

DAVID GANS: *“Literate, improvisational folk-rock, with looping”*

by James D. McCallister
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Known nationwide as a purveyor of literate, improvisational folk-rock with looping, singer/songwriter/producer/photographer/author David Gans has composed, performed, and written about music for the whole of his adult life. His eleventh full-length album, *Drop the Bone*, is his most ambitious and accomplished record yet.

A stylistically diverse stroll through the mind and soul of its creator—and of a few of his influences, too—*Drop the Bone*’s eleven tracks include a statement of purpose (“Life is a Jam”), a pair of cinematic instrumentals (“Pleased to Meet You, Part 2,” “Quarter to Five (For Tina Loney)”), a sardonic character study featuring a bilious, hectoring trombone (“Your Movie”), a bouncy trip through the crowd at a music festival (“River and Drown”), and a rocking ode to “Summer by the Bay” that’s like Fats Domino went out for a stroll and found himself jamming on a stoop in the Haight. Musical context and spiritual heft also come courtesy of iconic, evocative interpretations of songs by Townes Van Zandt (“Pancho and Lefty”), the Beatles (“Here Comes the Sun,” performed by Rubber Souldiers, a “Beatles jam band” that also included Chris and Lorin Rowan), and the Grateful Dead (a solo performance of “Box of Rain” preceded by a loop improvisation).

In addition to a number of “full-band tracks with jams hanging off the end of ‘em,” *Drop the Bone* features several more intimate musical settings. “Pleased to Meet You, part 2” is literally the first music played together by Gans, pianist Holly Bowling, and bassist Joe Kyle, Jr. in a session on January 4, 2017. (part 1 appears on the *Drop the Bone Bonus Disc* along with several alternate takes, three radio edits, and a demo of “Be Like Earl”). “We just tuned up and started playing,” Gans recalls. “Pancho and Lefty” has Kyle on bass and Jeff Hobbs (who also played violin and saxophone on this album) on cello.

“Be Like Earl,” a tribute to Earl “The Great Humbead” Crabb, is a bluegrass quartet with featuring Thompsonia (Eric Thompson, Suzy Thompson, and daughter Allegra Thompson)—who were also friends and neighbors of Earl’s. And “Your Movie” features *two* trombones, both played by Greg Stephens, plus walking bass by Dave Jess.

Rounding out the record is “That Strain We Like,” a studio improvisation featuring the legendary guitarist Terry Haggerty (Sons of Champlin), Bob Bralove (longtime associate of the Grateful Dead) on piano, bassist Robin Sylvester

(Ratdog), and drummer Neil Hampton. As his wont, Gans assembled a crew of brilliant improvisers, “then we set set out runnin’ with no destination in mind.”

Arriving in 1966 in time to catch the initial wave of psychedelia and the birth of the counterculture, the LA-born Gans settled as a teenager in the San Francisco Bay Area amidst the full flowering of a music scene burgeoning with bohemianism and creativity.

A childhood playing the clarinet in school orchestras gave Gans a basic music education and an ear for melody. Things started to get interesting in 1969. “My brother played guitar, and he set a couple of my tortured teenage poems to music and taught me the chords,” Gans recalls. Thus, “I became a songwriter at the exact same moment I became a guitarist. I think that’s significant: even as I was filling my head with the music that was all around us at the time, I was focusing primarily on developing my own style.”

Gans considers himself a musical child of, first among many, the Grateful Dead. “To me, that means drawing from a great variety of sources but telling the story in my own unique voice.” After several decades of composing, recording, and performing, he’s become a master at delivering musical moments straight from the heart, soul, and fingertips. “What we make is not just rock & roll,” he sings in “Life is a Jam,” *Drop the Bone*’s anthemic leadoff track and statement of artistic intent. “We’re teaming up for spiritual entrainment.” Onstage, he conjures a special brand of magic that draws upon the symbiotic relationship between singer and listener. “The best performances,” he asserts, “happen in front of the best audiences.”

Gans never makes a set list before taking the stage, preferring (like the Dead) to let the conditions of the moment inform the progress of the set. Unconscious thematic progressions add up to a musically resonant full-meal portion of original and “cover” material, laced with improvisation. A seasoned weaver of digital loops, Gans layers chords and grooves over which his warm and often plaintive vocals dance with graceful glee.

His deep book of original songs and covers offer a scrolling sketchbook of the faces and spirits of the people he’s met, double-E waterfalls of imagery and ideas inspired by his decades working with several generations of inspiring fellow musicians. It may come as no surprise, then, that his lyrics also offer direct, incisive, and often trenchant commentary on the scene in which he’s been immersed for so long.

While his primary source of gratification remains the composition and performance of original material, Gans’ career has also focused on providing

interpretive context to the songs of myriad influences, primarily the enduring legacy of the Dead. Other inspirations include John Prine, Steve Goodman, Emmylou Harris, Merle Haggard, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, Little Feat, Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, Donna the Buffalo, and (of course) America's own Nobel-winning literary lyricist, Bob Dylan.

