then what happens if you meet your perfect soul mate? What I wanted to say was basically the same thing Robert Frost said in his "Road Not Taken," that if you decide on one road and actually walk it and pay attention to it, it doesn't matter which one you choose, it will BE the right one. It will be, in retrospect, the only one you could have taken and you're so grateful that it worked out this way. Just because if you just pay attention, it's going to be fine, it's going to work out, because life is just thousands and thousands of little decisions and the process of life is not just winning some prize here or there but how you work at it, what you do with it, how you relate to it.

**LL:** "What You Do With What You've Got" [a Si Kahn song David often plays].

**DW:** Yeah.

**LL:** That reminds me of a G.K. Chesterton quote which says, "I do not believe in a fate that befalls a man no matter how he acts, but I do believe in a fate that befalls a man unless he acts."

**DW:** [laughs] Ah, yes! Yeah, that's well said. I love that. The path's getting shorter at the far end...I'm ready for the next question.

**LL:** I basically asked all the questions I prepared.

**DW:** It was great. Well thought-out. Good stuff.

**LL:** Any plans for the future?

**DW:** Yeah. I noticed my writing taking a really interesting turn. I can best describe it as I'm trusting the intuition more and I'm letting myself write songs that I feel strongly but I don't necessarily have to whup 'em into shape so that all the ducks are in a row. All the rules that I used to have about songwriting—where you set the stage with one set of images and you stick to it, you never mix metaphors—but now I'm starting to understand that there's a certain emotional continuum and it doesn't have to be all logical. So anyway, it's kind of like if I were a painter, I would first want to be able to paint the landscape the way it looks and then paint it the way I feel. But I first want to get the trust of the listener and the confidence in my own ability to control the medium. So now I'm starting to write songs that are really different, more emotional, more kind of inside. It's a nice balance for what I've been doing before, and of course I'll still do it both ways, but it's fun now to have some songs that paint the way I feel.

**LL:** Will we be hearing any tonight?

**DW:** Yeah. I'm going to be playing one, it doesn't even have a hook line, I don't know what to call it, except maybe "I Know The Way It Feels," that's the last line of the first verse. It's a song that's big time into that exteriorization of interiority like I did in "Chet Baker ['s Unsung Swan Song]," where I just describe outside scenes and that has to do for describing what's going on inside. And this is a heartbreak song that never uses emotional language. It never mentions "lonely," "sad," any of the words that we have for emotions. It just describes scenes outside.

**LL:** The "show not tell" school of writing. With "Chet Baker," did you know what you wanted to write about when you started it?

**DW:** That was the second song—the first was "How Did You Find Me Here?"— that was written intuitively and quickly that I kept. I write a lot of them, but I tend not to sing them. But "Chet" was written in the time it took to move the pen. I was just really trying to keep up with it. I wrote it down really fast and really didn't change it at all. So that was a song that really surprised me, I didn't know until the end it was about Chet Baker, I just started in writing. I didn't have time to reread what I had written so far, I just kept going, I thought it was fun, and I expected that when I got to the end I would have some interesting ideas to start a song maybe, and I looked through and said, "That's interesting, that kind of rhymes— that's cool, that kind of rhymes, too— gee I wonder if I could sing this?" It's really something.

**LL:** I've noticed that while you occasionally play songs with a political backdrop in concert, such as "Sloping Titantic," you tend not to put them on your records. Is there a reason for that?

**DW:** There are very few political issues that I feel just absolutely sure about and I just know that I've been so politically naïve for so long that I would love to know the exact right thing to say and spread the news and say, "You should believe what I believe about this." But I just don't think I've done enough of my homework to know that I could say that and really understand the whole picture and be right. I kind of stick to what I can really believe. ●



*Larry Lesser, past vice president of the Austin Songwriter's Group, is a singer/songwriter whose songs have earned awards, triple A (adult album alternative) airplay, as well as rave reviews.*