A Conversation with Danny Barnes
By Frank Goodman (11/2005, Puremusic.com)

In the summer of 2003 we reviewed a great record from the Terminus label called *Dirt on the Angel* by Danny Barnes. We were interviewing another Terminus artist that month, Tywanna Jo Baskette. We'd been aware of our interviewee for some time, but were quite taken aback by the sheer magnitude of Barnes, of whom we were woefully ignorant.

Now a couple of years later, we were happy to see *Get Myself Together* appear in the mailbox, the latest Barnes epistle. It's along the same trajectory that *Dirt* was traveling, and demonstrates more of the virtuosic playing and singular writing of this Texan transplanted to the musically fertile Northwest sector, an island community called Port Townsend, WA. It's here that Danny loosely joined a family of musicians that includes the likes of Bill Frisell, Robin Holcomb, Wayne Horvitz, Tucker Martine, Laura Veirs, and many others.

As we looked a little further into the story of Barnes, what we found was what many that preceded us knew quite well, that he was the co founder and front man of the iconoclastic Bad Livers, a band that toured and thrived eccentrically for over a decade, bluegrass and old-timey to a point, but with obvious and visceral punk underpinnings. Barnes and bassist Mark Rubin were joined at the hip in this duality, to state it simply. The Bad Livers were a product of many influences, the aforementioned are just the most evident. Between them, there are and were many other avid musical interests that included klezmer and blues, Country, rock, jazz, classical and various ethnic musics.

There was a lot of jamming going on in the Bad Livers shows, in the context of incredible songs. The trio (that also included fiddler/accordionist Ralph White, who left the band in 1996) was much more likely to be seen opening up punk shows than folk and bluegrass festivals. (In fact, their first and landmark record, *Delusions of Banjer,* was produced by Paul Leary of The Butthole Surfers.) Barnes has said that they figured out they had about 11,000 fans, and that's usually how many records they'd sell on their most popular discs. Divided by the number of major markets at the time (175) you could usually figure there'd be an average of 136 people at the club, sometimes half or twice that many on given nights... There was definitely a method to their undeniable madness. There are, thankfully, many very important and satisfying songs of the Bad Livers on iTunes, and we strongly endorse the idea of checking them out; we certainly bought a number ourselves.

Since the Livers hung it up in 2000, Barnes has been busy. Any attempt at listing his many activities would be selling him short, but it involves a lot of touring and recording with Bill Frisell (including a brilliant CD called *The Willies*), the highly acclaimed jazz outfit *Mylab* with Tucker Martine and Wayne Horvitz and a passle of heavies. Anyhow, along with a long list of live and session credits, he's lately become an in-demand sideman for people like Robert Earl Keen and Tim O'Brien. He is first and foremost known as a banjoist par excellence, but is a top shelf acoustic and electric guitarist, as one

can tell from his latest effort, and (on electric) from very cool clips on his website with the Danny Barnes Collective.

I had to postpone the interview several times. Not only because of toxic busyness (has the age of specialization given way to that of chronic multitasking?) but because the longer I listened and learned about Mister Barnes, the more ungraspable he grew. At some point, you just throw in the towel, hang out and have a conversation. This was not over the phone, because he happened to be in town. So, at the same table at the back of Bongo Java where I once had a beautiful conversation with Darrell Scott, Danny Barnes and I sat and shot the breeze right through and beyond both sides of the tape. He is a down to earth but very high-minded musician of the first order, physically imposing but very soft spoken, a singularly impressive person.

Puremusic: So yeah, I'll start out by apologizing that I've put this interview off several times.

Danny Barnes: No, it's okay, no problem.

PM: Not for the usual logistic reasons--they were more like content reasons. I kept feeling unprepared for the conversation. Every time I--

DB: What do you mean, unprepared?

PM: Well, every time I looked into the music that you've made over these years, there kept being more to it, and more layers to the onion.

DB: Oh, I see. I've been in it a long time, I guess. [laughs]

PM: Not only that, you've been at a lot of different things over the years, and a lot of complicated things. I mean, you're probably as complicated a banjo player as one can find. [laughs] My first contact with your music was the solo record, *Dirt on the Angel*. So I came to your music mostly through *Dirt on the Angel*, and *Get Myself Together* first. Because there was an artist on Terminus also from this town--

DB: Tywanna Jo Baskette.

PM: Yeah, Tywanna. And I was doing a piece on her. I used to hang out with her a little bit. She's a wild artist.

DB: Yeah. Her music is cool. I don't know anything about her but that record.

PM: I was friendly with her some before she got that record deal. We'd go up to her place and she'd play me these one-minute songs about goat cheese and parakeets and stuff. [laughs] Very original stuff.

I was really knocked out by *Dirt on the Angel*, and met the president of Terminus at Tywanna's show. We talked about your music, and he thanked me for covering it. Anyhow, it was only after getting into this latest record, *Get Myself Together*, which was also amazing, that I started to look back--

DB: At that other stuff.

PM: --on the Bad Livers.

DB: Yeah, there's a pretty big catalog back there.

PM: And an astonishing catalog in its uniqueness. It's so unique, first of all, that it had such punk underpinnings.

DB: Yeah. We totally, totally threw ourselves into that band.

PM: It was a real kamikaze outfit.

DB: Yeah, that's a good word for it. Yeah.

[laughter]

PM: Now, your main homey in that band was Mark Rubin, right?

DB: Yeah.

PM: And you guys still--I mean, the way you've related over the years, I'm sure you're still tight friends. What's he up to now?

DB: He does all kinds of cool stuff. He was a manager of a violin shop for a while, just a retail violin place for a while there in Austin. I think he's gone back to just playing a lot. He's a DJ in Austin. And he has a lot of bands and things that he travels with and puts out records on, and does. He's kind of like an impresario of weird roots music and stuff like that.

PM: And an impresario that does pretty well for himself, right?

DB: Yeah, he does well for himself.

