

A Conversation with Darrell Scott by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 4/2002)

I once saw Darrell Scott sit down and play a song at somebody's show at the Bluebird Café, and it put me right on my ass. I thought I was seeing and hearing the ghost of Lowell George, for one thing. But he was even more than that. He sounded like all the things that are good about our country. You might think it's corny, but he sounded like integrity. Sometimes in Nashville, that's a quality that stands out, if you know what I mean.

That was years ago, and I didn't see him anymore, though I'd go out to hear music quite a bit. But I'd see his name on a lot of records, and I'd hear people talk about him in very special terms. People liked to talk about him, in the same way that they like to talk about Buddy Miller. The guy stood for something that made the people feel good about themselves and about the music here in Nashville. Every artistic field needs figures that reinforce the idea that what's important is to be yourself, to find out who it is that you are and what it is you have to offer, and to do that. Not to write some stupid song for an artist you think is a wimp that might get on a beer commercial. There's way too much of that around this town, knuckleheads with three writing appointments every day of the week that should be writing advertising. That are writing jingles, basically, and calling it a song.

Don't get me wrong, Darrell Scott has written and played on his share of jingles, big ones. He just doesn't confuse them with songs. His songwriting success has been a product of writing exactly the song he wanted to write, not the song that his publisher thought he wanted to hear. He was the NSAI Songwriter of the Year last year, based on "It's a Great Day to Be Alive" (one of the biggest singles of Travis Tritt's career, the second most played Country song last year, still getting 1200 spins a week a year later) and other big cuts like "Born to Fly" for Sara Evans, "You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive" for Patty Loveless, and "Heartbreak Town" for the Dixie Chicks. He and Tim O'Brien cowrote "When No One's Around" for Garth Brooks. (They're not all from last year, but all part of the buzz around this enigmatic yet open-faced character.)

He is that rare successful songwriter (like Tim O'Brien) that is even more highly touted as a player, and he's done a staggering amount of session work since his official arrival in Nashville ten years ago. You won't find many people on a hundred records that are also writing hit songs. But it's because Scott is not spending his time trying to write hit songs, like so many people are. He's just making music all the time, and the songs from his albums get cut by artists looking for great songs, and his soulful playing of many instruments creates a demand for him to play on their record, to get Darrell Scott's vibe on it. There are certain people you hire to put some tasty icing on the cake, and others you hire to bring a certain depth to the session, and Scott figures in the latter category.

Darrell and I didn't know each other, but we had a number of friends in common. He agreed to meet me at Bongo Java late one night. They finally kicked us out after both sides of the C-90 had run out, and we were still talking all the way to our cars. Inside of a

few minutes, it really felt like I was talking to an old friend. It's kind of a long interview, but believe me, we were still scratching the surface. That's a deep well, there.

Puremusic: Thanks for taking the time, I know you're busy.

Darrell Scott: Well, we've been talking about doing this for a long time.

PM: That's true, we first talked about doing this a year ago, at the Jammin' to Beat the Blues benefit, right?

DS: That's right.

PM: And I'm happy to hear that you're making a new record, is that right?

DS: I've definitely laid the groundwork. I started over a year ago, recording with Danny Thompson.

PM: Oh, one of my favorites [Thompson is a fantastic English upright bassist, many know him from his work with Pentangle, one of many sources]. He was playing with you that night we met at the benefit. How did you hook up with him?

DS: Through Tim O'Brien. Tim's project *The Crossing*, Bluegrass meets Irish music. We had a couple of gigs in Ireland and one in Glasgow, Scotland. We fantasized about Danny being a part of that project, because neither of us exactly had his phone number. Must have been Tim's agent over there that put us in contact. 'Cause Tim just called him up out of the blue and told him about *The Crossing* project, and Danny was interested in doing it, and Tim sent him some tapes.

PM: Was he familiar with Tim's body of work?

DS: Not that I know of. I believe he was just intrigued by the gathering, basically.

PM: And, while so many people could have attempted a cross-pollination of Irish and American music, this one was particularly successful because of the unique experience that the principals brought to the table.

