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

Since seeing David Wilcox win the 1991 Kerrville Festival New Folk Award, I've been inspired by David's originality, ingenuity, attentiveness, grace, sincerity, 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 ARK) or if you have seen him give concerts over two hours long, complete with his comicway capers, creative banter and humorous often-cropped song lyrics. 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 own at the Omni Hotel, or the till of an opera singer in the cavernous lobby frequently reverberated outside his overlocking 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 purpose and passion in your songwriting that David clearly has.

Q: Your four albums have used five producers—your most recent album (He, Hearts on ARK) has two producers. How great a role did each producer have in helping set the mood and keep the focus on the acoustic guitar and voice?

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

Q: 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?

A: It is something that I tend to do pretty well. I like playing with a band when I'm at home (Austin, NC), but I'm a mediocre band leader.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: 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.

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

A: Great question! I think the feeling of being in the moment that you mentioned on stage, do you find a way to bring that into your writing and recording sessions as well?

A: That aspect of the question is interesting, but the reverse is also amusing, 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 breath-out breath-of thing, the writing and the recording is all real inside and then the performance to very much focusing on how the audience is feeling. It's a nice balance.

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

A: 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 remember the song "Four-Lane Dance" and kind of get some sense of humor about it. I like it when songs work up 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 on 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.

By Larry Lesser

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SONGWRITERS MUSIKPAPER • JULY 1994
INTERVIEW

Pat Patterson, who teaches songwriting at Berkeley 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?

DPH: How can they make use of formal training? There are really two stages to it. The first is basic theory or composition, which is something that you can learn by reading books, by listening to what other people are doing, by going to workshops, etc.

The second is the craft of writing songs. This is where the workshop comes in. It's about getting feedback on your work, which is invaluable. But it's also about learning how to communicate with others, how to present your work, how to market it, and how to navigate the music business.

What are some of the common misconceptions about songwriting you've encountered in your workshops?

DPH: There are a few things that I often hear. First, people often think that there's a magic formula for writing hits. They think that if they follow a certain set of rules, they'll automatically write a successful song. But it's not that simple. Success in songwriting is more about intuition and personal experience than it is about a set of rules.

Another misconception is that songwriting is a solitary activity. While it's true that songwriting often begins as a personal project, it's also an art that relies on collaboration. Songwriting is about sharing ideas and working together to create something new.

How do you engage with the community of songwriters in your role as a teacher?

DPH: I try to create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their work and where they can learn from each other. I also try to connect them with other professionals in the music industry, to help them understand the business side of songwriting.

Finally, you've mentioned that songwriting is as much about the craft as it is about the art. How do you balance these two aspects in your teaching?

DPH: It's a delicate balance, but it's essential. On one hand, you need to teach the technical skills and the craft of songwriting. On the other hand, you need to encourage creativity and personal expression. It's about finding the right mix, so that your students can develop their unique voice and style while also learning the practical skills they need to succeed in the music industry.

Thank you for your time, Pat. I appreciate your insights on songwriting and your passion for teaching.

DPH: You're welcome. It's always a pleasure to share my knowledge and to inspire my students.
I N T E R V I E W

She's kind of a lot 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."

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

DWN: Well, I imagine it must be a real bewildering thing. I don't feel like I've gotten more grounded in 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. Rough question!

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

DWN: I would say both. I do play the way you, the guitar do the work. And I do love how the tunings have each different personalities. And there are some songs that I will try in new 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.

LW: You have described their using different tunings in any way you want these ideas, the editor loses, to let the music come out. Are there other things you do like that?

DWN: Yeah, on of the best ones I could recommend for people is "Shut Up" on someone's record that you really love that really moves you that really pulls at something deep, you can go inside the head-phones and go inside that song over and over and just write everything that comes to your head.

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

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

LW: If for some reason, you weren't able to explore your vision or a single language, what else would come closest to being a personal compass for you?

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

LW: Have you done any other art forms?

DWN: No, is any equivalent smile, but I have enjoyed messing with them.

LW: Who's your personal favorite song on the new album?

DWN: Different ones for different reasons. If there were one song that had to speak for my message, I would say "Show The Way."

LW: And other favorites are "Rough In The Cals" and "That's What The Lonely Is For."

DWN: But there are others that are a lot more fun to play and just enjoy musically.

LW: In "Holdin' Up To The Light" is a "personal compass" song on Big Horizon, you address God. Was that a difficult thing to put on the record?

DWN: 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 counting out your tears that there's some kind of meaningful Mary Hall God who's going to say, "Hey, you got the bucket of shit"

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