PM: It's amazing to see very particular and high integrity artists who can really stitch a good living together, regardless, in this crazy world.

DB: Well, if you can somehow keep the outgo and the income in balance, you're always ahead. No matter where you are, if you can keep those two things in proportion--if your outgo gets too high, you're always going to lose money, no matter where you are on the curve. You can clean swimming pools, and if you keep that together, you can still sock

money away, if you can do that. But when you forget that, though, you get in a lot of trouble.

PM: And you're a family guy, so you can't afford to forget that.

DB: That's right. I have a mortgage and all that stuff.

PM: It's amazing that the Bad Livers seem to always have been that way, too. I read a remarkable thing one time on one of the sites connected with them that you were breaking it down, that, "Well, there were about 11,000 fans out there. And that's about how many records we'd sell, and that boils down to 136 comers on any given show--give or take, sometimes none, sometimes 272." [laughs]

DB: Yeah. We had it worked out to a science, because we did it for so long. Exactly how to do it, and we kept our costs low. For me, it was a real learning experience just to see how all that stuff works. And it was a good time in my life where I could sleep on people's floors and do things like that. We were able to sort of live on the cheap like that, and think it was great.

PM: Right. You've got to be young enough, and you've got to have that turn of mind, to pull that off. And you got it while it was hot, all those years in question.

DB: We really believed that we were doing something important.

PM: Oh. And looking back, I believe that you were.

DB: I think so, too, because a lot of people cite us as influential--you read about us in a lot of interviews with other artists that they've done. You know, they listened to our records or caught us live. Because when we were doing that in the early 90s, that was before the days of Unplugged, and people doing acoustic records. It was very uncool to play acoustic guitar. Everybody played electric guitars, it was like that. We didn't even have a guitar in the band, really. The main lineup was banjo, bass, accordion and fiddle.

PM: Right. And it was remarkable that you got by without somebody pounding or strumming on anything. Well, I mean sometimes the banjo was--

DB: It was pretty amazing.

PM: The banjo was working and worked in a multitude of ways.

DB: Somewhere I read that Oscar Wilde said that "A successful artist is someone who confuses his audience and they still like it."

PM: [laughs] He also said, "If man was meant to be naked he would have been born that way."

[laughter]

PM: And for a guy who paid well-earned dues all those years with the Bad Livers, things seem to be going pretty dang good for you right now, don't they?

DB: Yeah, things are going good now. It took a lot of work and a lot of determination. You know what it took was a lot of faith. Because the music business is kind of weird, especially as a freelance thing--when you finish one job, you're out of work. And if you talk to somebody on the street and you ask them, "What's the most uncomfortable thing that you can do?" a lot of them will tell you it's to look for a job.

PM: Yeah, being out of work.

DB: It's one of the most uncomfortable things there is. Just looking for a job can be soul crushing. And in music you have to look for 150 or 200 jobs a year. But the last couple of years have been really good for me.

PM: Because now, these days, you've parlayed some very interesting work with people like Bill Frisell into real steady gigs.

DB: Yes.

PM: Robert Earl Keen, and now doing tons of dates with Tim O'Brien.

DB: I'm just out for a month with Bill.

PM: Oh, really?

DB: Yeah. He won a Grammy this year for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

PM: Really? What record was that?

DB: I think it was a Hal Wilner produced record. I forget the title at the moment. But it's awesome.

PM: He's an unbelievable artist, that guy.

DB: He's the real thing. It's been really neat kind of studying how he looks at music.

PM: Well, he calls you a mentor, too.

DB: [laughs] Oh! That's kind of weird, right?

PM: That just shocked the hell out of me when I read that. I mean, even for a hard-working guy like yourself, that's got to be pretty mind blowing.

DB: Yeah, that's pretty amazing. I mean, he's really one of the guys.

PM: Big time! I did an interview with him a while back. And I hope in retrospect it didn't piss anybody off, because usually I would edit the hell out of any interview, and take out the linguistic filler that people litter their parlance with. [Like all the 'likes."] But in Bill's case, the way that he kind of half steps and stammers his way through a conversation was special to me--there was such a musical pacing to it that I couldn't bear to take any of that out because--

DB: Wow, that's interesting.

PM:--it was important to the rhythm of the conversation.

DB: Yeah, his manner of speech is interesting. Did you ever notice how sometimes the way people play is similar to the way they speak?

PM: That's what I was talking about in the setup, I think. The interview with him was just like that--the way he loops things with his guitar, and then plays them around, and then he plays off that, and then it'll come around again...

DB: Sometimes when you play with him...well, some guys just kind of charge ahead. And Bill, sometimes when I've done shows and recordings with him, he sort of waits to see what happens. It's like playing defense. He waits for something to happen, and then he reacts to it.

PM: He's a counter puncher.

DB: But even within a bar, even within a bar of music. [laughs]
To me, he sounds like a small orchestra. He sort orchestrates the guitar rather than plays licks on it. It's sort of like little orchestrations of music.

PM: He's the best. Anyway, I hope I didn't piss anybody off when I took that approach with that interview.

DB: Nah.

PM: I've got to get in touch with that group again, because that was such a unique bunch of folks he was working with in Berkeley. [A real class act, to say the very least. Check it out: http://www.songtone.com/about/default.htm]

DB: Lee and Phyllis?

PM: Right. [Lee Townsend and Phyllis Oyama.]

DB: Lee is a good old boy, and a good guy. He produced that record that Bill and I did, *The Willies.*

PM: *The Willies* was such an important record for me. I'll go back to "Sittin' On Top of the World" again and again and again. [In fact, I found it on the iPod and put it on as I continued to proof the interview this morning. It's amazing!]

DB: A lot of people mention that song on that record. It's funny, that record, I noticed that none of my people that I ran into said anything about it for about a year after it came out. And then I kept hearing over and over that it seemed to take people a while to catch it or something.

PM: Yeah. It was a very subtle record. What was it like making *The Willies* record? And what's the hang with Bill like? What's the nature of your hang together?

