



Daniel Donato – *Reflector*

There are a lot of musical influences and sources that Daniel Donato has drawn on during his career and that inform *Reflector* (Retrace Music), the Nashville guitarist-singer-songwriter-band leader's first all-original album. But within those, Donato has carved out a unique and individualized spot for himself, one that speaks to the deep American music heritage that inspires him -- and that he's pushing towards the future with inspired, intentional vigor.

He calls it Cosmic Country, a moniker that's both self-descriptive and a statement of purpose. It's an organic rock band aesthetic with plenty of roadhouse twang; a showcase for Donato's instrumental virtuosity and facility for melodically infectious songcraft. Bridging Nashville and the Great West, Kentucky and mid-60s northern California, tie-dye and plaid, it's a world of his own, and a wide world of musical adventure at that.

"I think Cosmic Country is a tale as old as time, really," Donato explains. "It's yin and yang in a musical form. It's three chords and the truth, and then on the other side it's exploration and bravery. I really went through a lot of years of grinding, and still am, to achieve this sound which is a vehicle for my personality, and the personality is a vehicle for my soul. So (*Reflector*) is more than any other record I ever put out."

Reflector's 15 songs offer 66 minutes of ecstatic musical immersion. It's an *album* in the classic sense of the word, tracks that are individually memorable but sound even better coming one after the other and make the sum greater than the total of its parts. "We're touching on a lot with this record, which is also why there's so many songs on it," acknowledges Donato, whose stinging Fender Telecaster tone is the strongest glue of continuity throughout -- and is positively screaming on tracks such as "Gotta Get Southbound" and "Dance in the Desert Pt. 2." "If you're the kind of person who wants to listen to a record and have a record be a companion with you, then *Reflector* is going to vibrate in your frequency."

Donato's own musical frequency was tuned at a young age while growing up in Nashville. His father "picked around a guitar a small bit;" more importantly, he instilled in his son a discerning taste for quality music, filling his son's ears with legendary music of all genres. The rock meanwhile, came from Guitar Hero; the game was crucial to broadening Donato's vistas of listening to Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Stevie Ray Vaughan, et al, as well as a particular attraction to Guns N' Roses' "Paradise City. "Those players stuck with me and gave me my first foundation of guitar," says

Donato, whose father taught him his first chords on one of his old guitars. "I was a strange kid -- still am a strange person. I really didn't have any friends that got me, but the guitar understood me, and I had a vision for what my life could be."

It was Papa Donato who suggested the fledgling and industriously minded (even at just 14) artist start busking in Nashville's lower Broadway area and outside concerts, for eight hours at a time on the weekends. After one of those sessions the two happened by Robert's Western World, a legendary honky-tonk where local mainstay the Don Kelly Band was onstage – which was also Donato's first time playing a Telecaster, through a Fender amplifier no less. "I played country songs and fell in love with it," says Donato, who became a member of the band, playing four hours a night at Robert's (464 shows in total). "Their songbook was that of my main influences still to this day -- Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Bob Wills, Marty Robbins, Bill Monroe, traditional bluegrass music, Hank Williams Sr. -- old-timey music with real stories and emotions that everybody has. It just hooked me right away."

Another piece of the puzzle came through later in Donato's teenage years -- the Grateful Dead, thanks to a high school American History teacher who gave him a pile of bootleg recordings when he was 18. "When I discovered Jerry Garcia, there's really never been anyone who writes like that," says Donato. "From there I went on to discover Bob Dylan and all the great writers and made me want to make *that* part of what I did as well."

The whole package of player, singer, writer and band leader was in place when Donato began working on his own during 2018. It was on display via his first album, *A Young Man's Country* in 2020 but refined on *Reflector*, which features all original songs and finds Donato and his band – Nathan Aronowitz (keyboards/vocals), Will McGee (bass/vocals) and Noah Miller (drums and percussion) --honed from playing more than 200 shows during 2022, after the Covid lockdowns had lifted. That allowed Donato to not just play again but also to road test the songs that would comprise the album and expand the audience.

"We were home for less than two weeks between January and September of 2022," says Donato. "There was the existential necessity of going through a staggering amount of growth. All those shows and all those hours of experience really curated my values as an artist. That informed my composition, informed my band-leading...everything that goes into making music that has real value and impact."

Donato had good help in achieving that on *Reflector*; he enlisted producer Vance Powell, a six-time Grammy Award winner whose eclectic resume ranges from Chris Stapleton and Martina McBride to Phish and Clutch to Buddy Guy and the Jack White universe of the White Stripes, the Raconteurs and the Dead Weather. They'd actually met when Donato was a teen playing at Robert's, and he remembers Powell telling him that "one day you're gonna make a record, and I want to work with you," which made him the perfect candidate to help Donato achieve his far-reaching vision this time out.

"Vance was on damn near every record I enjoyed," he notes. "He seemed like the only logical choice to take a band that has country songs and old-timey folk songs that also jams and organize it into a digestible piece."

It's hard to find a more concise summation of *Reflector* than that. It kicks off with the joyous Southern rock roll of "Lose Your Mind," a sound echoed in other tracks -- especially the harmony-laden "High Country" -- and gets high 'n' lonesome on "Halfway in Between." "Double Exposure's" slinky funk is accented by dueling guitar lines, while "Half Moon Night" and the instrumental "Sugar Leg Rag" feel like a contemporary incarnation of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys. "Gotta Get Southbound," weighing in at nearly eight minutes, dances through its ebb and flow dynamics, and "Faded Lovin'" echoes the organic majesty of The Band. Donato and company get their cosmic on with both hip-swaying parts of "Dance in the Desert" -- one more acoustic, the other a trippy electric opus -- and the richly melodic odyssey "Weathervane."

Reflector -- which features Nashville pedal steel legend Paul Franklin on four tracks -- also reflects "the work I did on myself and the work I did on my art" during the past three years, according to Donato. "I really started discovering new psychological and ritual domains I wasn't really aware of," he explains. "The whole concept of *Reflector* is of a duality. The entire world that you see externally is a reflection of your internal world, so you have this internal world you exist in and this external world you exist in, and that's what this work is about. I like dualities; it allows me to see where each side of the fence post is, and I can paint in the middle."

The middle of anything has never sounded as engrossing and beguiling as Donato makes it on *Reflector*. These are songs that prompt a listener to hit "repeat" and that stick with you long after they've finished playing. They hit the heart, the soul, the mind -- and the cosmos, making it the kind of trip you won't want to end any time soon.

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