

Pop Talk: Dan Hicks may be unassuming but he's certainly not resting on his laurels

by *George_Varga*

With his quintessentially laid-back demeanor and soft-spoken Northern California drawl, Dan Hicks seems like a genuinely innocent bystander, not a psychedelic pioneer who helped lay the foundation in the mid-1960s for a soon-to-blossom generation of flower-power-fueled hippies in San Francisco and beyond.

Music icon Dan Hicks has a new album called "Tangled Tales" with his Hot Licks band. Photo courtesy of www.danhicks.net. But when Hicks travels to Australia for a tour later this year, he will become an innocent bystander, literally, at least long enough for some joint concerts.

"There's a tribute band in Melbourne called The Innocent Bystanders and they have an album out that consists entirely of my songs," said Hicks, who performs with the latest incarnation of his band, the Hot Licks.

"The Innocent Bystanders are totally cool, just the greatest. They have girl singers and fiddlers, just like The Hot Licks. It's always a compliment when someone covers your music; I don't take it for granted. I don't say: 'Of course, you do a lot of my songs. Tell me something I don't know!'"

What Hicks' loyal cult following of fans has long known is that he is a one-of-a-kind singer, songwriter and bandleader.

Steeped in swing, old-time country, bebop, folk, blues and other rootsy American styles, his repertoire of strikingly original songs dates back 44 years to his tenure in the pioneering psych-folk band The Charlatans. A one-time contemporary of the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and other San Francisco rock legends, with whom he regularly shared stages in the 1960s, Hicks wrote "We're Not on the Same Trip," The Charlatans' overlooked classic about a lovelorn hippie couple.

"I'd say I'm more of a hipster than a hippie," Hicks noted with a chuckle, speaking from the Mill Valley,

Calif., home he shares with his wife and manager, Claire.

The gems Hicks has written and recorded over the years, both as a bandleader and as a solo artist, include: "I Scare Myself," "Walkin' One and Only," "Crazy 'Cause He Is," "Canned Music," and "How Can I Miss You (When You Won't Go Away)?" He also penned "Hell, I'd Go," arguably the first song to endorse voluntary intergalactic space travel.

An Arkansas native who grew up mostly in Northern California, he has long been held in high regard by his peers. Among Hicks' most notable admirers are Tom Waits, Bette Midler, Elvis Costello, Brian Setzer and Rickie Lee Jones, all of whom performed on "Beatin' the Heat."

Released in 2000, "Heat" was his first album with any edition of the Hot Licks since 1973. It also marked the start of his ongoing partnership with Surfdog, the Encinitas, Calif., record label that recently released "Tangled Tales," a 12-song album that finds Hick and the Hot Licks playing and singing with characteristic charm and verve.

"People like Elvis Costello and Willie Nelson seem to be aware of something about Dan that's way bigger than his album sales and the size of his concert audiences," said Dave Kaplan, who founded Surfdog in 1993 and has since released nearly 70 albums by artists as varied as Stray Cats, Pato Banton, Dave Stewart, Butthole Surfers and San Diego's Slightly Stoopid.

"In our electronic press kit, we have Costello â€” on camera â€” saying that 'two of the best songs ever written' are by Dan, 'It's Not My Time to Go' and 'I Scare Myself.' Most of the staff in the Surfdog office are pretty young, so I had them all listen to that quote by Costello. I truly hope more people will discover how beautiful Dan's music is and what a great artist he is."

At 67, Hicks isn't holding his breath waiting for a break. An unassuming maverick, he has always seemed both ahead and behind his times.

Credit for this goes to his proudly old-school sense of aesthetics — his bands have been predominantly acoustic since the late 1960s — and to his abiding passion for styles, such as swing, country and blues, that are immune to fashion and fleeting trends.

"It just kind of evolved from me and my guitar," said Hicks, who joined The Charlatans as a drummer, after a stint as a percussionist in the Santa Rosa Symphony, and now moonlights as the singer in the group Bayside Jazz.

"By the time I was forming the Hot Licks, I didn't want to do loud rock 'n' roll. I wanted to do a more quiet, more folk-and jazz-oriented thing, because that's what I liked."

Hicks' diversity is vividly demonstrated on his new album, which includes a jazzy version of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," replete with three-part vocal harmonies, and a Latin-tinged version of "Song for My Father," the Horace Silver jazz classic that formed the (uncredited) musical foundation for Steely Dan's "Rikki Don't Lose That Number."

Better still is "Tangled Tales" ebullient title track, which Hicks wrote and recorded — at the prompting of Surfdog honcho Kaplan — entirely in scat. Nearly a century old, scat is the wordless jazz vocal style that was popularized by Louis Armstrong and later extended by such artists as Ella Fitzgerald, Babs Gonzalez, Dizzy Gillespie and the trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.

"It's not often I hear Dizzy mentioned as a scat singer, but he certainly was," said Hicks, who uses the phrase "lyrical nirvana" to describe "Tangled Tales" fleet vocal delivery. "I remember seeing a TV special where Dizzy was out-scatting Jon Hendricks. I was liking the name 'Tangled Tales,' just as an album title, and decided to stick that onto a scat thing. Dave suggested it to me and I'm glad he did."

The song, like the album itself, is a labor of love, both for Hicks and for Surfdog.

"We had some internal discussions and some of the business minds at Surfdog thought this is probably a record we shouldn't make," Kaplan said.

"Not because of Dan, but where do you sell them? There's no record stores left to ship them to. It came down to him being such a great, unique artist. If his new album didn't deserve to get made, then I don't know what album should be made. We could go into the widget business, but I thought we got into this for the music."

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