

An Interview with Dan Knudsen

Intro

Dan Knudsen is an American artist who's musical style has been described as a combination of folk, gospel and outsider genres. Local awareness of his music has resulted in attracting a growing cult following at area shows, a full-length tribute album and an annual festival in honor of the artist and his music.

Childhood

Dan was born in Hinsdale, Illinois September 14, 1974. He grew up in Wheaton and went to school in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Born an only child, Dan was surrounded by family musicians from an early age.

“Music is in my blood. I mostly get it from my Dad. He's always been an all-around musician. My Dad's two brothers were also both guitar players and singers. One of my uncles on my Dad's side was a barbershop quartet singer. On my Mom's side of the family, she has two brothers and a sister and both of the brothers were very musically talented... both of them were guitar and piano players. My father was actually a ragtime piano player. He got a lot of inspiration from Scott Joplin and my dad wrote a lot of his own piano rags so he was a composer way before me. He also plays the trombone in the Bath Municipal Band in Bath, Maine. He also sings tenor in a few different choral groups and choirs.”

In 1998, Dan's mother received a job promotion requiring the family to pack up and move Eastward to Maine. After living for 24 years in Illinois, Dan found himself starting over in a new state. Soon after the Knudsen's established themselves in Bath, Dan found a home for himself in Portland and began frequenting the city's music establishments.

“Right when I moved here I started performing at open mics and I had even done that back in the mid-90's when I was living on my own in Wheaton, IL in coffeehouses. Anyway, I continued to do that after I moved to Portland. In the winter of 2000 I started recording my debut album, *Sunsong* which was later released in August of that year, like six months after I began recording which was in February. I got acquainted with the local music scene. I had a lot of confidence because I had been performing since I was a teenager when I was in middle school or what they would call Junior high back then—that's when I started performing but I didn't start doing it on a regular basis until summer of '94 when I was 19, almost 20, so I had a lot of experience performing, therefore I knew what I was doing.”

Music Training

The album liner notes on Dan Knudsen recordings suggest that Dan plays a broad range of instruments. However, although this is the case with his recorded material, it is not so much with his live material as Dan chooses to keep it simple in concert. When catching one of his live shows you're likely to see him at the microphone with either 6-string or 12-string acoustic guitar just above his trademark fanny pack worn backwards—as if was called a “tummy” pack.

“I first started fooling around with my dad’s guitar when I was 12 years old—it was during the 86-87 school year—I was in 6th grade. My dad had a classical guitar—the kind that has nylon strings, which is what I play on *Keep This Garden Growing*, but anyway I started goofing around with it, just playing leads, playing one note at a time on the strings and then that Christmas I got my own first guitar—a kids’ sized. At that point I started taking lessons and learned how to play chords and I had my first of, I think it was 4, different guitar teachers I had up until I was in my mid-teens. I started taking lessons in early ‘87— I guess it was the winter. They were fun. I started playing traditional folk songs like *This Old Man*, *Home On The Range*, *Skip To My Lou*, *Michael Row The Boat Ashore*.

Songwriting Beginnings

Like most music artists, Dan began by listening to the songs of popular artists for inspiration:

“I decided to do it on my own after listening to songwriters like John Denver and Gordon Lightfoot and James Taylor. It started when I was 14. This was during the ‘88-’89 school year, I was in 8th grade. I started fooling around practicing songwriting—this is like 11 years before I started my recording career, when I was 25, when I recorded *Sunsong*.

Basically, how I go about writing songs is usually I think of titles and lyrics and write them down first and then I come up with the melodies and the chord patterns and that’s basically what songwriting is as far as I’m concerned but some of my songs I’ve come up with both at the same time—the lyrics and the music.”

Influences

As expected, Dan lists the classic American singer/songwriters in and around the folk and soft pop genres as what his music tips its hat to. What's not expected is the realization that he also listens to heavy metal:

“Well, I mentioned Denver, Lightfoot and Taylor earlier. Also Peter, Paul & Mary, The Kingston Trio—those were my folk influences—I've also had a lot of influences that were rock and roll, like, John Mellencamp, Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, and some of my Metal influences were like Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne—I don't play Heavy Metal by any means but I do have some songs especially on the *Outerspace* album that were inspired by the subject matter that they sing about and it's really heavy but it's heavy folk, not heavy rock—it's heavy subject matter but soft music. I like some Heavy Metal music but I would never try to be an artist of that genre and compose it. But there's all kinds of innovative things that have influenced me in terms of other bands and singers and some of their songs. I've borrowed a lot of the same elements. This is why I cannot name just one group or artist as an influence. I have to mention a bunch of them like I just did.”

