

## 'His work just bores into you'

Daniel Johnston lives with his parents, has bipolar disorder - and is a hero to musicians across the world. Dave Simpson hears why



**Dave Simpson**

The Guardian, Wednesday 15 September 2004 12.25 BST



The myth is equalled by the man ... Daniel Johnston

### **Mark Linkous, Sparklehorse**

Daniel Johnston has written some of the saddest and funniest songs I've ever heard. Next to Daniel, when I pick up a guitar or try to sing, I can't help feeling pretentious or corrupted. He's got the enthusiasm of a 12-year-old and the melodic gifts of Buddy Holly or the Beatles.

For these songs to come out of his body and be documented on tape is a miracle. Daniel suffers from bipolar disorder, he can swing from manic depression to violence. Thankfully, his medication is more together now and the person that Daniel is beneath his illness shines through in his music. He is 43 and lives with his parents, who are getting old. So some of us got together to make an album covering his songs to raise money for his care.

His insights are astounding and his songs are so universal they could be sung in subways or stadiums. I first got his homemade cassette album, *Hi, How Are You?* which Kurt Cobain famously wore the T-shirt for. I've since met other people who've got that album and they're all different. Daniel didn't realise you could duplicate, so every take he recorded would be an original master.

### **Wayne Coyne, Flaming Lips**

The pity of the Daniel Johnston story is the purity of expression that comes out of someone who is occasionally "demented". But the simplicity of the lyrics comes from true inner anguish. Madness shouldn't be thought of as people in mental hospitals peeing on themselves. It can happen to anybody. Who's to say at what level all of us don't have some inner struggle? It's easy to feel uncomfortable about covering his songs and it's difficult to outdo that kind of exorcism. But they lend themselves to reinterpretation because they are the real deal. We did the track *Go with Sparklehorse*; it's a great, optimistic song. There's a line, "If you think you've found something, don't let it go", delivered with a tinge of regret that he found something and didn't cherish it enough. It's incredibly moving.

### **Jason Pierce, Spiritualized**

The most important thing in music is absolute honesty. People like Daniel and Roky Erikson - 'cos they're slightly damaged - have this great ability to touch your heart because they don't know where to stop.

When a child hits a piano he makes untainted music, and that's there in Daniel. He goes between extremes of naivety and darkness. The song I can never get out of my head is *Funeral Home*, with the line "Got me a car, all shiny and black/Going to the funeral, I ain't never coming back." There's a recording where he gets the audience to sing along like a church gathering.

### **Jad Fair, musician/friend**

Daniel puts words together in a way that is very heartfelt and original. I first heard him in 1985 when he was making very raw tapes that caused a buzz in Texas where he lives. He puts so much emotion into what he does. He can play for 10 minutes or two hours and I've seen him break down crying but immediately after the performance break out in a laugh. I got together with Teenage Fanclub and we covered My Life is Starting Over Again, one of his most "up" songs, about what would happen if he became a famous rock star. He's aware of the irony and there's a wonderfully dry line: "I guess it's better than suicide." I've known him do a concert and when people scream for more he'll flee out of a back window.

### **Howe Gelb, Giant Sand**

Daniel Johnston is what I call a "lifer", somebody whose music you hear once and know you'll listen to it for ever. I met him when he was working in McDonald's in Austin, Texas, in 1986. He was in his uniform, as "normal" as anybody. His recording process was to play the cassette on one machine and record it on another, but add something to it. They were very hissy and sometimes the tapes wouldn't run at the same speed, but they were fantastic. I'm not sure he coped well with being thrust into the limelight: I've heard stories of freakouts in studios and the last time I saw him his dad was looking after him on the road. But the best songwriters I know all have grand mood swings and that's an important element of their artistry. If you like his songs, you understand them without even thinking, so how crazy can he be? Or how crazy are we?

### **Sean Mackiowiak aka Grasshopper, Mercury Rev**

Daniel's music is completely honest and incredibly endearing, like a little kid singing on the subway. That innocence is still in everyone, but not many of us are able to go back there. The crazier the world gets, the more powerful Daniel's magic seems. My theory on why he's got so many musician fans is that this is not a regular record company thing. He's truly making music for himself and I think that a lot of bands are secretly very envious!

### **Tunday Adebimpe, TV on the Radio**

Daniel is an endless fount of intensely personal pop songs. He writes like a cartoonist - putting pretty things in to lure you into the twist and by the time you've been seduced by the melody you're emotionally hollowed out. I've had family members who are schizophrenic and the amount of writing they did was incredible, on walls, tables ... It's tragic, but there is a link between illness and creativity.

Daniel's work is simple enough for anyone to relate to, but if you have ever felt anything in your life, the words will bore into you. His songs are so fragile that covering them feels like covering them with cement. We did Walking the Cow, which captures a moment where he has cracked up, but he knows he has to walk the cow. He focuses totally on this mundane task in the belief it will deliver him to his true love. That's just heartbreaking.

### **Tom Waits**

I covered King Kong because it's classic Daniel Johnston, one of the great love stories of all time. My favourite line is: "Just him and his screaming woman!"

### **Stephen Pastel, the Pastels**

It's right that Daniel is now talked of as an American classic in the mould of Robert Johnson. Although he's earned this tag "the Godfather of lo-fi", the actual composition is very sophisticated. He's like Paul McCartney in the way he uses melody against chord progressions. There have been periods when his behaviour has been very delusional, but I think his illness has left him with acutely heightened senses. He has that visionary intensity of a great artist. I try not to listen too closely to the lyrics because I tend to think: "Fucking hell!"

### **Vic Chesnutt**

Songwriters don't go to the places Daniel Johnston goes. His songs point out how pathetic a creature he is sometimes. It can be shocking and uncomfortable, but the

exuberance when he pours it out is beautiful. He makes stunning pop constructions that might be harrowing or might have a giant bunny in them, but that's his imagination. I first saw Daniel in Austin in 1990 and for years I was obsessed with him. As a songwriter he reminds you that you shouldn't edit yourself. I covered Like a Monkey in a Zoo, where he recognises the onset of mental illness, but it could apply to any change or disability. Many songwriters try to glamorise depression or eccentricities but there's no glamour in that song and he recognises the voyeurism with which people view anyone who's different. It's painful and foreboding: "It could happen to you."

#### **James McNew, Yo La Tengo**

Daniel's songs are personal to the point where you are hearing something you maybe shouldn't be allowed to hear, but they also have a really dry sense of humour. I once visited him in mental hospital and it was difficult to have a conversation but when he's playing he comes alive. We've done gigs with him and it's like performing with Santa or the Easter Bunny, this mythical creature that's only existed in your imagination.

- Discovered Covered is released on October 4 by Gammon.