DB: Well, mainly we just talk about music all the time.

PM: Right.

DB: Other music that we like, and guitars. We talk a lot about guitars and records, and "Listen to this, check this out." Like I'm learning with Bill, that if he ever says "Here, check this out," you got to spend some time with it. Recently he turned me on to that CD, *Sonny Rollins, Live at the Village Vanguard*. [A Night at the Village Vanguard]

PM: What year is it from?

DB: I'm not sure, because I just got it. I just downloaded it from iTunes, and I didn't get the cover.

PM: I think it's old, like '60s.

DB: It's old, yeah, it's like back in the day. And there's no guitar. There's just sax, bass and drums. No piano.

PM: No piano. [laughs]

DB: And no guitar. And man, I've been listening to it a lot. It's really awesome.

PM: Yeah, talk about the Bad Livers having no guitar, right [laughs] and no piano, either.

DB: Yeah, that record is really awesome. And I think there are some extra tracks, too, they reissued it. Anyhow, mainly Bill and I just talk about music and guitars. [laughs]

PM: I remember in the interview with him, it just came back to me, that once we'd gotten comfortable, he was kind and friendly enough to talk about what he liked on TV, for instance.

[laughter]

PM: I remember we talked about *Six Feet Under*. That was a fun part of the conversation.

DB: Wow. Last time I was there he had this really cool Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane video that we watched.

PM: Wow.

DB: It was an outdoor concert. It was one of those...not a kinescope, but something like that, where it was very grainy. And you know how Coltrane always wore that blue suit?

PM: Yeah.

DB: And I think on a couple of tours he left and only took that suit and his horn and a half of roll of LifeSavers or something.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And left for Europe.

PM: [laughs]

DB: But like there was something going on where there was just--smoke was coming off of him, like he was really hot and sweaty, and the dew--and it was colder as the evening wore on, and in the lights they were all like smoke was coming off of them, as if they were on fire, kind of. It was a cool video.

PM: The only guy I've ever seen that happen with was with Peter Garrett of Midnight Oil.

DB: Oh, yeah, that guy is amazing.

PM: And I remember seeing him in concert, and there was smoke coming off of his bald head.

DB: How does that work?

PM: I think--well, being shaven of head myself currently, I'll tell you that--and you probably have been in your time as well--when I sweat now, it's so different. Your hair absorbs so much of the sweat. But when you sweat and you're shaven on top it just collects there in a whole different way.

DB: Oh, wow.

PM: And there are properties of temperature and light that come into play. [laughs]

DB: It's got something to do with the temperature dropping, right, and reaching the dew point.

PM: That's a really funny phrase, the dew point. [laughs] I got to remember that.

DB: They looked like they were going to spontaneously combust in this video.

PM: [laughs] So, aside from *The Willies*, what was the other record with Bill that you made? There was something else.

DB: That record with Wayne Horvitz, *Mylab.*

PM: *Mylab*, yeah, with Tucker Martine and them.

DB: Yeah. That record did real well, too. That was on Terminus also. *New Yorker* picked that as one of the top ten jazz albums of the year that year. [Check it out at www.terminusrecords.com]

PM: Wow. I got to get up with Tucker because he's playing with this artist that I want to interview named Laura Veirs.

DB: Yeah, I know Laura. I'm on a couple of her records.

PM: Ah. That's some trippy music she's doing.

DB: Yeah, she's the real thing.

PM: So the northwest has been good to you.

DB: I didn't really know what I was getting into when my wife and I moved. I've been there almost nine years. At first glance it looked like it was going to be a backward move, because Austin is kind of considered to be--you know, after Nashville and New York--the place.

PM: The music town.

DB: Yeah.

PM: And especially for a Texan to move to Washington. That's really strange.

DB: Yeah, because it's a different bio-region. If you look in bird books, that side of the cascades is not only different geographically, but it's a different bio-region for the plants and the birds and everything, it's a different world.

PM: But things started clicking right away?

DB: Yeah, it ended up being really good. There's just a lot of cool, interesting music happening in Seattle. I think one of the reasons is because they have a really good symphony.

PM: Huh.

DB: If you have a really good symphony, then you have all those people that are giving lessons and studying music, and you have all their students. It's a catalyst for a lot of music, I think, having a good symphony.

PM: And I think also if you've got a vibrant youth culture that will support all kinds of--

DB: Yeah. They've got a super good, really odd punk rock scene, and a super good weird music scene and modern music scene and stuff like that. And plus, people in the northwest, at least the artist people that I interact with, they tend to be kind of interesting people. They read a lot, and they're kind of reserved, and they think a lot about things.

PM: And so if you're doing something interesting, you're liable to find an audience.

DB: Yeah. And also, be able to learn about whatever it is that turns you on. A lot of really advanced people live there, intellectually advanced. For instance, I moved there, and a couple of guys that I started working with are Wayne Horvitz and Bill Frisell and Robin Holcomb, who are all pretty evolved people.

PM: Wow.

PM: We haven't covered Robin Holcomb yet in the zine. Are she and Wayne Horvitz a couple?

DB: Yeah, they're married, and have two kids. They have a real nice older home there in Seattle and stuff. Right now she's doing a series of duets and solos with Wayne. She's pretty amazing.

PM: So you found an audience in the northwest right away, did you not, for what you were doing?

DB: Well, when the Bad Livers were around, that was one of our best markets.

PM: Ah.

DB: When I looked at my radio sheet from when I get paid for radio play, it tells you who's spinning the record. And there were four stations there that were playing my music. That was one of our best markets, for overall sales, and for concerts that was one of the best areas for our band.

PM: Oh, so your move was well-founded, in all those regards.

DB: Yeah. I figured it would be pretty cool for that reason.

PM: Pretty pragmatic for an outside banjo player.