DS: Danny didn't even record with us, but he was one of those principal elements that enabled this to work. But he was a part of the shows we did over there, and prepared meticulously for it. He listened to the material, and showed up with everything written out. I don't mean chord charts, they were like big band charts, hand written manuscripts. He'd really done his homework.

PM: Do you read like that, standard notation?

DS: No, absolutely not.

PM: Does Tim?

DS: I think Tim can kind of get through reading like that. But not like Danny, that was his medium of learning. Somewhere, he'd gotten classically trained. So that's how he prepared, and that's what he showed up with. It was a great group. A couple of players from *Altan*, Kenny Malone [one of Nashville's great drummers, allegedly the first to play on a bluegrass recording], Paul Brady, Maura O'Connell, I'm sure to forget some great people.

PM: I've been listening a lot to your *Family Tree*, and also picked up *Real Time*, your CD with Tim O'Brien. Tell us about the family from which you came, and the one you're raising. In the song "Hummingbird," for instance, there's a reference to brothers that aren't pickin anymore in the printed lyrics, but it's sung "not talkin anymore" on the record. Was that Hummingbird [a Gibson guitar model] your brother's or your dad's?

DS: It was my dad's. It's essentially a true story, though I embellished on the model, it wasn't actually a Hummingbird.

PM: But it's a very cool name.

DS: It's a cool name, and I've tried to figure out what it was from the photo with people that know such things. It was a lower priced Gibson, though my dad always wanted a Hummingbird. If you had a Hummingbird, well, then, you were happening. I had forgotten this when I wrote the song, but one of my brothers reminded me later that my Dad tried to spray paint a Hummingbird pattern on this cheaper Gibson. But anyhow, it's a true story. It was his guitar, and we took it back to the swamp in Northern Indiana to float it, it was wood, we were really young.

PM: What about that reference to brothers that aren't pickin or aren't talkin anymore? Did you grow up with a tough band of brothers?

DS: Well, the brothers lyric refers actually to my dad's brothers, my uncles. It was just a reference in passing to something that happens a lot in families, where people stop talking for a time. I did write it as "pickin" and sang it as "talkin," that's true. I cut my vocals live as I'm cutting the guitar, and that's how it came out. Then you've got to live with it, or doctor it, as the case may be.

PM: And do you have brothers and sisters of your own?

DS: Oh yeah, I have four brothers.

PM: Pickers?

DS: Oh yeah, every one of them. I was in a family band, I was in a brother band.

PM: Yeah, me too.

DS: Then you know. We started in church, and my dad had been playing since he was fifteen.

PM: Having a songwriter for a dad, I can't imagine what that must have been like.

DS: And a songwriter who wrote songs even though he had no outlet for them, just to write. Here in Nashville, you write songs and take them to your publisher, try to get them cut. But this was just writing songs because you wanted to, or had to. For the sake of writing a song. So, absolutely, music was central to my growing up. Period. A lot of families play baseball together, or go fishing. We played music.

PM: Do any of your brothers play professionally?

DS: Yeah, all of them at different times. Making their living, or supplementing their living. It ebbs and flows, depending on family and other circumstances. One of my brothers teaches music in public school, for instance. Another has an original band in CA, a jam band.

PM: Really? Whereabouts?

DS: Let's see, Novato.

PM: That's my old stompin ground, Marin county. What's the name of his band?

DS: Taos Hum. David Scott, he's a keyboard player. He's nine years younger than I am, he's 33.

PM: I gotta get his email from you later. Let's patch in the story of how and when you came to Nashville.

DS: Well, let's see. First of all, I lived in Nashville twice as a kid. My family moved around a lot, we were just picking up and leaving every six months for a while. One of the spots was Nashville. We lived in a trailer park on Dickerson Road [chuckles as my jaw drops slightly], that was fourth grade. My dad grew up in the hills of Kentucky, and he was a musician. He was into the Opry, all that stuff. So our first vacations were in Nashville. We never took a vacation except in Nashville for years. Going to the Ryman Auditorium, staying at the Drake Motel, [laughs] the whole deal. You know, and we'd do Tours of the Stars homes, and in the clam shell in Centennial Park there'd be Sunday concerts of the Del Reeves Band or Opry stars.

