

Daniel Johnston

by Stein Haukland



courtesy www.gammonrecords.com

His legend tends to overshadow his genius, but with his new album *Fear Yourself*, Daniel Johnston is out to prove his real value. Hailed by everyone from Sonic Youth and Kurt Cobain to Sparklehorse as one of our times' most important songwriters and performers, Johnston has created a musical universe quite unlike anything else out there today. The general media may want to focus on the years spent in mental hospital and on how he distributed his early tapes -- mostly songs about Casper the Friendly Ghost, super heroes and popular stars of the day -- by giving them away to pretty girls on the streets. But as his work over the years so convincingly attests, Johnston is much more than some original character.

Daniel Johnston writes songs of classic beauty with melodies that twist and turn and take you places you've never been before. His performances are emotionally naked and almost shockingly honest. Some early albums have been marred by an absurdly lo-fi production, or by studio musicians unable to provide the necessary sound for his songs. But on *Fear Yourself*, Johnston has gotten together with Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous -- another eccentric whose reputation too often overshadows his unique ambition and sheer talent -- to create one of the finest albums you've never heard. Talking on the phone from his home in Texas, Johnston proved to be every inch as honest and unpretentious as his music suggests he'd be.

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**I just got your album, and I'm really impressed by it.
Are you happy with it yourself?**

Well, I really haven't heard the album all the way through yet. They're sending me the copies, and I may get them today or tomorrow. But I was really satisfied with the demo copies that they sent. And of course, it was really great recording with Sparklehorse again, it was really great playing with a band. We're talking about recording again, because we had so much fun. So if you like the album, that's good news. A lot of people said they do like it, so I'm happy about that.

Yeah, it's the best I've heard from you yet, I think.

Well thanks! When Mark and me talked about the album, he said: "Do you want to make a new album," and I said, "Yeah." And so right after that I started writing a bunch of new songs, and I've been writing new songs ever since.

So how did you go about recording this?

Well, it's been about a year since we recorded it. We were up in Virginia, in their recording studio. They had about three pianos, all these organs, all kinds of synthesizers and stuff. They had a really big recording studio. It was a really great place and a lot of fun, there was no trouble or anything. Everything went smoothly.

Did Mark do a lot of post-production on it? There are so many things going on in there...

Everything was so easy to do, and it was only a week. But after it was done, they took the tapes, and they had them for a long, long time. They were overdubbing, adding things, and working on it for the longest time. And it turned out really good. I'm very impressed by the production.

Are you planning on doing any shows together?

Yeah, we're talking about doing some shows too, and if we did, that'd be really cool. It'd be really neat, yeah.

You played guitar and piano on this album, unlike the *Fun* album that you did with Paul Leary [of the *Butthole Surfers*] back in 1994. Is that better for you, to contribute instrumentally as well?

Yeah. When we were doing the *Fun* album, I had just gotten out of the mental hospital. And I was on these drugs, and my arm was really shaking. I was on these experimental drugs. And when Paul Leary came to produce me, I just couldn't play very well because of it. So I showed Paul Leary the parts, and he played it. That's how that came about.

You sound much happier these days, though.

Yeah, as a matter of fact I'm feeling a hundred per cent better about everything, and I'd love to work with Paul

again. And I talked with Paul about the group that I have, Danny and the Nightmares, and Paul has agreed to produce us. We're a rock n' roll band, and we're very excited.

I guess that will differ some from the *Fear Yourself* album?

Yeah, it's very different. It's more upbeat, more rock n' roll, and more rehearsed than anything I've done before. We have to wait around a bit, because of record contracts and things like that, but Paul Leary has agreed to produce us and we're very excited about it. We work with the band every week, and we write songs and we do shows too. A lot here in Texas, and we're even going to be able to go to Germany to do a show.

About the lyrics for your new album -- they're relatively optimistic, wouldn't you say, despite how the press release calls *Fear Yourself* "a song cycle about unrequited love?"

[laughs] Yeah, yeah, they're a little more careful, I think. I had the band, and I was really busy with that and with all these shows. And so I was writing all these songs in my spare time, just for fun, until I had a notebook full of them. And then the Gammon guy, president Jordy [Jordan Trachtenberg], called and asked, do you want to record with Sparklehorse, and of course I was a Sparklehorse fan. They had been in contact with me and sent me CDs. And so sure -- I had a notebook full of songs anyway, and it just happened. I was ready for it. I had the songs, without really having planned it. And because I was kind of busy, maybe the songs became kind of happy. It's the best way to be, I guess, to be busy. And maybe the songs were kind of happy because I was happy, you know.

It sounds like Gammon is really behind this as well. Do you think you will reach a wider audience this time?

