

Dave Carter & Tracy Grammer first met in March 1996 at the exit to The Buffalo Gap, a music club in Portland, Oregon. It's claimed that Dave then uttered the immortal words "Oh, I see you play the violin. We should play music sometime." Dave had been a Portland resident since the early nineteen-nineties, while Tracy had only recently relocated there from California. A matter of months after that initial meeting Tracy became a member of Dave's band, which shrank to a duo within the year. The pair went on to self-produced and record, in Tracy's kitchen, their debut album "When I Go" [1998]. By the close of 2000, their first collection for Signature Sounds Recordings, "Tanglewood Wood" became the most played folk/roots music recording on Stateside folk radio stations. If that were not enough, "Drum Hat Buddha," their follow-up released by the same label in June last year, was an even grander collection of songs. As for their performance on disc [and onstage at Kerrville where the following interview took place last September], revelation undersells the result. Dave and Tracy spent five weeks, this Spring, touring America's Eastern seaboard with Joan Baez and Richard Shindell. As this new magazine hits the news stands they will self-release their remake of Dave's out of print solo album "Snake Handlin' Man." What follows, is an insight into the quite wondrous world of "Drum Hat Buddha"

Q. For "Drum Hat Buddha" did you cut all the songs live.

Tracy. A few songs we did that way. But generally since we are such perfectionists, we would dub. The rhythm section would be done at once and a scratch vocal, and then we'd go back and layer things.

Dave. Also, I wanted to mention.....we didn't know very many of the songs on **Drum Hat Buddha** when we went in to record them.

Q. So you had not been playing them in live shows.

Tracy. Not at all. They were hot off the press. [**Dave.** We didn't have the chance.] For the song "Love The Magician" I literally read the lyrics for the first time when I recorded the vocal that is, for the most part, the final vocal. Dave was having trouble with the chorus, so he kept tweaking this word or that word. I saw all these pieces of paper and didn't know which one was the final one. Then he says, "Oh, it's this one" and I stepped up to the microphone and just gave it my best shot. I like that kind of situation, because you get the spontaneity. You're really trying to get the essence of the song the first time.

Q. Whither the title Drum Hat Buddha.

Dave. I was thinking one day while driving home from the grocery store, a picture is worth a thousand words and images would make specific statements. The shaman's drum is like the heartbeat. It's a hoop drum that you hold at the heart and you beat. The dream world and the physical world come together at the heart, and there's this beating. The cowboy hat corresponds to the intellect, which may strike some people as kind of odd [Dave and Tracy laugh]. The hat is involved with the head, with this house [Dave points to his head]. The Buddha is the transcendent element. We felt that it should come last. So there's the heart, the head and then the ineffable.

Q. Let's talk about some of the songs on the Drum Hat Buddha album. "Ordinary Town" is about someone who is not being accepted.

Dave. Yeah. [**Tracy.** Yeah.] It's about small town saints, small town mystics who have trouble making themselves understood.

Q. In a way, 2000 years on, nothing has really changed.

Dave. Yeah, that's true to some degree. It's about the frustration of being held down by a social machine. An invisible machine, that works for social stasis. You really see it in small towns more than in big cities. There's a kind of person who lives in small towns who have the capacity to reach out, but they get laughed back into the station that they are expected to fulfil.

Q. A lot of historic events took place in "Tillman County." In particular Denison Dam at the mouth of Lake Texoma near Oklahoma City overflowed in 1957.

Dave. I don't remember that particular flood, but Oklahoma is the world capital of horrible weather and down there along the Red River, the weather can be beautiful and then terrible. It really puts the fear of God into wanting to live there or spend even one Spring there.

Q. The lyric of the song features the term, "*chickasa trickster*." Who or what is that

Dave. The Chickasa is a Native American tribe. The Chickasa nation is located, thanks to the Trail of Tears and the land grab, in that area. For the line "*chickasa trickster calls to the funnel cloud*," I had this image of a Chickasa shaman, somewhere out on a hill, calling down this weather on to the land.

Q. The underlying story line in "*The Power & The Glory*" refers to your trip to Nashville in 1995. Well, almost. Except that many facts in this song are clearly nothing to do with you.

Dave. It really is true, about the experiences I've had in Nashville. Of course, I did not live that entire story. It's my experience of Nashville, and the experience that people I know, who have gone to Nashville, have had. This isn't true of everyone, because I personally am in love with many fine artists and songwriters that live in Nashville. Buddy Mondlock and Carol Elliott, for example. Gillian Welch. Stacey Earle.