PM: And that wasn't simply doing what dad was into, right? The kids were all into it, too?

DS: Oh yeah, we were all into it. We were seeing stars. Another time, we lived here for a summer, in seventh grade, over on Fessler's Lane. And then my dad bought a house here in Nashville, twenty years ago, in the country out toward Mt. Juliet. He built a house from scratch, at the time he was doing construction in southern CA. He'd save enough money to blast out a few more thousand on the place, then go back when he ran out of money. This went on for years, like seven years. He finally hit the wall with it when I was up in Boston.

PM: When you were attending Tufts University?

DS: Well, I went to community college for two years, then transferred into Tufts. I studied a lot of poetry and read a lot of literature and opened up the whole world of the Humanities that had been no part of my world as a honky tonk youngster.

PM: A lot of culture came to you late.

DS: Yes, aside from the culture to which I was exposed. Country music, church music, southern family culture. But as far as art or drama went, poetry and literature, yeah, that came later. So I immersed myself totally in the Humanities, and was reading and writing poetry. I was in a non-musical phase. I was in musical denial, it was me not playing music. In time, the two things came together, but I didn't plan that. I got turned on to a lot of music up there, but I wasn't playing much.

PM: As deep a musician as you already were, you found it in yourself not to play, somehow. In Boston, with so much music going down.

DS: It was easy not to play, very easy. I was having the time of my life. Acting in school plays...

PM: Worlds were opening up.

DS: Absolutely. Being a honky tonk musician was not a priority, I'd already done that. [Years before, for instance, he'd already gone to Canada and played steel guitar with the Mercy Brothers, who won Juno awards with songs of his, the Canadian Grammy.] Toward the end of my college, though, it was still an easy way to make money. So I started creeping into the honky tonk scene in Boston, to play all night and make my \$75. I played some great music up there, and played some really disgusting music, too.

PM: And where other musicians might pick up a Top 40 gig, you'd go play honky tonks.

DS: Oh yeah, I'd play the honky tonks. You didn't have to rehearse, you'd just show up and do Merle Haggard tunes or whatever, and collect your money and go home. But it wasn't like "I'm into music," it was strictly "I'm into seventy five bucks." But the guitar was in my hands, you know, I was playing. But I wasn't confused about it at all, I was in school. And I was late in going to school, I started college at 23 or 24. I was making money in bars at 15, that's how I bought my first Telecaster, which I still have. It's

funny, but since coming to Nashville, I hardly play electric at all, I've become known as an acoustic guy. That's cool, whatever. But how I got to Nashville was, my dad was finally at the end of his rope with this house, he was gonna let it go. It was an incomplete house. At the time I graduated college, I had the choice of staying in academia, which I liked and was good at. I'd tried college at 17 and wasn't ready, but I liked it later. So I was either going to go to grad school in some Creative Writing program, and I'd looked into a lot of those possibilities, or I was going to get back into music, and integrate what I'd learned along the way. And that's what I wound up doing.

PM: You were already married, right?

DS: Oh yeah, I met Sherry in my first semester. I answered an ad where a guy was looking for two roommates. He chose Sherry and myself.

PM: Wow, this stranger shows up to align you and your wife's lives, that's too much.

DS: And it really pissed him off when we became an item, because he wanted two roommates. So he kicked us out, and we got our own place. So we were together for the whole four and half years of college.

PM: So, together you decided that you were going to try and marry these two lives of honky tonks and poetry, and move to Nashville.

DS: Not Nashville yet, there were a few years in between. After four and a half years going to school, I spent another four and a half years playing music up there. I was playing honky tonks, but I'd begun writing the first songs that I was proud of. I'd been writing songs since I was twelve. I was finally recognizing myself in the work, the writer's voice, as it's called. The first time I remember it coming together was a song called "Uncle Lloyd." It hasn't come out, hasn't been released.