Recording Process

Dan has been the epitome of the self-starter musician. Examples of that independent spirit are his handmade, home-recorded, self-released recordings accounting for the majority

of his albums. It wasn't until last year that Dan received an offer to record in a professional music studio:

“When I first started recording, and this goes for the *Sunsong, Grass, Grain and Appleseeds* and *Beaches and Zoos* albums, I recorded them at my parent's house in Bath, in my Dad's basement studio which he only used for me—he doesn't do that for a living—it's not a regular business that he has but he had analog equipment—he had a 4-track recorder and a couple of microphones and after my dad became busy doing his own things, especially his own music projects, I found out that a fellow local musician, friend of mine, Frank Hopkins had a professional studio here in Portland and charged a reasonable rate for and it's not much more than I would pay to take the bus to and from my parents house between Portland and Bath, so that was a good deal and I lucked out, that was when I recorded the two brand new songs that are bonus tracks on the *Tribute* album and the *Outerspace* album. My studio albums took several months to record them because there's so many different sessions, however, when I recorded the *Live At Strange Maine* album, that was done in one session—just simply recording a whole show.”

Performing

Dan is a dedicated open-mic attendee at a few of the Portland venues. In addition to his regular appearances at these weekly spots he occasionally lands shows at venues allowing anywhere from a full set to a full-length concert:

“I have played in so many places over the span of my career but the places I play at now in terms of open mics and booked

gigs are *Slainté*, *The North Star Café* and *Strange Maine*. At Strange Maine I've only done booked gigs—they don't have an open mic in that store but I also play the open mic at *Dogfish Bar & Grille* and I sometimes play a full show there—they have a feature in the middle of their open mic where a performer plays for 45 minutes which is 3-times as long as an open mic slot of 15 minutes and they collect donations and once a year I also do a show at my church at *Saint Luke's Cathedral* where I attend church. A single performer or group of performers, I guess I should say a single act, can't do a show there more than once every consecutive year, so that's just an annual thing. When I do that, I also collect donations—Strange Maine, they usually give me some store credit to get some free stuff and when I go up on that stage you know I have a good time—I have all these positive emotions that I pass out to the audience and they reflect back on me and I try to make it like they're just partying with me and I love it. I try to put some good energy into it—that's what's expected of me and the fans want to hear all of the hits and favorites and a lot of times I like to take requests for my songs—when I play the open mic at the Dogfish and at Slainté I do what I personally dub as the *Dynamite Dan Adventure* where people in the audience can yell out requests for my songs and I play them. So that's just a little program that I like to do and it's really fun.”

Band Members

Almost exclusively a solo artist, Dan has performed on occasion with a small handful of local musicians in special situations:

“Adam Shutzman, he’s one of my backup band members. He plays the musical saw on *Rain Falls Outside My Window* and *We Are Not Alone* and he’s played the sitar on *Rain Falls [Outside My Window]* he also played and still plays once in a while the theramin on *Creatures of the Sand*, you know that was the instrument that provided the buzzing and whistling sounds that I refer to in the song because it sounds like giant bugs in sci-fi movies. Chris Livengood who’s one of the members of Visitations which is a band that Brendan Evans, the owner of Strange Maine is the lead singer of. Brendan was also the one who drew the picture depicting imagery from *The Sharks Are Gone* which I made into the poster and I’ve sold quite a few of those. Chris DiRocco of the band, Modern Syndrome he played electric lead guitar on a couple of songs on Live At Strange Maine — *Jesus Is The King* and *I Won’t Hurt You*. I’ve got to tell you about that guy—when he played with me on that recording, he was only 13, almost 14. Just a kid. And he really kicked butt. He kicked the Devil’s butt and a woman abuser’s butt. He’s just incredible. He’s 17 now and he’s still in Modern Syndrome and I can’t believe how well he played—just a young, teenage boy.”

Awards

One would think that with the kind of cult following that has begun to develop surrounding Dan’s recorded and live music, that he would have generated a superlative or two.