DB: You know how when things are good, sometimes they're good in ways that you didn't anticipate. And you end up getting a lot of residual benefits out of it, just in terms of being able to interact with musicians who are that next level up, in terms of their compositional and instrumental abilities—

PM: Yeah, because you sure enough stepped into the next rung right away with that crowd.

DB: That's exactly right. And where I was, there were musicians like that. In a sense, even though Austin is more noted for roots music and people who were more blues based, country based, while there's certainly a lot of good music in that world, just in terms of, say, modern harmony and rhythm and the like, it was very fortuitous for me to be running with this new bunch of musicians.

PM: Are you very schooled in those regards? Are you a good reader?

DB: I'm learning that more and more. I'm constantly taking lessons and studying and working on my music.

PM: And what instrument do you use to study harmony and stuff. Do you use the banjo?

DB: My banjo. The banjo and the guitar. And the piano, to see things. And also just writing it out on paper, because some of the things I have to do I have to write for other instruments and arrange.

PM: Although you're a fantastic guitar player, the instrument I guess you're most often and most closely associated with is the banjo, right?

DB: Yeah. I appreciate you saying that. But the banjo is really my medium. Like a visual artist, if you worked mainly in pastel, it's my medium in that way. Whatever it is I bring to the party, the lens that projects it on the wall is the banjo.

PM: And what an unusual lens it is.

DB: It's pretty weird, yeah.

PM: A more maligned instrument has never existed, really.

DB: When I was growing up, my mom and dad always played country records at home. My mother and dad were from a rural heritage. They always played Jimmie Rodgers records. Red Foley was my dad's favorite singer. He was from Alabama, and they were real in tune to the Grand Ole Opry, country music with a capital "C." My grandmother was actually born in East Tennessee, and then they migrated to central Texas in a covered wagon.

PM: Where in East Tennessee?

DB: I believe in the Sparta area. Because when they moved there, they called their new town Sparta, after that.

PM: I see.

DB: But they played these records when I was a young kid, when I was five, six, seven years old. People like Jimmie Rodgers and Bill Monroe were not just musicians. My mother and dad...I sometimes use the word "worship," but those musicians were up on this really high pedestal, almost like biblical figures to me.

PM: Wow!

DB: Right? When they talked about Hank Williams, or when they talked about Red Foley or somebody like that, or Minnie Pearl or Webb Pierce, it was in that way. When I was ten, I went to see Grandpa Jones and String Bean on this little Opry tour. And I've got to say, both those guys are brilliant musicians. Grandpa Jones published all these songs. He was a great songwriter, and he was a good banjo player. And String Bean was a really good banjo player. Anyway, I saw these guys play, and I just thought, man, that would be the most blessed job you could have is being a banjo player and traveling around playing the banjo. So when I was ten years old, I figured that's what I wanted to do. And I had no idea about the sociological ramifications of any of that.

PM: [laughs]

DB: Or the economic implication of that, or the sociopolitical kind of baggage that that kind of thing brings on in your life. I just had no idea. And at that time, a switch flipped, and that's what I wanted to do with my life. I had no idea what I was getting into.

PM: If it flips on the tuba, it flips on the tuba.

DB: Yeah.

PM: So, you had no idea of the many multifaceted ramifications of the decision to play the banjo.

DB: No, I had no idea. I just thought, that's got to be the best thing you could do for yourself and for other people is to travel around and play that. My first concert I saw after that was John Hartford. I saw him, and that sort of solidified that idea.

PM: I recently saw his son Jamie play "Gentle on My Mind" at the Americana Awards show at the Ryman. I was in pieces. I mean, it was just so amazing to hear that song again in that way, and think back to the Glen Campbell Show, where everybody gathered around the TV set, and him picking that song...damn, that was magical.

DB: That's when you really saw people that could play, on TV. You really saw the actual musicians on TV.

PM: Roy Clark and Glen Campbell.

DB: The other day, I saw this thing on RFDTV, on satellite TV at home. They had one of those old Glen Campbell shows on TV. And it was like Mel Tillis, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Glen Campbell, all on this show. And they're doing little skits and playing. I was thinking, I was the last generation of people who saw actual musicians on TV who really could play and write songs that were really great. And seeing them on TV again shocked me. I thought, this is better than anything I've ever seen on TV. They got out guitars and played together and they had these crack bands, the best.

PM: Yeah. And it was like going into their living room, the way that they filmed it.

DB: Because they hung out and just kind of reacted to each other.

PM: Yeah. And like Louis Prima on TV, where so much of his stuff would be like just ad libbed on the spot. He'd just freak out on national TV.

DB: Or Oscar Lavant.

PM: Yeah, right. [laughs]

DB: Steve Allen used to say, "Goodnight, Oscar Lavant, wherever you are."

PM: [laughs]

DB: That's what he used to close the show with. My brother gave me a book written by Oscar Lavant, that was kind of a biographical book by him. And he was talking about being on those quiz shows. And I don't know if I read it on the jacket of that book or read it somewhere, but maybe Wayne Horvitz said this--it sounds like something Wayne would say--but somebody said, "That was back when people wanted to see smart people on TV," that was back then. [One quote that Oscar Lavant is know for: "There is a thin line between genius and insanity. I have erased this line."]

PM: So it's amazing how your very eccentric and yet singularly pointed path has ended you up in this kind of steady employment at the moment with guys like Robert Earl Keen and Tim O'Brien.

DB: [laughs]

PM: So what was it like--how did those two gigs come to be?

DB: I've known Robert for 20 years.

PM: He's a Texas buddy.

DB: Yeah. I've known him for a long time down there, off and on. And then two of the guys in his band were friends of mine that were in other bands. Rich Brotherton is a really good guy--he's actually the one who hired me and got me going in that. And they had a new record, they wanted me to play on a couple of things. And so actually he asked me first to go out and just open some shows for him.

PM: Do you like playing solo in situations like that?

DB: Yeah, because I have this thing with my solo act where it's kind of like confrontational standup comedy.

PM: Oh, really? I'd love to see that.

