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Dan Berggren: *Fresh Territory*

BY CHRISTOPHER MULÉ

*Dan Berggren's 2006 CD release, **Fresh Territory**, contains an excellent representation of the variety of material that Dan covers as a singer-songwriter of the Adirondack region. I spoke with Dan to find out how he crafts songs and where his inspiration comes from.*

How did you get started as a musician?

Well, in high school and in college I liked to write poetry; I was moved by poets that I read in school, and at some point I realized, well, what am I going to do with these poems now? I had been playing the guitar since I was 13 years old, singing folk songs, mostly traditional songs, some songs by James Taylor. I thought, at least if I wrote a song, instead of writing a poem, I could sing it to people. And so it was after college, I was in the Army, I was stationed in Germany, and I wrote a song about my grandfather who was an “Adirondacker.” Had grown up on the family farm and was a rural delivery mailman, one of the first in the North Country. I guess I was homesick, I wrote a song about him. And that kind of started it, writing more and more songs about experiences and of people and places in the Adirondacks; then it eventually broadened out to writing about experiences outside of the Adirondacks. My brother John is six years older than me, and when he went away to college and came back knowing how to play the guitar, I thought that was magic. I asked him to teach me, which he did, and I started playing at 13 and bought my first guitar at 14.

What were your musical influences and inspirations as you were developing as a musician?

I was singing things that my brother would listen to, his records of the Weavers and Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly. And at the same time, I was listening to whatever pop songs were on the radio. And that

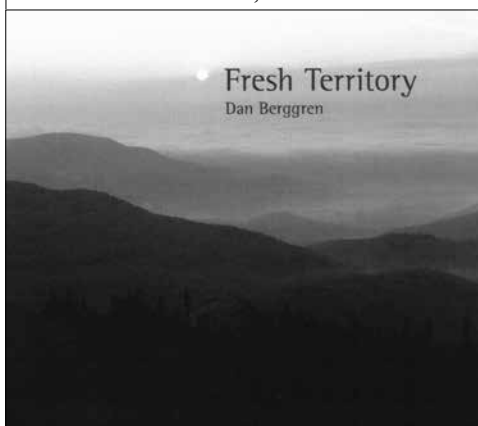
was everything from the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to hearing the Kingston Trio and newer things like Bob Dylan on the radio. So, I would sing the mix of all of it, as long as it was a simple three-chord song that I could play along with. I met a really significant person in my life when I was 16, Ralph Rinzler. He worked with the Newport Folk Festival, and he came to a family compound, where I was a chore boy [in] the summers. I was 15 and 16 years old, and he treated me like an adult. He said, “So, Dan what do you think? Sing me a song?” And then he sang me a song. And then I sang him a song, and back and forth. And then he played a reel-to-reel tape for me, and he said, “I’m collecting the music of Uncle Dave Macon,” this old-timey guy who used to play at the Grand Ole Opry and played the banjo and was quite a showman. Then he played it for me. He had gotten some 78s and was playing me a reel-to-reel, and I had never heard old-timey music like that before. Then he gave me a couple of records of Doc Watson. He was writing the liner notes for a new release on Vanguard from Doc and Merle Watson and said, “You should listen to him. He sings about North Carolina and songs that he grew up with.” So it was later that summer that I got to hear Doc Watson live, at a little boathouse concert series at Schroon Lake, NY. I met him and



sat in the front row listening and watching every note that he and Merle played. The combination of meeting Ralph Rinzler and him introducing me to these two very different artists—and then meeting Doc Watson—that carried me for a long way. That kind of was an undercurrent throughout my college years, as far as the kind of music I wanted to play. I hadn’t written any yet, but that came later.

That must have been a high standard of musicianship to witness? Was it intimidating to watch that level of musicianship and traditionality?

Yes, it was one of those experiences where you either want to burn your guitar or practice harder. Thank goodness, it made me want to practice harder. That was the introduction that got me thinking in that direction. But it was when I got out of the Army in 1975, and got out of the Adirondacks. I grew up in the town of Minerva. I am not a native of the Adirondacks; I was born in Brooklyn. And every summer my family would come up to the family homestead, the place my mother was born, her father was born, her grandfather was born, and her great-grandfather settled when he came over from Ireland in the middle 1800s during the potato famines. I came back home and worked with a surveyor for a