“I haven’t won any awards but there is a celebration of my music that happens once a year and this has been happening since 2007 — 2 years ago. *Dan-a-palooza* is the annual concert—it’s a live performance where local bands and

singers cover my songs, especially some of the ones that were on my tribute album. This is the live concert version of that— it's where a lot of other performers gather in a certain given venue to pay tribute to me and I always attend that show, it has to be a night when I'm available. The first year, it was at *Acoustic Coffee* which later became, *Goat's Head Soup & Sandwiches* but then closed down. Last year, it was at the *Dogfish Bar & Grille*, it was actually done during the feature slot at the open mic I explained earlier. I think this year it's going to be at *Slainté* because I think that's the venue where most of my crowd that pays tribute to me or who would want to, hang's out. I know for one thing that Johnny Fountain who's another local Maine singer/songwriter, he wants to cover *Outer Space*. That album came out right after the tribute album so nobody's ever covered that before, and I think Charles Broder wants to cover, *Creatures Of The Sand*. Someday I hope to put together a second tribute album—it might not be for a couple of years but when I can get enough other musicians and singers and groups to do that that didn't do that on the first tribute album they can do other songs that were not ones on the first tribute album. Then I'll put it together and I'll release another *Tribute to Dan Knudsen* CD."

On the importance of writing music

"As a writer and a performer, I really love the fantasy of it. Some of my songs, you know just like heavy metal music, and classical music, are very epic and they're the kind of songs that could be used on the soundtracks of movies or tv shows. In terms of songwriting, and creating visual art, it takes a very child-like approach. Basically, I'm a teenager that's trapped inside a young adult body, that's why I love children so

much—I'm a kid at heart, I like kids and I've written a lot of children's songs and so it's very healthy and it helps keep me young in addition to exercising."

On performing other people's music

"Well, if I'm going to do cover songs that are ones that are not original by me but songs that are by other songwriters, I try to pick ones that I can relate to because real music does not just come from your vocal cords or your instrument, it also comes from your heart and I learned that a long time ago. So, I try not to just go with the tradition of a certain style of music. You know a place that I usually perform a lot of covers is at my church, at the cathedral because I was a Sunday school teacher for a couple years and now I still help with the children's church service that we have and I'm the music leader for that. I choose traditional church hymns and sometimes I do covers by other folk and rock stars and I've even done some parodies, that I've copied off of famous rock songs, I rewrote them as church songs and so I've done some parodying. But I don't expect myself to be like Weird Al Yankovic."

Do you see doing cover songs as a sort of tribute?

"Oh yeah, definitely because that's what so many people have done for me, I know how that feels. That's why sometimes I like to cover other songwriter's songs is to pay tribute to them and plus one of the advantages of that is you're playing songs that almost everybody knows. But I still think it's more fun and interesting to do your own songs but when you do cover

songs you're not only paying tribute to the artist, but you're playing songs that most people are familiar with and they can sing along and that's another thing I like about performing live is when I do my own songs which I mostly do, that is, my originals I play at the open mics and the booked gigs, I get the audience singing along with me on a lot of my songs and I really just feed off of that so hopefully they'll keep feeding me that way."

On success

"Success to me in my music career is basically selling as many CDs as I possibly can but more importantly, making people feel good and making them happy, because it's entertainment. If I do a performance and people come up to me after I get off stage and they tell me that they really liked it and they make positive comments on it, then that makes me feel like I've done my work."

On touring

"Yeah, someday I would like to do some interstate touring. I've been trying to ask a lot of my fellow local musicians and friends if they ever tour other states if I can go with them and maybe split the bills with them and their shows. It'll be a long time until I can do that by myself because I have to save up enough money to get my own car and it's expensive to travel to other states and cities on the bus or on the train or on the planes but someday, yeah, I would like to do some real touring and maybe not just to other states but to other countries. Yeah, I would want to start out going with friends, other musicians doing that, until I even think about doing it alone,

I also want to stress that I did play a few shows in other towns in Maine. I don't do it on a regular basis but I did play a couple venues in Gorham. And I also played a venue in Lisbon Falls."

On dream venue

"Well, definitely not the big arenas or stadiums because it costs a lot of money to rent those theaters, those rock theaters but basically, I'd like to keep performing in the kinds of places that I perform in now, you know, restaurants, coffee houses, churches, there are some venues that I dream of playing that I've never played before that some local musicians perform at like another one of my fellow open mikers from quite some time ago, Mary Hargraves, who is known professionally as Mary Ukelady, she does shows at libraries, especially children and family shows, and I'd like to get to that someday, playing in libraries and maybe playing in schools and maybe even playing in nursing homes for the elderly. I actually once did a private show at Maine Medical Center in the pediatrics ward, I played for the children there so I would love to do that sort of thing again, you know either play in hospitals and nursing homes, schools, libraries, and maybe small theater halls."

On performing for large audiences

"I've actually done that before. Yeah, I remember a long time ago when I was a teenager and I went to this outdoor event where hundreds, maybe even thousands of people around, there was a folk band performing and they actually let me get up there and perform and I played maybe like one or two songs. Of course, when I play any show, any performer gets a

little bit nervous at least but at the same time they're happy—they're having fun. It's a good time. And I have played at other churches around my home state, Illinois when I was a teenager, they were just like one song, maybe sometimes two or three songs."