PM: It was on that first SBK album, never released.

DS: Right. It was the first time I thought "This is me. This is my story. No one else could write this, no one else would write this. That's how I talk or think, that's how I see things." And that's when I started gathering some songs that were something like the poetry that I'd been writing. It wasn't about three minute songs or hook lines, or any of that. You're writing, it doesn't have to rhyme, it's just open ended. So around that time, writing songs became something I wanted to turn up the heat on.

So, \$75 honky tonk gigs were paying the bills, barely, and I'd write songs at home that I'd never play in the bars. Boston was a great place for singer songwriters then, as it's always been and still is. And I was getting turned on to that stuff. There were lots of places like Club Passim where that scene was thriving. And I was starting to hear great writers, and I was in the audience. I was the guy that had played for years, but I was checking it out. Around then, I saw Guy Clark for the first time, and Greg Brown.

Okay, so we're still going to Nashville. I start to collect songs I'm proud of, get into the singer songwriter scene from the audience, and play some coffee houses. But I never make the leap into that world. On some level, I'm still not sure I've made that leap. I went to college with a guy who came from one of the SBK families, the Koppelmans. He sent some songs of mine to his dad, Charles Koppelman. After a couple of years of progressive development deals, we finally got to signing a full on recording contract, to make a big budget record. And the record was to be these songs I'd been writing all this time. After a whole selection process, I decide to use Norbert Putnam. The record company puts you in a mutual interview situation with a bunch of guys for you to sniff each other out, it's a real strange dance. [laughs]

I chose Norbert for several reasons, and don't regret it. I know we made the very best record we could at the time. Part of the record deal was also a publishing deal with EMI. The record and publishing companies suggested I go down to Nashville and write with some guys they recommended, and see what happens. So I came down and wrote with Guy Clark, Verlon Thompson, and Bill Miller.

PM: Alright, there are three interesting guys.

DS: Yeah. And I made really great connections with all three guys. This would be '89 or '90. And I made connections with the Nashville office. My catalog was considered to be somewhere between the pop that the NYC office would handle, and the country market here. It ended up staying in New York. It never got to Nashville, so to speak, in terms of real representation.

PM: Were you okay with that arrangement?

DS: It was okay. I gotta say, I've been in Country denial for a long time. I grew up on Country, I'm an authority. I know this music. I know it as a player and a singer, intros and outros. I also didn't like what had been happening to Country music. It didn't sound like my music.

PM: It didn't sound like Haggard or Jones anymore.

DS: Yeah, or the great singer songwriters of Country, like Mickey Newbury or Townes, or Guy Clark. Or Billy Joe Shaver. That's the stuff. You know what I'm saying? So I was very glad not to be thought of as Nashville material. So I was fine with the anti-Nashville, anti-Country stance at the time. Then we made and mastered the record, and it goes like many typical stories here in town. They get to some point in that process, and just unplug. They don't see it working anymore. And that was my story, too.

After I made the record, I knew that I wanted to leave Boston. Some friends in Boston had had their brush with fame. Basically, the record company comes in and strips you of your dignity on some level, like you've failed. Even though we know you haven't failed, there's some great failure to getting up on the high horse of a record deal, and then getting shot off the horse. Then you're supposed to collect your ass, and what? Go back

to playing your honky tonk gig? Your seventy five bucks? I knew I didn't wanna do that. Even with my so-called failed record, I had made some connections in Nashville. With Guy, with Verlon, with the EMI office. And my dad's house was coming up, he wanted out from under. We'd been paying Boston rents, which are like the Bay Area. My wife was a teacher, I was a musician by night, we were just barely paying the bills. So we thought, let's go to Nashville, my dad will give us a great deal on the house. If we can't afford to pay him right away, he's cool.

PM: He didn't owe the bank, he owned it outright.

DS: Oh yeah, that's the way my dad operates. He bought some raw land, and bulldozed it, started building a shack.