DB: Where if you go out there and they're totally indifferent to you, and there's ways you can sort of like irritate them and sort of get their attention, and push them around--

PM: Oh, yeah? [laughs]

DB: Even just one guy.

PM: Even one guy with a banjo.

DB: I totally get off on the irony of that, too. A lot of places, they didn't know who I was, and they wanted to see Robert. And here I come out there, and you're going to have to deal with me for a half an hour, or whatever, because I'm playing the full deal.

PM: And that's some pretty drunk frat boys sometimes.

DB: Well, they can be a kind of interesting crowd. They told me right before a couple of the dates, "Some people have left this gig in tears."

PM: [laughs]

DB: And I said, "I'm totally ready for this." It was fun because you can kind of fake them out, push them around a little bit, and stuff. So I've developed that with my solo work. I worked on a lot of solo shows and developed a little way how you can react to what you're presented with.

I don't have a set list where I know what songs I'm going to play. I just go out there and kind of see what happens. It's like pitching a game, where you got to see how the batters are swinging to know what you're going to pitch, instead of trying to work it out in advance, or whatever.

PM: Did you pitch growing up, because you're very tall and strong looking.

DB: No, no, no. I respect pitchers. But I have always just been in music.

PM: Right.

DB: That's all I've ever really done.

PM: But on the other hand, you have a lot of strange extracurricular activities.

DB: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: Are you still avid about some of those?

DB: Yeah.

PM: What are the current ones?

DB: I like airplanes. I fly airplanes. And I like fly fishing. I like to ride unicycles and skateboards.

PM: I've never ridden a unicycle. Is it hard, and can you ride them uphill?

DB: Yeah. The hardest thing is riding them downhill.

PM: Right.

DB: It's easier to go uphill, because if you lean forward, you just kind of fall uphill, it's not too bad. But when you're riding them downhill, they're constantly trying to get away from you. So downhill is actually harder than uphill. It was interesting, I read on a website that it takes roughly twelve hours to learn how to ride it. And that's twelve hours of pushing yourself off of the wall and falling, pushing yourself off and falling--just over and over and over, for twelve hours, and finally you get where you can ride it across the garage. And it literally took me like almost exactly twelve hours to do that. I don't know if it was a self-fulfilling prophesy or not, but I read it on the internet.

PM: That's a lot of falling.

DB: Yeah. It takes a long time. But once you get it, though, man, you can ride--I mean, I can ride to the library and stuff.

PM: Wow. Have you ever run into a good singer/songwriter named David Wilcox? Do you know him?

DB: I've read that name.

PM: He's a unicycle guy as well, yeah.

DB: No kidding. I'll tell you something funny about unicycles, though, there's a website called banjo.com.

PM: Yeah, I've been there.

DB: Yeah. It's a good place to find used banjos, or whatever you want. It's a cool site. Well, lo and behold, there's also a website called unicycle.com, with the same setup--if you need a new seat for your uni, or you want to get some cool pedals, or you want to get like a longer seat post, or whatever, this is like the place, right? So I'm in my friend Scott's shop, right--

PM: What's his last name?

DB: Williwaw--actually, Scott Jaster is his name, but he runs Williwaw Cycles, which means--"williwaw" means a big storm. Anyway, I'm at his place, and I notice he's got these banjo.com bumper stickers.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And I said, "Where in the heck did you get those?" And he goes, "Man, I ordered this stuff from unicycle.com, and they put these in there for some reason." Turns out it's the same guy that does banjo.com and unicycle.com. Same guy.

PM: So this guy has become a friend, right?

DB: Yeah. I immediately had to call, yeah--"I don't know if you know this or not"--but anyway, it's so funny that it's the same guy.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And so I told Darol Anger about that. And Darol says, "What is it with that shape that gets that guy all obsessed?" He collects frying pans and--

PM: [laughs]

DB:--something about that shape--

PM: That shape just killed him. [laughs]

DB: Yeah.

PM: [laughs] When it comes to the banjo, it seems very unusual to me that you seem equally at home and adept with the clawhammer style and the bluegrass world. Isn't that kind of unusual? Aren't people usually in one camp or the other?

DB: That's funny. I've never really understood that, but all my life, even now, my clawhammer friends and bluegrass friends, they don't really interact. I don't know why that is, really.

PM: It's not as if guitar players were different camps that were separated into finger pickers and flat pickers. That doesn't happen in guitar playing.

DB: It's really odd, I don't know. I've never really caught that. I figured, and it's proven itself to be true in my case, in order for me to make a living, I have to be able to do a lot of things on the banjo. I have to be a complete banjo player. I have to be able to play slow stuff, I have to be able to read, I have to be able to play jazz, and read music for commercials, and jingles, or whatever, and be able to write for it, and write for other instruments. That's why I'm still taking lessons and studying.

PM: Lessons on banjo with anybody?

DB: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Who is there for you to study banjo with?

DB: Oh, man, there are so many good banjo players. Mainly, when I get with somebody, I have a particular question to ask. And then it might take me three years to work out what they say. Like when you're learning to play, and someone shows you a scale, you can come back the next week and play the scale. But a lot of things that I learn from people, it's like it may take me three years or a year to get together what they say.

PM: Right. It'll be about theory or it'll be about harmony.

DB: Yeah, or some little technique or something, where you've got to rethink everything to get it, or something like that.

PM: Who are some of the guys who can point you in new directions on your instrument?

DB: Well, like this guy Reed Martin, he's my favorite clawhammer banjo player. He's an old-time banjo player.

PM: Reed Martin. And where does he live?

DB: He lives in D.C. He's an interesting guy. At one time he was John Kay's chauffeur.

PM: Wow. [I later went to a banjo site and listened to Reed play a version of "The Old Stillhouse", it was beautiful. You can hear it here: http://www.banjonews.com/BNlhtml/2mp3.html]

DB: He's got the weirdest resume. Also, he retired from the Smithsonian as a model builder. He built all the little scenes. Like when they have like a little scene of Gettysburg, and all the little figures, he would build that. But he's a really awesome banjo player.