On recording contract

"If I had my way, I would prefer to stick to doing it myself in terms of recording and producing and distributing and selling and all that. But I might consider an independent record label, a small one, but in terms of a major record label like Capital records or Reprise records or whatever, that's what would lead to international stardom and fame and fortune and I suppose it's possible at some point in my life, and likely, that I might get offered a chance to do music full-time but I don't feel strongly enough about that because I have so many other talents and there's so much more for me to do that I want to do."

On music career

"I do believe music is the arena where I'm going to touch the most lives because I believe that music is what I'm going to do the rest of my life, until I get old and die regardless of how old, even when I'm in my senior years, I plan to still be young at heart, because I still want to be healthy and fit, and I want to keep playing. You know there's people in their eighties that are still rockin' and I would love to do that because I'll never stop playing music, I'll never retire from that until I drop dead. That's basically the way that people retire from playing music is falling on their backside and realizing that they're gone—

otherwise, no. Day jobs, or day careers, people can change those a few times in their lives. But music, people can do all their lives.”

On Future album releases planned

“I already have several ideas brewing in my mind for new songs and the next couple albums. Next year, I’m going to, actually at the end of this year, beginning of next year I’m going to record a couple of brand new songs for the *Best of Dan Knudsen Volume II*. And the rest of that will be classics from *Beaches and Zoos* and *Outerspace* albums just like my first *Best Of* contained classics from *Sunsong* and *Grass, Grain & Appleseeds*. So that spanned the first four years of my career and the second *Best Of* is going to span the rest of those ten years that’ll be 2005 to 2010 so I will have been between the ages of 30 and 35 when I recorded all of those. It will probably be out in the spring of 2010. Now, the two brand new songs that will be on the *Best Of Dan Knudsen Volume II*, getting back to that, one of them will be called, *Life On The Line* which will be about how I put my life on the line for my woman. I’ll be singing to her, saying that I swear to protect her and safeguard her and the other song will be a children’s lullaby for bedtime called, *As You Lie Down*. Yeah, it will be a really, really nice, sweet lovely song so there will be a song for the woman and a song for the child and it’ll be straighter material than some of the classic songs on the album.

On what defines a “classic”

“Classics, are songs that have already been released. You know like on Best Of collections and Greatest Hits collections. You re-release a lot of older songs that have already been recorded, the same versions as on the studio albums. Brand new ones are the previously unreleased ones. And I like to do that when I release a collection of any type, whether it’s Tribute or Live or Studio because I want it to be something special. I don’t just want it to be stuff that’s already out that people already have on the studio albums. Every one of my CDs has material on it that is not on any of the others.”

Dan as Visual Artist

In addition to a poster Dan sells at shows which contains art created by a friend, Dan has and continues to create his own visual art pieces—most of which end up for sale at Strange Maine in Portland.

“I’m a beginning artist, so I’m starting out simple. You know a lot of the pictures that I created on my paint program on my computer, I didn’t actually print them cause that takes a lot of ink and it’s hard to make it in color. But what I do is I look at the pictures that I made on the computer program and I try to make construction paper copies of pictures that are similar to that, not exactly the same. But I put the construction paper on pieces of cardboard—those are used as the frames. And I sell them at Strange Maine so that’s very simple art but it’s fun and I sold several of my pictures. There’s still a few more of them left at Strange Maine and there’s quite a few more that I still have yet to make. But I have also sold a few woodworking projects that I made in a woodworking class program that I took at Portland Adult Education so I’ve had some experience as a woodworker just as a hobby and a semi-profession

making things out of wood the things that I made were medieval symbols and religious symbols like I made a wooden sword, a cross, a dagger, a shield—I think all those have sold but at Strange Maine, there’s still a wooden lance for sale that I made.”

On Developing as a Visual Artist

“I still have yet to mature as an artist, a visual artist and as I become more experienced I’ll be making better pictures but I think I am becoming more and more passionate about it and eventually, before I know it I’ll probably develop as much a passion for visual art as I’ve had for songwriting.”

On Album Art

“Eventually I’d like to get away from just making album covers that have photos of me made on certain colors of construction paper—eventually, I’d like to start making CD covers that are like real pictures, not just one color of construction paper but basically like a photograph or a picture drawn with many different colors. I’ll get to that one of these years.”

For an earlier Dan Knudsen interview be sure to check out [**The Rambo of Folk Music: A Talk With Dan Knudsen**](#) by Blainer McGough, published in the January, 2007 issue of The Bollard.