And that's how we came to Nashville. The record was either going to come out or not, it was either going to do okay or not. This house was affordable, we could make that switch. I knew I didn't want to fall back into honky tonk world. And somehow, I wanted to use my brush with the high horse to see what was possible here in Nashville. Because I knew there was an underground of great writing, that it was more than what was on the radio. And I knew that a lot of the greatest songwriters in the world were sitting right here, and the best artists.

So we came down, and the first year we had no money, and ran the credit cards all the way up. We took the money out my wife's early retirement fund and lived on that. I knew we were supposed to be here.

PM: You ran right though her early retirement.

DS: Yeah, we did. And after a year of that, I started getting some sessions as a player.

PM: I've seen your discography. It's so deep, it's comical. How did the session calls begin?

DS: I'll tell you. There was a guy at EMI named Blake Chancey.

PM: Wow.

DS: Right. Obviously, Blake's gone over to SONY, and he's done great things over there. He's a very cool person. His dad, Ron Chancey, was a producer. He did a lot of classic Conway Twitty, the Oak Ridge Boys, and a lot of jingles. So, Blake passed my name on to Ron, who started calling me for jingle work.

PM: So, Blake Chancey was the first guy to hook you up.

DS: Absolutely. He kept us alive, truly. And Verlon would always hire me for every session he had, and I started doing shows with Verlon. It sort of expanded from there. But I played on lots of jingles for Ron, beer jingles and Eggo, all sorts of stuff. We'd come

here with a one and a half year old child, and we started our second as soon as we got here.

PM: How about the house, did it have all the plumbing and electric, and all that?

DS: Yeah, but it didn't have heat or air conditioning. We lived there a good six or seven years without air conditioning. We got central heat about three years ago. The first year we went out and got propane wall heaters, that helped a lot. The other thing was that my dad had built a CA house in Tennessee, with a flat roof that held water. We had leaks and buckets all over the house. So we were working on the house and try to keep that going, and the session work from friends floated in at a rate that seemed to keep us going. When I got here, I had a \$350 Alvarez Yairi Acoustic, that's what I had for an acoustic axe. I was an electric and steel player.

PM: A \$350 Alvarez, that's funny.

DS: No kidding. For sessions, I would borrow Verlon's Taylors. And I started getting more calls to play acoustic. Not more calls, I started getting some calls.

PM: Your acoustic rhythm playing is so good. So many acoustic players here don't have a nice rhythm sound. The way *Family Tree* starts, I want to play that for people and say, "This is what it's supposed to sound like when you strum an acoustic guitar."

DS: But you know what? I know for a fact that for the first three years of sessions here, I was pissing drummers off. My time wasn't their time, it wasn't metronomic. I'd never worked with a metronome ever, and I wasn't about to start. At the same time, I could tell I was falling short of what they wanted in that regard. That's a fact, literally. And the day it all changed was the day I went into the studio with Kenny Malone and Roy Huskey Jr. Suddenly, this invisible click track appeared in my phones, but it wasn't really there. Then all that insecurity of not measuring up or being with the drummer metronomically fell away, and it was just music, as opposed to just time. Time is a part of music, it's not music in and of itself. Kenny Malone has been central to my education, on many levels.

PM: He's a deep person, aside from his musicianship.

DS: Yeah, he is. One of the greatest gifts I've had in coming to Nashville is getting to know Kenny and playing with him.

PM: My friend Jack Irwin, who co-produced a record I did with Kenny and Michael Rhodes, had a story about Kenny Malone.

DS: Kenny played that record for me, he was very proud of that.

PM: That's nice of you to mention, we did some good work together. Jack told me that some years ago his best friend back in Pittsburgh hung himself, and Jack was really

broken up about it. Although he didn't really know Kenny well, he was moved to call him up and talk to him about it. Whatever Kenny said to him on the phone that day really put him back together, and helped him get on with life in a way that he never forgot.

DS: That sounds like Kenny, alright.

PM: And you guys are biking friends, right?

DS: Yeah, he gave me my bike. It's an English made Raleigh from the 70s, a classic. It's this big steel frame thing that I can get up on, I'm a big guy. He got it in barter as part of pay for a session. The guy said, "I'll give you ___ dollars and the Raleigh." And he passed the Raleigh on to me. And then got me way into it.

