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Dan Bern Is

...a conundrum wrapped inside a genius wrapped inside a big scary punk.

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Dan Bern is going out of his way to provoke the crowd at Thursdays nightclub. "I just realized," he says, letting his guitar drop to his side right in the middle of a song intro. "I just had an epiphany. All the stories I ever heard about Pennsylvania were about people who got away from the mines, the coal mines -- people who escaped and went to college and never had to go back down there again. So that means you people -- you're the ones who are still here. So you must all work in the mines." He fixes his stare on a middle-aged woman in the front row. "You, ma'am, do you still work down there?" She giggles awkwardly, managing a "no." He refuses to give up: "Do you own a parakeet?"

Dan Bern is singing a song about a guy named Josef Amerikovski. The first verse is a typically, brilliantly surreal slapdash of thought-bursts ranging from ethnic identity and pop culture to romantic poetry. Then the music hits a dark, grooving break, and suddenly Dan's stream of consciousness turns from a raging river into a whirlpooling drain of subzero liquid oxygen. "Joe Namath, Joe Namath, Joe Namath was from Beaver Falls," he drones in a near-monotone. "Joe Namath, Joe Namath, Joe Namath was from Beaver Falls." As he spins further and further inward with a singsong rant about the American Football League of the '60s and its sexy, mustached players, it's impossible to tell whether he's freestyling or whether this is actually the song. And it may not really matter.

Dan Bern is hanging out after the show is over and eating a dish of ravioli, when a fan asks about the next album, which was supposed to have been released by now. Dan shrugs. "We'll go in, like, a day before we told everyone it would be done," he says, "and just put down a little tape recorder on the table..." He mimes playing the guitar as if to say: *We'll just bang out the whole damn record right here during dinner.*

Dan Bern is being slightly disingenuous when he says this. Because his tone suggests it's a joke. Yet when his keyboardist/co-producer, Pittsburgh native Wil Masisak, reminisces about making the *last* album, 1998's *Smartie Mine*, he reveals that just about all the takes they used were recorded between 1 and 6 in the morning. It was, he says, a "late-night living-room record." It eventually got a gushing review in *Rolling Stone*, the kind of lavish praise that generally runs with five stars next to it -- yet there were only three stars there for Dan. Maybe *Rolling Stone's* editors don't approve of the living-room thing.

Dan Bern is possibly the most insanely genius lyricist of our generation. He's got big lyrical balls, as he might say; he's not afraid to throw something in your face even when he doesn't know whether it'll make you laugh, make you cry or incite you to riot. There's a song on *Smartie Mine* called "Beautiful Trees." Sounds pretty, huh? It's not a ballad. Nor is it about environmental issues. It's a furious, jump-punk exorcism of primal male frustration with all things female: "Every 28 days women bleed / Unless they get too much of your seed / But men gotta flush themselves out too / But it's always sexual when they do / You women -- you just stick some *pad* inside / Men gotta practically fall in fucking love." He then wraps it up sneeringly with: "Let's not beat around the bush, that's bad luck / I asked you in 'cause I wanna

fuck... / You don't have to leave / You can stay here / After all, this is still a love song." If you didn't know Dan Bern, you might think it was a love song by a rapist. And yet three tracks later he's crooning one of the most vulnerable, romantic, gently sexy *real* love songs -- using his girlfriend's actual name -- that's ever been recorded.

Ever.

Dan Bern is willing to admit that he recently came close to chucking the whole music thing altogether. After he returned to the States from his last European tour in 1999, he still hadn't succeeded in igniting the cultural revolution he'd had every right to expect, given how often the rock critics had called him the Springsteen or the Dylan of Generation X. (Apparently Generation X isn't *looking* for its Springsteen or Dylan -- it's too busy seeking ecstasy on the dance floor.) So Dan Bern hung out in New York for eight months and painted. He painted a lot -- so much, in fact, that "for weeks at a time, I'd forget that I do this," he says, briefly picking up his harmonica. "I was kind of thinking, maybe I would stop, walk away from it. Because it's *hard*. And there's so much self-absorption that goes into it. Painting is the opposite. You remove yourself, to a fair degree, to focus on something outside. And that was feeling so good."

Dan Bern is a pretty neat painter. Just look at his second album cover. He could get work.

Dan Bern is going to write music forever, though, periods of disillusionment notwithstanding. And he knows it now. "When people ask me, 'Why do you write songs,'" he says, "I think the question is backwards. Because my question for them is, 'Why did you stop?' Every little kid is making up songs all the time. They speak in singsong. And at some point, they stop. There's social pressure against it -- it's a 'silly,' 'frivolous' thing to do. But I've seen when people start to do it again after they'd stopped -- and it's a glorious thing."

Dan Bern is a cocky, swaggering, sarcastic loudmouth onstage who kind of just a little scares the fuck out of people. Sitting quietly in the dark after the show's done, though, Dan Bern is quiet and thoughtful and downright reverent. "I believe in song," he says so softly it's practically a whisper. "I don't want to sound hokey, but it's true. As much as my ego wants *my* particular songs to be liked and listened to, it's more than my songs, or Bob Dylan's songs, or Bruce Springsteen's songs or John Lennon's songs. Everybody's just tapping into that primal thing: When we speak in different pitches, it *sounds good*."

Dan Bern is. Thank God.