PM: So how did you get onto him?

DB: I just met him teaching at a banjo camp. He's just a phenomenal banjo player.

PM: Who are some of the other banjo guys that point you in a new or better direction--

DB: Eddie Adcock.

PM: He's more on the bluegrass side, right?

DB: Yeah, but he's got this whole lexicon of banjo that's like his own vocabulary of the instrument. There are so many of them. I mean, jeez, there are millions of banjo players. Every time I see Bill Keith somewhere, I try to snatch a little something from him.

PM: I love that melodic style.

DB: He's a brilliant guy.

PM: Do you agree, then, that you're kind of equally well-versed and equally interested in both of those approaches to the banjo?

DB: I'm not very good at assessing what I'm doing, as far as a qualitative assessment of what I'm doing, but I do know that I'm very interested in both those styles and try to work in those worlds, because a lot of my knowledge and approach has come through necessity, for making records. When you get tired of making a record you may play banjo on somebody else's record, and they say, "What else can you do? That's not really working." You've got to kind of come up with something.

PM: Wow.

DB: So, to make the kind of records that I end up making, when I get hired to play in a recording session, I have to have a few bags of different things I can play in, and be able

to mix and match whatever I do to fit the piece. Because sometimes the producer will say, "That's just a little too busy, can you play something more rhythmic?" Or then maybe they'll say, "Can you play half of that?"

PM: Right, the famous request.

DB: Yeah. Or, "is there any way you can kind of propel this a little more" or--

PM: Or a little less.

DB:--"that tuning is--can we play in a different capo, different tuning?" So you just have to be able to think on your feet.

PM: Have you noticed--it's just come to me when you said, "Can you play half of that"--there's a lot of recordings across many genres that include a banjo, but frequently it's not someone that plays the banjo.

DB: Right.

PM: And they're just kind of playing at it.

DB: I know. That's really odd. I've noticed that, too.

PM: They're playing at it just to make the banjo sound, but they can't play enough to get in the way, they just pick something really, really simple for the sound.

DB: A lot of stuff on TV is like that. They'll have basically a rock type song, and they'll have a banjo in there just off to the side, just to remind you that it's on the country station or something.

PM: Yeah, even in Nashville, Tennessee--

DB: That's what I'm saying, that's what I'm referring to, yeah. But there are some great banjo players here in Nashville, unbelievable. That guy Mike Snider, that guy is amazing. He plays on the Opry.
He's an awesome banjo player. Eddie Adcock lives in Lebanon, but he's in the area, man. These guys are--Charlie Cushman, and--I could sit here and name twenty guys who are just unbelievable banjo players that live here.

[laughter]

PM: Is this the greatest concentration of good banjo players in the States or--

DB: It's the greatest concentration of banjo players that work, that can tour and record and are well-versed in also the commercial aspect of playing. I mean, there are a lot of

musicians all over the place, but they may not understand how to do a session, or maybe not how to get your banjo to San Francisco to play a gig, or be business-minded.

PM: Real world banjo players, yeah, right.

DB: For instance, it's a trick to get your banjo to London in one piece.

PM: Rock-it Cargo.

DB: Right, you got to know how get it there.

PM: So on the new record, on a tune like the title tune "Get Myself Together," it sounds like a tenor banjo. [The four string strumming kind called to mind in general by tunes like "Sweet Georgia Brown."]

DB: That is a tenor banjo.

PM: And you're playing it with a plectrum. [A flatpick.]

DB: Yeah. I'm very interested in those guys that play tenor banjo. I'm really interested in that stuff, like the guy Harry Reser, and the guys that can really play.

PM: Right. One of the greatest rhythm instruments ever, a tenor banjo.

DB: Yeah. And that instrument also is in some of the George Gershwin stuff.

PM: Right.

DB: And I believe it was in some Kurt Weil music. And I believe Paul Whiteman actually thought that the tenor banjo was like "*the* modern instrument."

PM: [laughs] Oh, God. Well that didn't quite pan out, did it?

[laughter]

DB: No.

PM: [laughs] "The modern instrument." Well, one time mandolin orchestras were all the rage, too.

DB: Exactly.

PM: Yeah, I mean, we won't live to see it, but someday they'll say that about guitars--"Remember when everybody played the guitar?"--

DB: Yeah.

PM: "How ridiculous." So I haven't even looked at my questions since we sat down.

DB: You got any good ones in there?

PM: Now, how would you contrast the joy involved with doing your own band or being in an ensemble as a sideman, as it were?

DB: Well, somebody once asked Yasha Heifetz, "What's the hardest thing that you can play?" And he said, "It's all hard." It's all challenging. I'm really lucky that I never get bored with my job. I'm always doing different things. I make these really weird records, and then I work some on really commercial records. And I work on various strange things, and stuff kind of right down the middle. The way they're similar is you just want to be great, you just want to--from my perspective, I just try to do a great job, whether I'm playing a solo gig or making a solo record, or being in somebody else's band. But one thing I like about playing with other people--especially with the people that I've been fortunate enough to be associated with, is it's such a learning thing. And for me, the musicians that I really respected, they just kept getting better and better.

PM: That's for sure.

DB: Some guys, they develop something, then when they're about forty they just keep doing the same thing. But that's one of the things I really respected about John Hartford, like with his violin playing, he just got better and better and better, and he kept practicing and working. Like you'd call him on the phone, and you'd hear the metronome clicking. And he's sitting there at the table.

PM: Really?

DB: Yeah. He's sixty years old, and he's practicing.

PM: Really? Sixty years old with a metronome on.

DB: Yeah, yeah, at the table, playing something over and over and over. You'd go over to his house, and he's got his little thing at the table, a metronome, and sheet music, and he's learning.

PM: And he was learning longhair stuff, or what? What would he learn?

