

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Charlie Daniels

STILL KICKIN' ... STILL PICKIN'

By Glenn Swift

In the summer of 1950, two events took place on the world stage that would have long-term historical impact. The first was the North Korean invasion of South Korea. The second was 14-year-old Charlie Daniels picking up his first guitar.

The Koreans are still fightin'... and Charlie's still pickin'.

"I had always wanted to play a guitar, was fascinated by the darn thing, but never had the opportunity to learn how to play. Then out of nowhere one day a friend of mine, Russell Palmer, pulled out a guitar from his closet. I told him that he had to teach me everything he knew. That was about two and a half chords," laughed Daniels.

Those two and a half chords changed Charlie's life forever. "From that moment on I wanted to play," added Daniels.

Before long young Charlie had his own guitar and began learning everything he could from as many people as he could. "I've never had any formal musical training.... I couldn't afford it," quipped Daniels. "Even to this day I can't read music."

But boy can he play.

"I got my first gig about four years later playing at a beer joint in Jacksonville, North Carolina. From there, I went to Washington D.C." Slowly, Daniels began to earn a reputation...very slowly.

"For years Nashville seemed as far away as the moon," recalled Daniels, who openly conceded that he never dreamed he would ever enjoy the level of success that has come to pass. "I couldn't have even imagined what was in store for me," the legendary songwriter said.



Charlie Daniels - Photos Provided

Daniels got his first break in 1964 after co-writing "It Hurts Me," which was later recorded by Elvis Presley. But the boy from Tupelo, Mississippi was long past his heyday, and Daniels could still not break into the Nashville scene.

All that changed when renowned record producer Bob Johnson signed Daniels on as a studio musician during the recording of three albums for Bob Dylan between 1969 and 1970. Daniels' extraordinary musical talent was no longer a secret. Shortly after doing his session work with Dylan, other notables (including Johnny Cash and Leonard Cohen) were also utilizing Daniels' skills as a guitarist and

fiddle player.

"But I wasn't a studio musician... I was a performer," said Daniels.

No truer words have ever been spoken. Daniels recorded his first solo album, Charlie Daniels, in 1971, which was soon followed by a second album the following year, Honey in the Rock. It was a novelty song from that second album, "Uneasy Rider," that Daniels enjoyed his first hit – at age 36.

"Because I came up the hard way and worked for so long without a great deal of success has helped me to appreciate the success I've had," said Daniels.

Then again, the famed musician was quick to concede that there were two other reasons why he's been able to take the fortune and fame in stride – mom and dad.

"I was very fortunate to have had the parents that I did. They taught me right from wrong and respect for people and property. They gave me everything I needed... and not a bit more."

"Uneasy Rider" eventually topped out at #9 on the Billboard Hot 100. Shortly thereafter, Daniels organized the first in a series of Volunteer Jam concerts based in or around Nashville. Except for a three-year gap in the late 1980s,

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these jams have continued ever since. In 1975, he had a Top 30 hit as leader of the Charlie Daniels Band with what has become a Southern Rock anthem, "The South's Gonna Do It Again." Later that same year, Daniels recorded another hit: "Long Haired Country Boy." Daniels had now become a household name.

Since those early years, Daniels has recorded 48 albums along with a wealth of hits – many of which have been of the "cross over" variety making it onto both the country and pop charts. Daniels won the Grammy Award for Best Country Vocal Performance in 1979 with his signature song, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," which reached #1 on the charts.

Subsequent Daniels pop hits have included "In America" (#11 in 1980); "The Legend of Wooley Swamp" (#31 in 1980); and "Still in Saigon" (#22 in 1982).