Yeah, I think so, because it's a new release, and it's closer to being an immediate release than anything before. It's fresh, you can almost smell it [laughs]. You know. Things like *Rejected Unknown*, it was almost five years old by the time it came out [laughs]. You could almost tell. But this one's pretty new you know, and that makes a difference, I think. And that's the way I like it to be. But we're also planning to release a lot of the old tapes on CD. And I'm excited about that too.

That's great, because those are almost impossible to track down.

Yeah, they are very difficult to get hold of. And we're doing all new artwork for the booklets, with drawings from the era of the album. A lot of this has circulated in

various shapes, and so we plan to re-release a lot of it properly, like *Yip/Jump Music*, *Hi How Are You*, and things like that.

You're still drawing and putting up art shows?

Oh yeah, that's where I earn most of my money, actually. My dad [Daniel's manager] buys my drawings and he sells them again for even more money. And so I get enough cash flow to, you know, buy new records every week. So that's how I have cash. When we do shows, we divide the earnings with the band, and there's nothing left [laughs]. Because we really don't get paid enough to really -- you know. But I guess I sell some albums there.

So, with all this, and an upcoming tour this spring, you're keeping pretty busy. Do you manage to focus on the current release, or is that mainly a thing in the past for you, already?

Oh yeah, I live in the future, I live in the past, you know [laughs]. As far as the music goes, the music that I listen to, I live in the past. It's Burt Bacharach, Lennon/McCartney, Neil Young, and it's Universal horror movies [laughs]. Since I don't have a car, I really don't know what the hit movies are, I really don't know the top stars today. But I do know the Butthole Surfers, I am familiar with Sonic Youth. I know who they are.

But many of those certainly know who you are, though.

If they do, that's pretty cool, you know. If I ever did have a real hit, if the right producer came along and I did have the right hit or something, I would surely buy all the Top 40 records and give them a listen [laughs]. Because, the way I think, well they're Top 40, and I'm Top 40. So I'd give them a listen. But it's like, I'm not with them or anything, I'm in the underground. I'm like a mole.

How many albums are you planning now? There seems to be loads of them coming out soon.

[Laughs] It's hilarious, I've got so many albums planned, and I even got albums, like, in the works. I have an album with the Rhythm Rats planned, which started when I was still on Atlantic. We had a recording session and recorded a song called "Might to Your Mother." It sounded so great, I couldn't believe it. It was the biggest production I ever had. Shortly after that, I was dropped from the label, and they never used it. I wanted to ask the label one day if we could finish that album with that track. That's one of the unfinished projects I want to finish. Besides that, there's another project that I started that I didn't complete, with Kramer from New York, you know, from Shimmy Disc Records?

Yeah.

I was working on a project with him many years ago, called *The Horror of Love*. He might have up to fifteen tracks already that I recorded with him, and that I wanted to record all over again, because I wasn't satisfied with the performances. And since then, I've taken these songs and rewritten them and revised them and practiced them, and planned to, you know, finish that album with him. There are projects like that, and then other projects with people that I've recorded with, on 4-track. Yesterday I did some recordings with a friend of mine who used to be in Danny and the Nightmares, and we're planning to release that eventually as an album. I got all these projects here and there, and it's fun that way. Every time I get a song finished, I put it in a notebook and eventually I've got an album. If I write a song, I think, wow this would be good for my gospel album. That's the kind of thing that I do, 'cause I write all the time, every chance I get. And if a song is right, I say, this would be good for this album. 'Cause I do want to record with Sonic Youth again, and stuff like that, so I have notebooks for different albums that I'm planning.

You didn't release anything between 1994 and 2001. Did you write anything during those years?

Yeah, it was a long time till *Fun* from *Artistic Vice* [referring to the period from 1991 to 1994], and the reason for that is I spent over three years in the mental hospital. And it was really bad, I guess not as bad as prison, but -- I was there and I couldn't get out. I was in various hospitals all over the country, and I couldn't get out of the system. There was nothing I could do and I really didn't write songs at all, and I hardly didn't draw pictures or anything, It was really a scare to be there, and it took forever to get out of the system, and it was bad.

And so it was helpful to start writing and drawing again?

It sure was. And I really didn't feel that I was mentally ill, other than that I'm a manic-depressive. But since they finally got me on the medication that I'm on now, it has really helped so much. I really don't get depressed anymore. But I used to get so depressed, it was a nightmare, it was just, like, pain in my brain. I couldn't stand it. But I finally found the doctors that got me on the right medication, and it's been over five years now that I've been out of the hospital, and I just feel great. I'm so productive, I work all the time. Now that my dad's my manager, everything's going great, I'm feeling better, I'm getting things done all the time, I'm traveling the world. You know. I'm rich [laughs]. It's great, I love it, you

know.