DB: Everything, everything, yeah. He learned to write music and got really into writing, and was really good at scripting. He got into transcribing things. But it's guys like that who just keep getting better and better. And that's the way Bill is, too. I mean, Bill is constantly working on his music. He could just kind of sit back on his laurels or whatever, and he doesn't. He keeps working on music.

PM: He's all over the map--

DB: Yeah.

PM:--and the map of the entire universe, not just the world.

DB: One time I had a conversation with him, and we're both middle-aged guys, and we were saying, "Is there enough life left to do all this?" Because I mean, we talked about, "Oh, man, wouldn't it be really cool to work on a Scriabin piano thing, and do it as a duet with guitar playing the low side and the banjo playing the high side?"

PM: [laughs]

DB: "Oh, man, that'd be really cool. We should work on that." And different things like that. And then we're thinking, "Man, is there enough life left to do this?"--and you just can't think like that. You just have to keep moving.

PM: Yeah, take a stab at it.

DB: Yeah, you just keep moving.

PM: Do you know that record he did with the Intercontinentals?

DB: Yeah. That's a cool record.

PM: Incredible.

DB: We played some of that music on the last tour in July of--I was out with him for a month, and we played a lot of that music.

PM: I got to go back to that. That's just amazing. Oh, this is an old quote of yours, but I was really struck by it, you said: "The reason why it's soul crushing is simple, the supply and demand curve is totally fucked up."

DB: [laughs]

PM: "There's way more supply than demand. You can't blame people for capitalizing on it, because that's the nature of the beast. But there are way too many people doing it, there are too many clubs, there are too many bands, and not enough people that are interested in it, period."

DB: Yeah. I mean, do you think that's fair?

PM: I think it's unbelievable.

DB: Yeah.

PM: I mean, to me it put 1,000 conversations that I've heard on the subject to bed in a few sentences.

DB: Yeah.

PM: I think I'll just carry that around in my wallet. "Hey let's crystallize this conversation, just read that. Okay? That's the whole thing right there."

DB: [laughs] Well, you just have to grasp supply versus demand, I think that was in Economics 101.

PM: Yeah, right, the music economics that we all should have taken.

DB: I think it's true with pitching, too. Like I think there are too many baseball teams. Pitchers used to be better, I think. I don't know. But I think there are too many baseball teams.

PM: They're not as special as they used to be.

DB: Yeah. And they don't play as often as they used to, either, in the games. I mean, Walter Johnson used to play all nine innings.

PM: Right. It's rare to see a person go the distance anymore.

DB: Yeah. Even five or six innings is a long time. And they specialize in closing, or middle relief, or whatever.

PM: Right.

DB: I think there are too many baseball teams, and that sort of dilutes the whole thing-- that's what actually got me thinking that about music-- John Hartford told me one time that in the '70s there were 1,000 bands traveling around the country, making records and touring. And now, there are 1,000 bands in every state doing that, or trying to do that, or whatever. And the market is smaller.

PM: And the market is smaller.

DB: And the distribution is smaller, the channel of distribution is much smaller, too.

PM: So it's not a smart way to go, but if you have to do it, you have to do it.

DB: Yeah, if you got to do it.

PM: Hey, tell me something about the guy who wrote that incredible song "Corn Kingdom Come."

DB: His name is Mark Graham. And he's worth checking out. He's got a record called *Inner Life*. And he's got a lot of records, actually about four records. He and I did a record together. But he's an unbelievable songwriter.

PM: That's a great song. Where's he from?

DB: He's a Seattlite.

PM: I've never heard that, a "Seattlite."

DB: Oh, he's got a bluegrass version of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

PM: [laughs]

DB: It's really awesome. And he writes a lot about Greek mythology, but like in old-time music. He's a totally unbelievable guy. He's got all these songs like, "Can I Have All Your Stuff When You're Dead" and--

PM: [laughs] That's great.

DB: And, "I Can See Your Aura and It's Ugly." He's a brilliant guy. A good musician, a really good guy.

PM: And so you've done an album with him already.

DB: Yeah.

PM: Was that his record?

DB: Yeah, a self-produced record of his. He's just a friend of mine, a music friend of mine. I'm a fan of his work. And we co-wrote a couple of things. Like one of the Bad Livers' songs, "Lumpy Beanpole and Dirt," he and I co-wrote that song.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And then we co-wrote a song called "Fun Time" on the record I did with a band called The Old Codgers. But he's worth looking up. He's really a brilliant guy. He's written just dozens of great songs.

PM: So what inspired the song "Wasted Mind"? You got kids?

DB: No, I don't have any kids. I've been married eighteen years, but we don't have any kids. But it's just from watching kids, watching the choices that they make, and things like that. When I grew up, I think what saved me from ruin was just being obsessed about music, being obsessed with something that wouldn't kill ya. It saved me, because I had something that if you sit and practice your guitar for eight hours, it ain't going to hurt

you. A lot of the kids that I've known, and that I see, don't have a passion for something of substance. I don't know, they get passionate about appearances, and passionate about getting rich, passionate about owning certain things. But the mechanisms are skewed--for instance, things like the lottery, being obsessed about the lottery, as an investment strategy.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And like I looked at the back of the lottery ticket. I think your odds are about the same whether you play or not.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And so I don't know, in one sense I feel sort of old, man. I don't really relate to that whole thing. But like at any point in that song, that guy can make better decisions. That whole record is really kind of based on cause and effect, lyrically. Like all those people in that movie, whatever, that record, they're all just making really hideous choices. And it's all somebody else's fault.

And they can't figure that they're actually the architects of their own destiny. Maybe one or two of the characters are hip to that, but most of them are totally unable to see that. And they're at various stages of being smacked in the head with that two-by-four of that realization and being ignorant of it. I've been guilty of that, and I see that as a race it goes on.