PM: So we did finally finish that question about how you came to Nashville, right? [tape runs out, I flip it over.]

So, it's interesting that, all these years later, you're going back and re-recording some of the tunes that were on the big budget debut album that never got released.

DS: Well, see, it never left me. I hate to harp on it, man. But everyone I've talked to... I have a lot of friends who have the same story in this town, and we all get over it. But on some other level, there's something that's just not right about it. We're never quite square with it.

PM: When...

DS: When we get f____d. When you never get your chance. I mean, I made the real deal record. It was big budget, the works. We had the Memphis Horns. Leland Sklar on bass, Russ Kunkel on drums, Michael Otley on keyboards. We had a song that needed a fiddle. [Producer] Norbert Putnam said, "Who do you want?" and I said, "Sam Bush"—after all, he was an idol of mine, from Newgrass Revival. So I got to meet Sam. We struck up a friendship then, before I ever moved down here. Years later, I toured with him for two years in his band.

Like I said, I have other friends who share the same story. And it's my sense that, although we may go on to do plenty of good work, that this issue often lingers, unresolved.

PM: Well, I like your approach toward the issue. You got the dough, cut it again.

DS: I've had years to think about this, and I've looked at it from every possible angle. I still maintain that those are really good songs, and they deserve to be out. More than that, I'll even put them out as they were cut back then.

PM: I ran into somebody at the video store the other night who told me they had a copy of that. I said, “No bullshit, man, you gotta bump me a copy of that, I need that.” [Darrell laughs]

DS: I break it out once every couple of years. I hear a lot of flaws. I’ve had the good fortune of spending a lot of the last ten years in the studio with really good players, so I’ve learned a lot. I’m still learning.

PM: All the good guys are.

DS: Even aside from live performance, I’m fascinated by the process of recording. It’s got me. Yes, I’ve got my own home studio, and talented buddies who come and play for less than they deserve.

PM: And ask you to do the same.

DS: Yeah. So I’m really into finding veterans with masterful chops who play with the wonder and the excitement of children. Kenny is like that, and I made the same kind of connection with Danny Thompson, the English bassist who worked with us on the Irish gigs.

PM: I’ll ask you something I asked Tim O’Brien. One thing that distinguishes you from your talented peers is that you’ve experienced publishing success through big recording acts covering your songs. How has that changed your life?

DS: Well, it’s confirmed to me that I should do what I want to do, what’s in me to do. It’s literally good fortune, it’s a gift. It tells me to keep following my instincts.

PM: In any of the instances that involved the four big cuts [Travis Tritt, Dixie Chicks, Garth Brooks, Sara Evans], were you writing to get cut, or just trying to write a good song?

DS: In the Sara Evans song, “Born to Fly,” it was a three way between myself, Sara, and Marcus Hummon. That was led by Marcus, I’d have to say.

PM: And, with all due respect to his fine work, he knows how to write to get cut.

DS: He does. But when he goes to that table, he brings all the goods with him. He brings the poetry, he brings the composition, it is not a lesser thing. I love him, and he may be the most creative person I’ve ever met.

PM: I know he’s got his show *Francis of Guernica* rockin right now, and just did the one about Jim Thorpe, with Mark Luna starring.

DS: He’s got his plays going, he’s written a book of haiku. He’s written five plays. He paints, and he’s very involved in the community, and his church. His wife is a priest. He

produces records. I'm in awe of the guy, and I love his songs. I've played on dozens and dozens of his songs, I see them all. I see the ones that are Grammy nominations, I see the ones that are in his plays, and the ones that are as artistic as anybody. I'll tell you, he's incredible. I get it. And when I sat down with Marcus and Sara Evans that day, we ended up writing a song for her, about her. Extracting some of her essence, so that she could get up in front of huge crowds of people and give something of herself to them. Yeah, I'm truly in awe of the guy.

PM: So, although that trio that day might have been conscious that they were writing a single...