year, and it was during that year that I discovered the recordings of Marjorie Lansing Porter. Marjorie was the Essex County historian. She did for Essex County what John Lomax and Alan were doing all across the country, and eventually around the world—collecting folk songs before they evaporated into thin air. Once people stopped singing those old songs, from Grandpa and Mom and Dad, they're lost. So, she was going around the back roads of Essex County, recording songs with an acetate recorder, and her collection of Adirondack songs focused on “Yankee” John Galusha. He died in 1951; I was born in 1949. There was no way I could have met him, but growin’ up in that time—my family moved when I was 12 to Minerva. Here I grew up in the same time, in the same town as this guy “Yankee” John Galusha who knew hundreds of songs. And Marjorie Lansing Porter recorded most of them, and I’d never heard of him. Nobody had mentioned his name! I thought, “What a crime this is that here’s someone who grew up in this town, and loved folk music, and sang folk music, and I never heard of him?” So, it was at that point that I decided—if I was going to sing folk music anyway, why not pick up some of the music and lore of “Yankee” John Galusha and bring that forward? So, I started singing some of those logging songs, “Once More A-Lumbering Go,” “The Lumberman’s Alphabet,” all those songs. Then writing new ones that I consider in the tradition, not only musically in the tradition of the musical style, but writing songs about people, places, and events. Some of them I had the chance to experience, and others, I didn’t experience them, I would research them. I will give you an example: I was asked to write a song about the Minerva Historical Society, about Francis Donnelly. He had been the town supervisor for Minerva for 46 years. After he died, the Minerva Historical Society was going to have a special dedication to him. They asked me if I would write a song about him. As I began my research, I discovered that it was his grandmother who came from Ireland, as a widow, with five children. Think of that, not only leaving your home and going to a totally new country, but you no longer have a husband, and you have five

children to care for! She brought them up to be good people: civil servants. Not only did this guy, Francis, become a town supervisor, but also his father had been one. And when he died, his brother completed the term. He just was always giving to the community.

What experiences have shaped the content of your songs?

I will take a real diversion and mention “Roadblock,” because it’s not an Adirondack song. It illustrates how *Fresh Territory* is a better representation of the wide variety of things I’ve written—and yes, there are some Adirondack things on this album, but it’s very diverse. “Roadblock,” is a song I wrote when I was in Jamaica in 1985. Western New York and Kingston, Jamaica, are part of a group called Partners of the Americas, and they are like brother or sister communities. I went down with an engineer. This was back when I was teaching audio and radio production at SUNY Fredonia, and spent a month in Jamaica teaching audio for radio, audio for theater, and working with the cultural training center down there in Kingston. The day before we were to return home, the price of gasoline—what they call Petro—went up from a couple of dollars to 10 dollars. Overnight, it skyrocketed! The next day, the headlines talked about how fuel is now at this outrageous cost, because the government could do it, and the government needed the money. The general public protested. They shut down the city of Kingston and virtually the country of Jamaica; every road. There were fires at the intersections of every major road, the airport was cut off; nothing was happening, and this went on for 24 hours—tires burning at every intersection. And at the end of 24 hours, everyone went back to work and said, “Okay, we’ve made our statement, and we are not happy, but we got to say what we wanted to say, and now it’s back to work.” Then, the next day after that, we got to return home. But being in the middle of this, and hearing the radio reports—shots being fired here and there, police looking for this and that, so and so hasn’t come home from school yet—I wrote the song “Roadblock.” One of the challenges

of a songwriter is whenever anything personal happens, how can you turn the song to be universal, so that those who weren’t in Jamaica can get something out of this? Yes, it happened in 1985, but what does it have to say to people in 2012? So, that’s what I attempt with all the songs I write. So, certainly over the past couple of years, I have been singing “Roadblock” more and more. It’s virtually the Occupy [Wall Street] movement. They were occupying the City, saying that “We’re pissed off, we don’t like this, what are you going to do about it?” But then, they are continuing on with life. It indirectly addresses greed, which is a topic in another song: “Peace Begins in My Own Heart.” You recognize the tune in “Peace Begins in My Own Heart” as being “The Wayfaring Stranger” tune. I was asked if I knew any songs about the Golden Rule; there was going to be a guest speaker at a local church who was going to talk about how the Golden Rule is a part of every major world religion, and if I knew any songs about it. After searching all my songbooks and records and CDs and not finding one, I decided to put new lyrics to that tune but didn’t care much for the lyrics to that particular tune. So I made it about helping one another versus the greed that we see in the world. “Whistle Blower” came after hearing some stories about specific whistle-blowers who are trying to do something for the good of all people. And often get either fired, or in trouble, or, a company suing them because they said something publicly or disseminated some classified information that they weren’t supposed to. But it was for the good of the people. Instead of making it about a specific case, I decided to have the person be unnamed, and the job unnamed, and let it be a generic whistle-blower instead of a specific one, like in the tobacco industry.

Where did this desire to stand up for social justice come from?

I guess the best way to describe it is my upbringing, my parents, or my mother, always giving things away. If she’d make a pie, she’d make a couple of extra to give away to friends. At church she’d be quilting with the other women, and they would always be working

on quilts to give away to others. And it wasn't until really late in her life that I learned that during World War II, she and other women were crocheting bandages for the troops, so every night she'd be crocheting. So just her experience, learning that life is not about you, it's about how you interact with others.

What tools have helped you with your songwriting?