That's something that they don't teach you in school: how do you live life, how do you be happy? They never talk about that. "How do I make a choice where I can live with myself and where I'm not hurting other people and not hurting myself? How do I do that?" They never talk about that in school. And it's hard to teach people that, because you kind of have to know it beyond verbiage, you have to grok it, to use Heinlein's word.

PM: First of all, the teachers have to have grokked it.

DB: Yeah. And then you can tell somebody that kind of stuff until you're blue in the face, but until they really realize it, they're really lost in it. That whole record--and there's a certain amount of humor in that, too--like that joke about the guy beating himself with a hammer in the head, and it feels so good when he quits. At least he knows where it's coming from, or whatever--there's a million punch lines to that joke.

That song there, "Wasted Mind," I got on the bus--I write down a lot of my lyric ideas from what I overhear. Like when I ride the city bus sometimes in Seattle, or when I go to a recording session, I take a boat across, and then I'll just jump on the bus with my banjo and take a bus to the gig, because I have to take a boat to get into town. And I just write little things down that I hear people say. And I have this little book, and I write it all down. And then later I go back through it and sort of add it together and make longer work out of it. But that one came from--I was on this bus with this kid--

PM: It's like found words.

DB: Yeah, exactly. But that song--I was sitting on a bus with this kid. And he had the whole baggy pants thing going on, the hat on backwards--just like he watched TV and dressed like the guy on TV.

PM: He had the uniform on.

DB: Right down the row, yeah, right down the row. And he sees me with this banjo, and he starts saying, "Hey, I'm going to be a rapper." And I was like, "No kidding?" He said, "I ought to be able to do it. It looks pretty easy. I think I can do it." "Oh, yeah, I guess. Well, good luck."

PM: [laughs]

DB: And so anyway, he hands me this--he had this CD of all this rap stuff that he'd done. And I was listening to it, and it was this "bitch this," and "ho that."

PM: Yeah.

DB: Selling dope, and all this stuff. He was like some middle-class white kid. But he was about eighteen, he had a kid, he was going through court-ordered treatment, and all this stuff. And it was just interesting talking to the guy, and just seeing, "Oh, wow, this is the youth of America right here."

PM: Right.

DB: "This is the youth of America," like that poem Howl, "fat, horny and strung out," or whatever, that Ginsberg poem--I mean, this was that guy, man. This was him, the modern version. And it was just really interesting to see how his mind worked. I didn't really react to him. I just kind of let him talk. And just the way his mind worked was pretty fascinating.

PM: And he became the hero of that song.

DB: I sort of used him in that song.

PM: And he'll never know.

DB: Yeah, he just can't understand why all this is happening.

PM: [laughs] I don't know if you'd like to talk about her, but I'd like to hear about your wife.

DB: Oh, yeah. I got a great wife. Her name is Suzie. We've been married 18 years. She's part owner of a business that repairs vintage sailboats, and works on classic maritime pieces of things.

PM: So did she come from Texas, then, too?

DB: Yeah, she's from Odessa. And that's what she does. She works in Port Mayor, which is right by the water. So when she takes her lunch break, she walks on the beach by the salt water. She lives there. And her birthday was just Friday.

PM: Oh, wow. Now, what does she tend toward musically? What does she like?

DB: She likes music just in a normal way. She's not really into music, which is one of the reasons why we get along.

PM: Yeah.

DB: Because when I go home, I don't want to talk about music, because that's all I talk about to everybody that I know. I don't even know anybody who isn't in a band or owns a recording studio or has a music store.

PM: [laughs]

DB: And so when I go home, I don't even want to talk about it, because I want to talk about the yard, or what's in the paper, or some movie.

PM: The boats.

DB: Yeah, yeah. So we get along like that.

PM: Fishing and bicycles.

DB: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Do you skateboard still?

DB: Yeah. I'm into long boards now, because we get all padded up and bomb down these long hills. And helmets and everything.

PM: That scares the shit out of me. I'll do a lot of stuff, but I never got on a skateboard. It's just like, nah, nah.

DB: You might like it.

PM: Really?

DB: Yeah.

PM: Being low to the ground and all.

DB: Yeah, you might like it, but just--all you got to do--and they've just come so far in the padding. Like they make really good pads now. You can get really good wrist guards.

PM: Cause you can take a wicked fall.

DB: Oh, dude, yeah, you can totally eat it. I've been told it's kind of like skiing, it's like a slalom. You control your speed by carving the hill and turning. That's my current thing, I really like skateboarding.

PM: Because you're an awfully big guy for skateboarding.

DB: [laughs] Unicycles, too.

PM: Yeah, right. So anything more we want to say about Susie before we get off that subject?

DB: Well, I just--it's been really great having somebody that's supportive. Because so many times I've talked to musicians and they say like their wife doesn't want them to do this or that, or their husband doesn't want them do this or that.

PM: Big time.

DB: And I've never gotten an ounce of static from her. Of course, from the first date that we had, the next day I left for a thirty-day tour of Europe. That was our first date.

PM: So she got right with it right from the top.

DB: Yeah, she knew what she was getting into. For instance, I like to shoot black powder rifles. And one day I left a keg of gunpowder in the living room.

PM: [laughs]

DB: I forgot about it. And I was driving to this gig, and I'm driving down the road, and I'm like, "Oh, man, I forgot to put that up." It's like a keg--it's only nine pounds, but it's in the middle of the living room. And she doesn't make any fuss, just puts it up for me. A lot of women might get pretty freaked out by that.

[Editor's Note: The second side of the tape ran out here. The only other time that had happened, it'd happened at the same table, at the back of the same coffee shop, with Darrell Scott. I think the only other question I asked Danny was whether he was a spiritual person. He thought about it for a little bit, and then asked if he could consider that for a while before he answered. After that, though, I thought maybe I'd just leave that

lie, unless he wanted to email me about it. But I suspect he forgot about it straight away, and is playing his banjo somewhere. Don't miss him when he comes to your town--solo, with Tim O'Brien, Robert Earl Keen, or Bill Frisell.]