Q. I just love "*236-6132*." That song is so much fun. I presume that "*Casey cracks the ball*" is a baseball reference.

Dave. I don't know if you know this poem. It's a big, important poem that everybody studies in American public schools, "Casey At The Bat." It's about how this baseball team, in this small town, is down by one point. Or two points. The mighty Casey, their hero, steps up to bat. It's the end of the game, the bases are loaded, but everybody's confident, because the mighty Casey is at the bat. At the end of this hopeful, hopeful poem the last lines are something like, "*somewhere brass bands are playing, it's a beautiful day and everyone is happy, but there is no joy in Mudville because the mighty Casey has struck out*." Something I've always wanted to do, since I was a little kid, is write a poem where, in fact, Casey did hit that ball. The line, "*Casey cracks the ball*," is what I wanted.

Tracy. My one regret about recording the song, because I hear this in my head every time it plays, is when "*Casey cracks the ball*," I just want to hear this crowd roar in the background.

Q. I took it as read that you had a lot of fun writing the song. Was it easy to write.

Dave. I did write that one pretty quickly. I had to be ecstatic. It wasn't something I wanted to work on over a period of time. There's a lot of references there, including one to Townes Van Zandt.

Q. "*41 Thunderer*" – I take it that was a very famous gun in the old west.

Dave. The song is about Billy the Kid. I won't say it's romanticised quite, but it's a mysticised, philosophised sort of version. That was the gun that Billy the Kid used.

Tracy. The song was written sort of as an answer to a challenge. A friend of ours who runs the Sisters Folk Festival is a real big fan of Billy the Kid. [**Dave.** A fine songwriter]. He's real knowledgeable about the old west and said "*Dave, I want to play you this song about Billy the Kid*." He's strumming along and then he sings, "*And he shot his*," and he picks some substitute gun [**Dave.** He goes, "*his old 44*"]....."*Billy shot his old 44*," and then stops and says, "*Alright, I know Billy didn't really shoot an old 44, he shot a 41 Thunderer, but you can't put that in a song*." Of course, at that very moment the light bulb goes on in Dave's head. He's fairly glowing out of the ears. Dave went home and, I think, that night started his song about the 41 Thunderer.

Dave. It was partly because, when he said "*41 Thunderer*," I'd never heard of the gun, the 41 Thunderer. [**Tracy.** It's just a cool sounding thing]. What a powerful name for a gun, I mean that's sheer poetry right there. Good Lord, that is, to me, a far more powerful image than "*his old 44*." That said, I do want to say that Jim's song about Billy the Kid is really good.

Q. The words, "*She slid like a viper from her tooled leather dress*" could be misconstrued.

Dave. [Laughs] You know of course, that that's a reference to his holster. **[Tracy.** You can think about that. You could go there]. You know it's the image of the gun, and the way of life of the gun, that's what the whole song is about. It's about a person who falls in love with the gun and the way of the gun.

Q. "Highway 80" is a kick up your heels, road song.

Tracy. It's a good one. We've had that one around for a little while.

Q. For all the heavy lyrical nature of what you do, is humour an essential part of your life.

Tracy. We spend most of our time on the road laughing at the stupid jokes each of us makes. It would just be silly for us to make an album full of ponderous, morose ---- you know, taking ourselves a little too seriously, kind of songs. We like to think we're funny with each other. It's just required, and Dave is so good in capturing that stuff in song. Also, we just have a policy that on every album we do, we include some kind of truck-driving songs. Or some kind of travelling song, and "Highway 80" was the one for this album.

Q. In "Love, The Magician" what is the Ray Wylie Hubbard reference. Is it to do with his song, "The Messenger."

Dave. He has a song that starts "He came down from Oklahoma," and I realised after I wrote the song that it is possible that I might just have got that line from Ray and forgotten about it.

Q. The whole concept of the song is about something that disappears into thin air. Or can disappear into thin air.

Dave. That part I don't think I got from Ray. **[Tracy.** It's another shape shifter kind of song]. You know this couple, they just keep changing shape when the.....**[Tracy.** Old man or the dog, tries to catch up with them. They can see him, because they are a different animal].

Q. In "Merlin's Lament" a magician turns up again. The lyrics in the song could be taken as being pretty explicit, almost erotic, on occasions. Was that a deliberate approach.

Dave. Yeah. You're probably aware of most of what I'm about to say, but one of the legends of Merlin is that he was imprisoned by a young woman to whom he gave away all of his power. This is a powerful myth, because this really happens to us in daily life, even if we don't really quite live it out. I think there is always this adoration of youth and fertility that one always can be put into a certain, I suppose, kind of jeopardy by. If jeopardy it is. Maybe the price of that ecstasy is not too high at all. I think Merlin lives everywhere. Again, in my song, I wanted to put it in a little town. An everyday sort of setting. He's locked in his cave downstream, but all the energy of life flew "from the miracle hills of her hips."

All of Dave and Tracy's recordings can be obtained in the UK from Fish Records, P.O. Box 148, Shrewsbury SY3 5WQ or on the internet at www.fishrecords.co.uk

Arthur Wood.

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