



DANIEL DONATO

Broader Horizons

Daniel Donato, known for his distinctive “cosmic country” style, is quite content with his new album, *Horizons*.

“I’m as satisfied as I can be with it,” he says. “The satisfaction comes more from what happens in the moment as opposed to what gets crystallized on the album.”

Like his previous efforts, *Horizons* incorporates his blend of guitar-driven originals in extended jam-style contexts, punctuated with his “high lonesome” vocals, though various performances honor classic country sounds of the past.

He plays amplified and acoustic parts with his Cosmic Country sidemen, occasionally assisted by Nashville steel guitarist Trent Resnick.

An early hit by one of Donato’s old-school heroes led him to write the earthy honky-tonker “Better Deal Blues.” The song, he says, “...was pretty much inspired by Buck’s (1960) single ‘Excuse Me (I Think I’ve Got A Heartache),’ a great Buck tune.”

“Translation” reflects Donato’s mastery of James Burton’s famous chicken-pickin’

technique and contains overtones of two other legends.

“When I first found out (Burton) played with Elvis, I wondered why he never played with Bob Dylan.” He created the song as “A combination of the two. The rhythm is kind of danceable in a Jerry Reed sense. A lot of Reed’s songs about love had a great backbeat to them.”

Donato’s precise picking is inspired by Brent Mason.

“You gotta pick every single note because there’s not a lot of legato happening. That’s also a Hank Garland thing. I always loved that style. It reminded me of a pedal steel, Buddy Emmons, very staccato sound.”

He blazes his way through “Broadside Ballads.” With high register passages and double-stops, he’s quick to credit the contemporary Nashville guitarists who inspired him.

“A lot of the double stops, high notes, and single note ideas came from (Nashville sideman) James Mitchell. He’s really only known among guitar players, and he’s one of the best ever playing Tele. One of my mentors when I was growin’ up.

“There’s a lot of guys like James, Rod Riley, and Danny Muhammad – players who helped me when I was 15, 16, 17 years old. Johnny Hiland, as well. These guys are unsung heroes of the Telecaster.”

Born in Florida, Donato’s family briefly lived in New Jersey before moving to Nashville. Guitar was around from the start.

“My grandfather played folk music and my dad played rock,” he says.

At 12, “Guitar Hero” further inspired his interest, as did his dad’s rock heroes. Delving deeper, he gravitated to the iconic Robert’s Western World on Broadway in Nashville. The former home of Sho-Bud Guitars, Robert’s became an oasis for old-school sounds in the ’90s. He played there with various groups including the Don Kelly Band.

“Robert’s was the only place downtown that would hire bands that could play Western swing, traditional country, honky-tonk, and bluegrass. It became the home of traditional country, so we all played the same songs.”

Another Nashville hangout was a famous bluegrass/Americana club.

“I grew up at the Station Inn,” he says. “A lot of guys who played at Robert’s during the day played the Station at night.” There, he says, he learned “...that classic Doc Watson style, the Merle Travis style and the Clarence White style.”

Donato’s gear choices have evolved.

“My first good electric was my dad’s old Strat. The first good Telecaster I had was one my dad and I made – a Danny Gatton-style. Johnny Hiland gave me a great Music Man Axis – that was my first humbucker guitar.”

His primary electric is his signature DGX Epoch, made in Connecticut by Dan Nealsey. He often uses a Fender Custom Shop Tele based on an early-’60s model.

“I ended up using my Tele for a lot of tracks [on *Horizon*], but for the lead tracks I used the Epoch.” He recorded with an old black-front Princeton Reverb.

“My friends at XTS do my pedalboards and my whole rig. They do Bob Weir, Keith Urban, all kinds of big names.”

Since age 18, Donato has endorsed Ernie Ball strings and uses a 1.5mm pick. His acoustics include a custom model by a Birmingham luthier, his grandfather’s ’64 D-18, and a later HD-28.

Donato has finished an album of classic country covers done in the cosmic style and has two live albums coming – one recorded at the Ryman, the other at Robert’s.

Does he feel he’s come a long way from “Guitar Hero”?

“Yes and no,” he laughs. – **Rich Kienzie VG**