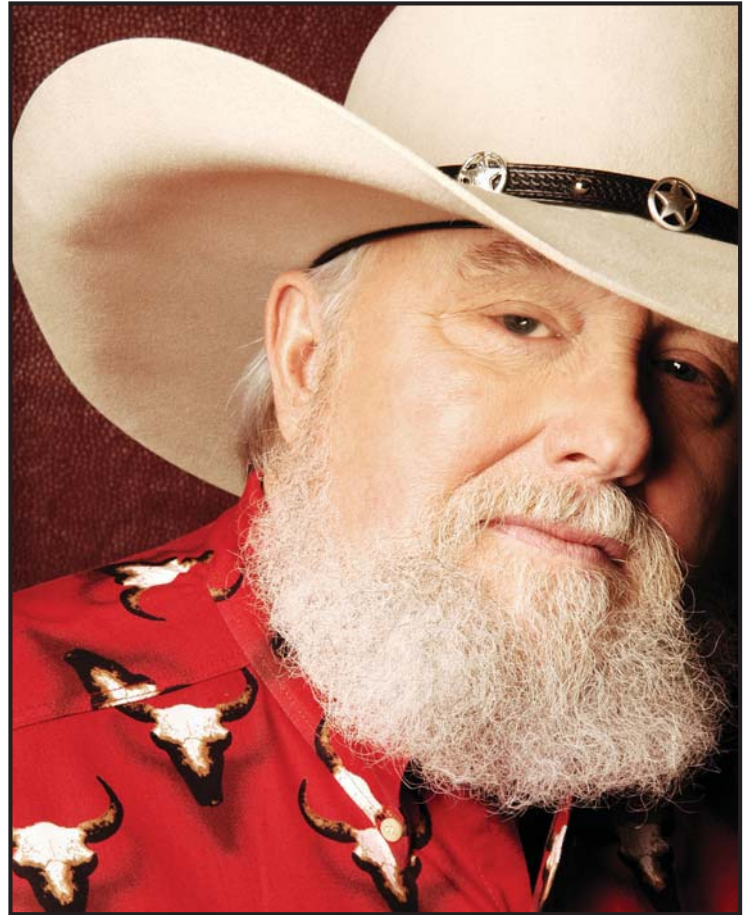
Fervently patriotic, Daniels has never shied away from politics. He was an early supporter of Jimmy Carter's presidential bid and performed at his January 1977 inauguration. "In America" was a reaction to the 1979-1981 Iran Hostage Crisis and described a patriotic, united America where "we'll all stick together and you can take that to the bank... That's the cowboys and the hippies and the rebels and the yanks."

For Daniels, "In America" was a throw back to yesteryear.

"I'm a child of World War II," said Daniels. "A time when everyone was patriotic. Believe me, to see everyone in the country pulling together for a common cause was a sight to behold." In 1990, Daniels' country hit "Simple Man" seemingly advocated a pseudo-Biblical form of vigilantism with lines such as "Just take them rapists, killers, and child abusers out in the swamp. Put 'em on their knees and tie 'em to a stump. Let the rattlers and the bugs and the alligators do the rest." Daniels wrote the song "out of frustration," he said. "Simple Man" eventually reached #2 on the country charts and, to say the least, got Daniels considerable media attention and talk-show visits.

In more recent years, Daniels has become closely associated with the Religious Right and was a fervent supporter of George Bush in the last two presidential elections. Never one to compromise on his principles, Daniels refused to take a pot shot at John Kerry during the last presidential campaign in the midst of the Swift Boat Controversy. Despite his open support of President Bush, Daniels said that having never served in the military himself, he did not feel he had the right to criticize the Senator's service record.

Since the attacks of 9/11, Daniels has undertaken three tours of Iraq and Afghanistan to perform for our troops. "Our country has always been closely linked with our military. We are very beholden to them because we wouldn't have the freedoms and opportunities that we have without them. Today we have a very cruel enemy and those Americans who put their lives on the line to defend us deserve our support. It's the least we can do.



Daniels is also very concerned with the leftist slant of so many of today's celebrities. Clearly, this country boy wants to send a different message.

"Besides wanting to give people a great performance every time out, I'm concerned with how I am perceived and want to show my sincerity for this great country of ours."

In 2003, Daniels published an Open Letter to the Hollywood Bunch in defense of President Bush's Iraq policy. His 2003 book, *Ain't No Rag: Freedom, Family, and the Flag* contains this letter as well as many other personal statements. After penning a book of short stories a year later, Daniels released his third book in March of this year, *Growing Up Country*. His latest work echoes the memories of a bygone era that he holds so dearly.

Daniels continues to perform his unique mix of traditional country, honky tonk, outlaw, gospel, blues, southern rock, and jazz. "There's a reason why my music reflects so many

different styles," said Daniels. "When growing up in rural North Carolina, we only had one radio station. They played a little of everything and I learned to enjoy all kinds of music. Even today, I listen to everything from Beethoven to Eric Clapton."

At 71, Daniels isn't showing any signs of slowing down. In fact, he still tours nine months of the year. Why? "Music is my life," said Daniels. "Retirement isn't in my vocabulary."

Charlie Daniels will be performing a Volunteer Jam concert on May 12 with the Marshall Tucker Band and The Outlaws at the Sound Advice Amphitheatre at 601-7 Sansbury's Way in West Palm Beach. Doors open at 5:30pm and the show begins at 7pm. For more information, call 561-795-8883 or visit livenation.com.

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