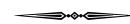
Moving from Brooklyn to this 350-acre farm at the age of 12 years old was a huge shift and an important change in my life. Letting me experience wilderness. All I had to do if I wanted to go for a walk was to tell my parents, "Okay, I'm going in this direction and I'll be back by supper." The freedom to wander off the trail—I think that at a young age helped me to not be such a jerk as a teenager. Experiencing solitude, seeing a deer trail and deciding to follow it, and if you were lucky coming upon some deer or just the opportunity if you were quiet, and observant enough, that the wildlife was there. It is my uncle that took me hunting. He was a hunter training person, and he taught me to "still hunt"—instead of tracking a deer or a bear, sitting still, blending in, being quiet and observant, and eventually, that would pay off in the wildlife coming to you as long as you were quiet and were observant. Those are exactly the tools I needed to become a songwriter, or actually [for] any kind of writing—is to be observant and blend in and listen. That contributed to my teaching of audio production. The first lesson is that you have to learn how to be an excellent listener if you hope to be a good producer. The same is true for writing. I have heard that fishermen do this—you begin to catalog in your brain, whether you write it down or not—you go out on a day and it's 78 degrees and overcast and what do you see and hear? What do you catch if you are fishing? Every time you go out, you are mapping what is the temperature? What is the weather? What season is it? And eventually, after years, you have a sense of "I am not even going to go out today, because the fish won't be biting." Or, you look out and it's a certain humidity and temperature and it's a fall day, and you know that if I go out there, I am going to see some rabbit,

I'm going to see some deer, because all of the dates that I have collected in my lifetime tells me that this is when they'll be out. Of course, that applies to everything in life. We are collecting data all the time. Or, at least we are if we are observant. The next step is having the brain process it and put it to use. Calling upon that and seeing and hearing connections. No matter where you learn those skills about observing and collecting data, and if you go hiking, you are out in the open, out in the woods, the things that you learn to do there can be put into use there, no matter where you go, even in a city. When I visit my daughter and her husband and granddaughter in Brooklyn, I feel I get more out of their backyard and the parks. We walk around—'cause they don't own a car, we walk everywhere—I get more out of that experience than the average person who's lived in Brooklyn all his/her life. Just because I am tuned in to what is going on around me. I realize that I have these skills or tools, and I try to take advantage of them no matter where I am.

Where did you write the songs for *Fresh Territory*?

Quite a few of them were written at that cabin: "Power From Above," "Whistle Blower," "Fix it or Stop Complaining." "From Every Mountainside" was written while I was driving. I do a lot of writing while I'm driving, if I'm going to be in the car for two to four hours. Instead of having music on, I'm just quiet for a long, long time, and then maybe something I've been thinking about, or a song idea that I wanted to work on, or something completely different gets into my head. "Like a Sailor" was written at that camp; "Widow of Charlie Hollow," that was written at that camp; "Oh Holy Day" was written at that camp. Both "Oh Holy Day" and "Seize the Day" are meditative songs along that line about observing. It all started with noticing when I was at that cabin, a Black-Eyed Susan kind of bobbing slowly up and down in the breeze, and it looked just like it was nodding yes. And, so, I think I jotted down, "The Black-Eyed Susan is nodding Yes, I wonder what the question is?" Then, I set that aside, and then came back

to it later with other images. Have you been to Great Camp Sagamore up near Racquet Lake? It's one of Durant's great camps. The Vanderbilts lived there after Durant went bankrupt, and then it belonged to Syracuse University. Since the late '70s, it's been a not-for-profit educational organization. I was singing there the week before last, and there was a group of birders there from all over the country. I hadn't been in the Adirondacks in the fall for a number of years, and I was going to do a program of Adirondack music at Sagamore back in the '90s. Every turn in the road—I'm driving there in October—every turn was another splash of color, and I rolled my windows down and the smell of decaying leaves was so sweet and overwhelming. And when I arrived at Sagamore, before getting out of the car, I just started writing "Drink of Autumn." ▼



Fresh Territory is available for download only (www.berggrenfolk.com/fresh-territory.html). From this webpage, you can also download a free PDF of a choral arrangement of Dan's solar and wind energy song, "Power From Above." Dan has been inviting choruses and choirs around the country to sing it on Earth Day (April 22), or any day they wish. Bill McKibben, author and environmentalist, says, "Dan is a throwback to the old role of the folk singer. With his wind power song, he's articulating things that need to be said right now."

Dan's CD, *Fresh Territory*, was the May 2012 featured selection in the New York Folklore Society's CD-of-the-Month Voices in New York membership program. Visit our Artists' Directory www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/music/artist/berggrend.html for more information about Dan Berggren. Look for other CDs by Dan Berggren, including his 2013 release, *Tongues in Trees*, with Ed Lowman in the NYFS online store www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html.

Chris Mulé is the Folk Arts Director of the Brooklyn Arts Council (BAC). He earned his MA in Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, Bloomington. Chris is also vice-president/secretary for the New York Folklore Society Board of Directors.

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