

GROOVY PICKER

## DANIEL DONATO CHANNELS GRAM PARSONS, GUITAR GREATS ON 'HORIZONS' ALBUM

The Nashville guitarslinger continues to redefine his idea of "Cosmic Country" on a mind-expanding new project

By GARRET K. WOODWARD

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Daniel Donato looks to horizons both musical and personal on the Nashville guitar-slinger's new album.

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For **Daniel Donato**, *Horizons* is more than just the title of his latest album. It's also the location where the guitar wizard and his unique brand of "cosmic country" currently reside — right on the edge of the earth.

"It's where any one person is standing in their life, where the land meets the heavens," Donato tells *Rolling Stone*. "Psychologically, it's the level that you understand or realize something, where your capacity meets the next level, in which you can discover more."

Recently, Donato turned 30 and is viewing the milestone as a line in the sands of time where he starts to focus on what matters most, onstage and off. Instead of youthful shenanigans under the barroom lights, it's realizing just why he's compelled to stand in front of a microphone.

"I feel like life is reflecting back in me everything that I've wanted," Donato says. "And then, also a lot of things I didn't know I needed, which is a lot of things I didn't necessarily ask for."

Of those things in particular, he points to the pressure that comes along with being a rising band. In recent years, Donato and his Cosmic Country ensemble have been barnstorming America, ascending from small clubs to mid-level theaters with a heady blend of country and psychedelic rock.

"I like the pressure. It's good to raise the heat, to try to get to that next horizon," Donato says. "Because whenever anyone gets called onto a new horizon, that's where the spirit of adventure can bring something else that's dwelling within you that wasn't revealed to you before."

Musically, Donato starts with a thick foundation of honky-tonk, which he perfected as a teenage guitarist onstage at Robert's Western World, Nashville's traditional country outpost. Those sounds are all over *Horizons* and remind listeners that, for all his jam-rock forays, Donato is a country picker at heart.



Then there's the layers of Donato's sound that draw a through-line to the Flying Burrito Brothers, back when Gram Parsons was at the helm on "Christine's Tune," to Cowboy with Duane Allman on "Please Be with Me," and to the Byrds' "The Christian Life." Donato says he's not so much influenced by them alone, as by the artists who shaped Parsons in particular.

“All of those artists I’ve loved since I was 14 years old — George Jones, Ernest Tubb, Bob Wills, Hank Williams, the Carter Family, Johnny Cash, Buck Owens. By the time I discovered Gram, I’d already listened to those artists,” he says.

It’s at this point in our conversation where I mention to Donato that I recently listened to Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys on a road trip through Wyoming. In turn, he excitedly shares a similar story of traveling from Denver to Wyoming to visit a former girlfriend, and how he too would put Wills on his car stereo and absorb the rolling landscape.

“It’s that feeling of being in that part of America, listening to that music, and feeling that spirit. That sense of adventure and that warmth of yesterday. That feeling is where I go to in my mind all the time, especially when I’m onstage,” Donato says. “Being surrounded by all of this potential beauty amidst all of this actualized darkness — that’s quintessential to the cosmic country experience.”

Donato holds tight to the idea of “potential beauty” when asked about the current political climate of the United States, and just what may lie ahead. “The idea of America is righteous, and the execution has been very human,” Donato says. “But the idea is illuminated by something that is higher than us.”

He speaks of a moral responsibility in staying true to the freedom to pursue your potential, both as a human and an artist.

“To embrace the horizon, to embrace the monsters, to embrace the tragic sorrow in the inevitable mortality that’s blatant within every step of this journey,” Donato says. “To help us transcend and conquer what’s in front of us? That is the American ideal. And you’ve got to do that gracefully, without taking away anything from anybody else.” 🌐