DS: No, we were just trying to write the best song we could. But, it was, I believe, Marcus trying to give words to the artist that were their words, so that it's their story. In interviews, that's what Sara says, that that's her autobiography, that's her song. So I think that's a very successful song, on those merits. I was glad to be a part of that circle that day.

In the cases of the other three songs you mentioned, those were definitely songs I wrote. I had to write them. "When There's No One Around" was the second song that Tim O'Brien and I ever wrote together. The first one was a song that he put on an album of his at the time, it's called "Daddy's On the Roof Again." With Tim—and this is how we play and sing as well—there's an immediate breaking down of self protection, it's very vulnerable. When you can, why would you not? And I remember the day we wrote "When There's No One Around," over at his publishing company. I remember I was taking a break, and went down to get some coffee. I ran into Barry Tashian, and he said, "How's it going up there?" I remember saying, "I've never been so vulnerable with another guy." You know what I mean? There's a place we go in our creative process that's about breaking down all preconceptions. I think we write that way, too. It's one of those things we don't push at all, either. The same is true with Marcus. We don't want to push those things. I want magic, and you can't push that. As much time as Tim and I spend together on the road, it's surprising how little we write. It's a very small fraction of the time. But when we do, it's always a special thing.

PM: How about "It's a Great Day to Be Alive," let's talk about that great song.

DS: The story on that is, I had back problems. I was on my back for a week, and couldn't get up. I'd get up once a day to try and sit at the table for a few minutes. I was in misery. I was in the living room on the concrete slab for awhile, till finally I was able to sit up for the first time in a week. And I wrote that song. It just all came right out. All but the last verse, which came the next day, and I was feeling better yet. I'm a real baby when it comes to pain. It was one of those things, it just came from an appreciation of being able to sit up. I literally did have rice cooking in the microwave and that's how the song begins. Of course I hadn't shaved, that's the next line, et cetera. I do that a lot, just try to write what's happening, really.

The song had been cut by several major label acts, Travis was the fourth artist to cut it. In the other three cases, the artist lost their deal or management shifted, like my record. I even had female artists looking at that song, wanting me to change lines about the Fu Manchu and other manly references, but there were too many. I couldn't get there.

It was Blake, again. He was over at SONY.

PM: Blake Chancey, your champion. What a guy.

DS: Exactly. He pitched the song to the production team, or to Travis, I don't know for sure. Next thing I know, Blake calls me and says Travis wants to record the song, but there are some lyric changes he'd like to talk over. Now, I'd been performing this song for six or seven years in this circuit that I have found myself to be in, a kind of bluegrass or acoustic singer songwriter circuit, with Tim, and Sam, and Guy, you know. And I'd play it everywhere I went, for years. I'd heard the stories, I knew what the song already meant to people. People coming up after shows and laying out these honest, soulful accounts of how the song had affected their life, you know? So I was reluctant about lyric changes, because the song already had a life of its own. It came through me, and I didn't want to mess with it, on some level. I actually talked to Marcus about it. [we laugh] So I had to live with it for a while. Travis had called, and we talked about it.

PM: And he knew exactly what he wanted to change.

DS: Oh yeah, very specifically. And that's cool to me, I respected that. He needed it to be his song, just like Sara Evans, and I agree. I'm not married to lyrics, I change them too, like we said at the top. So, eventually I moved off the place of hesitation or reluctance, but it took a couple of weeks.

PM: And he wanted you to make the changes and retain total ownership of the song.

DS: Oh yeah, it was totally cool in that and every regard. And I did finally make the changes, and we took care of it in a short conversation, and everything was set, it was great. I was camping last Memorial Day weekend. My brother was living in Atlanta, we met halfway with our families. So we're at the communal shower, and this woman who'd just taken a shower was packing up her baby into the back seat. And while she's doing this, she starts singing "It's a Great Day to Be Alive." And I'm just sitting there, alone, no witnesses, thinking, "Okay, this is cool." Songs have a life of their own.

PM: To round out the story of the big cuts, let's cover the one by the Dixie Chicks, "Heartbreak Town."

