



## Daniel Donato's Cosmic Country – *Horizons*

Daniel Donato's philosophic approach to playing music is simply stated, if hardly simple to achieve.

"It occurs to me that music is actually a form of service," explains the Nashville raised singer, songwriter, guitarist and bandleader, who's adopted Cosmic Country as both a group name and as the moniker for his ambitious stylistic alchemy. "You can make a living of it and do beautiful things with your life, but music is really a service to bring truth into people's lives -- if that's something you're interested in doing."

Donato has proven very interested, and extremely adept, at serving that higher calling with his music during the past six years of recording -- including the new *Horizons*, his third studio album and second full set of all-original material. It's another dynamic 15-song set that features Donato and his compatriots in Cosmic Country traipsing through a wealth of American music, picking like bluegrass virtuosos one minute, cranking out rock riffs the next and then steering into otherworldly -- yes, cosmic -- jam spaces. Co-produced with Vance Powell, who also worked on 2023's reputation-establishing *Reflector*, it's a testament to the reverence, curiosity and fearlessness that fuels Donato's creative ambitions as both student and acolyte.

"The degree to which you respond to the call to adventure equals the degree to which you're willing to sacrifice and admit that you don't truly know everything that goes on," he explains, "and that you're willing to find out there's more to know."

Born in New Jersey and moving to Nashville with his family when he was seven years old, Donato's fascination with music was stoked by his father, who filled his son's ears with legendary music of all genres and generations. (Though Donato's mother gets credit for being a Deadhead, who instilled that sensibility via DNA.) The Guitar Hero video game allowed him to fixate on rock, as well as the identity he was craving in his youth. "I was a strange kid," Donato acknowledges. "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."

At his father's suggestion Donato began busking on the streets of Nashville's lower Broadway area at the age of 14, which led to an invitation to play with the local Don Kelly Band at clubs such as Legend's Corner and especially Robert's Western World. Strapping on a Fender Telecaster, Donato "played country songs and fell in love with it," adding traditional bluegrass to the mix as well. By the time a Sturgill Simpson concert at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium during 2015 inspired him to plot his own course, Donato was knitting together a stylistic synthesis that made his music sound like everything, but also like nothing we've ever heard before.

"When I first started playing music I kinda had this fervor I wasn't able to understand," Donato recalls. "There was some sort of a driving force that was pushing me northward to keep pushing and keep doing and keep inventing myself (by) either practicing more or writing more, playing more. I didn't know why that's what I was doing. I feel like it chose me."

The *Starlight* EP in 2019 gave the world its first taste of Donato's vision, followed by *A Young Man's Country* in 2020, *Cosmic Country & Western Songs* the follow year and then *Reflector*. The stage is as essential to him as the studio, however. To see Donato's Cosmic Country, with bassist William "Mustang" McGee, keyboardist Nathanael "Sugarleg" Aronowitz and new drummer William "Bronco" Clark, live is an experience akin to a revival, true believers working without

boundaries and without a net, letting their chops run wild but not undisciplined as the group builds to one ecstatic crescendo after another. It covers a lot of ground, too, from the

playful frenzy of Bill Monroe & His Blue Grass Boys to the earthy expansiveness of the Allman Brothers Band and the psychedelic voyages of the Dead.

The stage is also where Daniel Donato's Cosmic Country, in collaboration with his audience, finds the proper path for its music. Everything, including the material on *Horizons*, is played live before it's recorded, so that the version we hear on record is the sum of a great many parts developed over months or even years.

"Our community really changes the songs," he explains, "just by us playing them and (the fans) being able to partake in the same room as us as when we're playing the song. We've played every song on this record live dozens upon dozens, sometimes 50 times live, before we recorded them...in rooms filled with humans...so they can feel human before we bring them into the studio. When you bring it to people, it changes. It truly does. They help us provide a curvature for the song and really influence how they go before we ever hit the red light in the studio."

Donato "strategically set a lot of limits" during the process of making *Horizons* in Nashville's Sputnik Sound studio, using his brothers in Cosmic Country as well as friends such as Lillie Mae Rische on fiddle and Brett Resnick on pedal steel. "We wouldn't let ourselves cut a song more than five times," Donato notes, "and we wouldn't allow ourselves more than 30 minutes to kind of work on any overdubs or anything." There's an arc to *Horizons* as well; it leans hard into country at the start on high-octane drivers such as "Blame the Train," "Sunshine in the Rain," "Yonder" and "Broadside Ballad," as well as more measured, gentle and melody-focused fare like "Better Deal Blues" and "Along the Trail."

The instrumental "Hangman's Reel" serves as a gateway into *Horizons* further expanses, whether it's the funky underpinnings in "Prairie Spin" and the joyous "Valhalla" or, especially, stretched-out pieces such as "Chore" and the album-closing "Down Bedford" -- weighing in at more than 11 and almost 10 minutes, respectively -- where the Cosmic Country crew delivers arrangements carefully constructed from the improvisations of scores of previous live performances.

"Part of the Cosmic Country mission statement is to try to take the living truth of country music and storytelling and tie that with moments of improvisation," Donato explains. "I feel like moments on 'Chore' and on 'Down Bedford' really start cracking in on that." Lyrically, meanwhile, Donato wanted "to lean into what's most human and transparent about producing anything right now." The result is a group of songs that are about nothing less than the finding meaning in the human experience, drawing inspiration from biblical [or philosophical? – y'all's choice] parables to hone his intended messages. "I wanted the lyrics to be easy to understand, not abstract," he says. "There are many layers to the meanings and you think about it, but it's not rocket science to understand them. Trying to

maintain a human sound and faith in what humans can do really inform the actual sonics and production of the record, too."

Amidst all that, however, the tenants of Cosmic Country remain strong and true throughout *Horizons* -- accomplished musicianship, enveloping and not always conventional harmonies, and an element of truth in expression that elevates music beyond any style or genre designations.

"I want there to be a Cosmic Country sound where you can hear it right away, you can hear the first eight bars of any song and say, 'That's it!'" says Donato, who, as you read this, is already working on a second volume of *Cosmic Country & Western Songs*. "Some of it is technical, like using the same microphones and the same studio as the last record. And some of it's just in the way we approach it -- and that's something we get better at every time."

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