Well on his way as a songwriter already when he had his first Grateful Dead experiences in 1972, “the Dead expanded my musical consciousness in several directions at once. These songs didn’t tell you everything they know the first time you heard them; they insinuated more than they asserted, and they left plenty of room for the listener to participate in the art. The Grateful Dead showed me how to give an honest, spontaneous performance every time, as opposed to a fixed, predictable presentation.”

While writing and performing music has long represented his principal passion, Gans’ professional life became “sidetracked” (and “enhanced”) by a long career as a writer, photographer and journalist. With bylines in *BAM*, *Record*, *Relix*, and as music editor of *Mix*, Gans found his songwriting skills immeasurably complemented through a deep immersion in the business side of the recording industry. “I got a million-dollar education! I spent time in recording studios, learned how the music business operates, got lots of records for free—and got paid for it.”

After Jerry Garcia’s death in 1995, Gans, the author (or co-author) of five books and host of nationally-syndicated radio programs *The Grateful Dead Hour* and *Tales from the Golden Road*, found himself gravitating back toward writing, recording and performing original music, while also forging an onstage persona as an interpreter of the Dead catalog. He grew to understand how important it had become not only to continue to turn on listeners to the band’s voluminous recorded output via the radio show, but also to perpetuate the songbook by reinterpreting the material in his own performances.

In the two decades since, Gans has augmented his ongoing scholarly and journalistic output by releasing albums of original material (*Solo Acoustic*, *The Ones That Look the Weirdest Taste the Best*, *You Are Here*, and others) and as a co-founder of bands that focused on reinterpreting favorite musical catalogs: Sycamore Slough String Band (acoustic Grateful Dead) and Rubber Souldiers (a “Beatles jam band,” represented on this record by “Here Comes the Sun”).

Frequent national tours range from the intimacy of house concerts and small venues to the big stages at festivals such as the Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion, the Terrapin Hill Harvest Festival, and others. Gans also extols the virtues of pairing up on the road with Dead-friendly bands like Pearly Baker’s

Best, The Grass Is Dead, the Rumpke Mountain Boys, and others. “I get to play solo *and* jam with great musicians, without the overhead of taking a band on tour. Best of both worlds!”

In December, 2017 David flew to Austin to perform with the Barton Hills Choir, a grade-school vocal ensemble attracting national attention with their rock’n’roll (and Dead-heavy) repertoire. “I was delighted to be part of this sweet event,” he declares. “We’ve known all along that this music will outlive the men who invented it, and this show was a strong demonstration of the power of Grateful Dead songs.” David has also added some guitar and vocals to the BHC’s second studio CD of Dead songs, to be released in 2018.

His latest book, *This Is All a Dream We Dreamed: An Oral History of the Grateful Dead* (co-written with fellow longtime Dead scholar Blair Jackson), is available in hardcover, paper, ebook, and audiobook editions. He is also pleased to have contributed to *Eyes of the World: Grateful Dead Photography 1965-1995* (October 2017), a lavish coffee-table book edited by Jay Blakesberg and Josh Baron. Four images captured by the Gans lens are featured alongside work from such notables as Annie Leibovitz, Herb Greene, Rosie McGee, Jim Marshall, and many others.

Gans still makes his happy home in the Oakland with his wife of 23 years, Rita Hurault. He’ll be on the road off and on throughout 2018, solo and in collaboration with friends from coast to coast. Details at www.dgans.com/gigs.html

With a strong new record in hand, needless to say David Gans is eager to continue his ongoing journey as a songwriter, improviser, and interpreter of an American musical legacy.

Drop the Bone track list:

Life Is a Jam
Be Like Earl
Summer By the Bay
River and Drown
Pleased to Meet You (part 2)
Your Movie
That Strain We Like
Box of Rain
Pancho and Lefty
Quarter to Five (for Tina Loney)
Here Comes the Sun

Drop the Bone Bonus Disc track list:

Summer by the Bay (Radio edit)
Life Is a Jam (Radio edit)

Pancho and Lefty (Radio edit)
Be Like Earl (2015 demo)
Pleased to Meet You, part 1
Life Is a Jam (Alternate take)
Summer By the Bay (Alternate take)

The players:

David Gans – vocals, guitars
Holly Bowling - piano
Bob Bralove - piano
Joshua Raoul Brody - keyboards, vocals
C.C. Dawson - drums, vocals
Jordan Feinstein - keyboards
Terry Haggerty - guitar
Neil Hampton - drums
John Hanes - drums
Jeff Hobbs – violin, cello, saxophones
Dave Jess - bass
Joe Kyle, Jr. - bass
Chris Rowan - 12-string guitar, vocals
Lorin Rowan - guitar, vocals
Greg Stephens - trombones
Robin Sylvester - bass
Allegra Thompson - bass, vocals
Eric Thompson - mandolin
Suzy Thompson - violin, vocals
Joshua Zucker - bass, vocals

Produced by David Gans and Jeremy Goody

“Your Movie” and “Quarter to Five (for Tina Loney)” produced by Jim LeBrecht/Berkeley Sound Artists

To interview or to book David Gans, or for more information about *Drop the Bone*, contact him directly: gans@well.com