DS: I have to say, it's Blake again.

PM: This guy would be in line for a kickback at this point, if he wasn't already doing so well. [Darrell laughs]

DS: Blake and Paul Worley, the producer, called me to write with Natalie, the singer. While they're overdubbing in the studio, Natalie and I go to the back room to try and write.

PM: That's pretty wild, right?

DS: I think it was a question of the preciousness of time, you know. And what Natalie and I did was just talk, get to know one another a little. We tried to work on a song. She was talking about strangers. And that's a lot of what goes on here in town. Stranger meets stranger and try to create art together. Sometimes it works. When I came down here in the early days to write with Bill Miller, for instance. The other night, when we played that Jammin' to Beat the Blues benefit, Bill was there. I ran into him backstage, and had only seen him once at a book store since we wrote that first song eleven years ago. And we wrote a really soulful song back then. It was about his father, it was about my father, the angst about how your father is who you want to get the hell away from—that sadness, that remorse. And we did it. And I was just down for a week, and that was my appointment with Bill Miller. And all those years later, that connection was still there. It can work.

PM: And did you find a vibe with Natalie in the studio back room that day?

DS: Something similar, but it didn't turn into a song, exactly. It did turn into us talking about music, the lousy part of it, and talking about the art of it, too. And, in talking about what kind of a song we'd like to write, I played her a few songs. One of the songs I played her was "Heartbreak Town," and she really liked it. The producer came in two or three hours later and asked if we'd gotten a song. I said no, that we hadn't. And she said, "But he played me this song I love." And I heard a couple of weeks later that they'd cut it. Then you go through the waiting period to see if it's gonna make the record. And it did, finally.

PM: I'm a big fan of the Minton Sparks record [see our review] that you played so well on. How did that come about, and did you enjoy that project?

DS: Oh yeah, I love her work. That was Marcus Hummon who brought me in there, he was the producer.

[We digressed into shop about clawhammer banjo and the like—he explained how he'd never studied any instruments, and had a guitarist's view of banjo, dobro, and mandolin, et cetera.]

PM: When it comes to acoustic guitars, are you a Gibson man?

DS: You know what, just two weeks ago I bought two great old Gibsons. I bought a '63 Hummingbird. [laughter] And I'm gonna give it to my dad. It's beautiful. And I bought an all mahogany 1943 guitar that they tell me is an L-00. I bought a couple of champions there, from Music Emporium, in Lexington, MA. You know, they usually only use spruce

and the like for tops, but in '43, they were running a skeleton crew during wartime, and ran some mahogany tops. It sounds great.

[I start taking a couple of pictures, and he says, "I like that lampshade over there."]

PM: So, before they kick us out of here, tell me how soon we may see this album you're working on.

DS: I've recorded 39 songs.

PM: Wow. Will you pare it down, or will it be a double album?

DS: It may be a triple album. I don't know, but I'm working hard on it right now, I go in spurts. I don't have much energy for what to do with it, but I have a great deal of energy to make this music, that's all I know.

PM: After recording 39 songs, you're not going to want to pare it down to 12.

DS: No, I recorded all 39 for a reason. It's just Danny Thompson, Dan Dugmore, and me in the room. [Dugmore is a stunning multi-instrumentalist with a temperament like Darrell's, a sterling example of the kind of player Darrell was profiling earlier in the interview.] I love the spirit of these recordings done in my living room. We've had to deal with the learning curve on this computer-based recording gear. We're still learning how to use the machine. I was talking to Wendy Waldman, who's producing John Cowan's new record that I was doing some overdubs on, and they were using the same system. And they basically shamed me into learning the thing. They said, "You mean you have this gear, and you're going to record on ADATs next week? You're out of your mind." So I took that, and said, "Let's record on the computer next week." My good friend and engineer Miles Wilkinson had to get up on the gear in a hurry, he's also biking partners with Kenny Malone and myself. He had to roll up his sleeves in a big way.

[Unceremoniously, the 90 minute tape ran out here, and Bongo Java was closing. We walked out to our cars, and said thanks, and goodnight.]