

Meet Singer-Songwriter Dana Countryman: Writing Songs in a Time-Warp



Dana Countryman in his home recording studio in Everett, Washington. Here, in this music and memento-filled space, Countryman has recorded numerous albums over the past decade-plus.

photo by Frank M. Young

Songwriter Joel R. Cooper talks with Dana Countryman about his new album of melodic retro pop, “Come into My Studio,” and reminisces about their earlier days in an exclusive interview

I first met Dana Countryman in the late '70s, when he lived in Hollywood, California. At that time, we were both fledgling songwriters, as idealistic as we were wet behind the ears.

But even back then, I saw something in Dana that was unique. For one, he was certainly precocious. His understanding of pop music, how songs were constructed, and pop vocal harmonies far exceeded that of any other songwriter I personally knew at the time. He also showed great expertise using overdubbing on a multi-track reel-to-reel tape machine.

Fast forward to today, some 40 years later, and Dana is still at it. But he has matured as a songwriter, taking his life experiences as both a professional musician and skilled craftsman of songs to a much higher level. He is a true artist, driven only by his desire for excellence. Current musical trends and fads don't affect him, and he's never caved into the promise of gold from hip-hop, rap, EDM, or country crossover. He doesn't try to be someone he's not. For the past four decades, he's stayed unwaveringly true to his vision of what music should be.

Dana Countryman's sixth solo album, “Come into My Studio,” reflects this creative passion in each of its 15 tracks (and even in its bonus 16th track, an original Christmas song).

In an age when most albums are slapped together like a poor excuse for a hook (sandwiched between two pieces of cheap plywood), this album is an extraordinary accomplishment. Painstaking craftsmanship of both music and lyrics is what Dana is all about. To him, the song is everything. And it shows.

The following interview was conducted long-distance, with me in Phoenix, Arizona, and Dana in his home studio in Everett, Washington, a suburb of Seattle. But it's as intimate as if we were casually conversing in the same room.

I do need to provide one disclaimer. I am the co-writer of one of the songs on Dana's new album: “Then She Smiles.” But this in no way affects my journalistic objectivity regarding Dana. Even if you never listened to this one particular song, his new album would still be amazing. (Of course, I do hope you listen to all the tracks, because they are all worthy of your attention).

(As an aside, I was quite honored when Dana asked me to work with him on the lyrics to his song. And I couldn't be happier with the way the song turned out).

So, Dana, tell me: what is “Vocal Retro Pop” all about, and what motivated you to do a sixth album after already doing five?

I'd say Vocal Retro Pop, to me, means the styles of music that was popular between the late '50s through the early '70s. That was my era. My favorite “zone,” concerning a style to write songs in, is around 1969. It was a kind of transitional period in pop music, when it was a cool blend of bubblegum, happy pop, memorable melodies, and lots of harmonies.

I made a commitment to myself many years ago to create an album of new songs every year, for as long as I live. Each album has a few little musical twists, and on each album, I like to tackle at least one style that I'd never tried before. For this album, I'd say that song is “Shame, Shame, Shame, Shame,” which I've described in detail below.

When you create a new album, do you try to come up with something totally different each time?

No, I don't try to do something completely unique with each album, I just try to write songs that are catchy and interesting to me. If other people like them, that's great, but

they have to please me first. I don't try to make each album radically different from the last one.

Who are some of your biggest influences – that is, the artists and songwriters who have inspired you and perhaps affected your music the most?

Well, it's going to sound "old school" all the way, but I'm an old dude! I'd say my biggest songwriter influences are Lennon-McCartney, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Eric Carmen, Tony Macaulay, Carole King, Irving Berlin, and Jimmy Webb. There are others, but those are probably the main ones. You might not hear the influences, but I know exactly what I've gleaned from each of them.

What about Richard Carpenter and John Bettis, Burt Bacharach, and Cynthia Weil/Barry Mann?

Yeah, them too. Of course. Thanks for reminding me.

Please provide a track-by-track description of your new album, "Come Into My Studio."

Ah, do I have to? I'd really prefer that people just listen to my new album.

I'm sure the readers would appreciate it!

Okay, here goes:

1) Come Into My Studio

I wrote this as a "hello" song, to start the album. It basically welcomes the listener into my studio and invites him or her to sing along. The sound of an old tape machine starting up clues the listener that this is retro stuff.

2) Take a Little Chance

I wanted something "upbeat" to start the album. My friend, Kai Danzberg, played acoustic drums on the song. He's in Germany. And another friend, Kirkcaldy McKenzie, played electric guitar on the song, all the way from Scotland. I collaborate quite a lot with musicians and singers in other locales.

3) Where Can My Baby Be?

I don't recall what the inspiration for this song was. It's just a wistful little thing that I made up, in the car, while driving.

Pardon me for interrupting you here, Dana, but good Lord! Tell me how you can possibly write songs while driving in your car? Is this even safe?

Well, I commute to and from my home in Everett to Seattle quite a bit. It's a 35-mile journey, each way. Since I'm sort of stuck in there, I find it's become kind of my songwriting office! I even have a license plate holder on my back bumper that reads "Don't disturb me – I'm writing songs in here"!

I can turn off the music in the vehicle and focus on writing both melodies and lyrics. I've been writing songs long enough that I don't need an instrument nearby anymore. I make up melodies while I'm driving and sing them into my iPhone.

"I just try to write songs that are catchy and interesting to me. If other people like them, that's great, but they have to please me first."

Same thing with lyrics. I can do "talk to text" with lyrics, while I am driving, so I do a lot of re-writes this way. I do all this, while making safe driving in traffic a priority – both hands squarely on the wheel!

4) Every Time You Break My Heart Again

For this one, I was trying to recreate that 1969-period of pop songs, along the lines of "My Baby Loves Lovin'," that kind of thing. Of course, this one sounds nothing like that particular song.

5) Same Old Dream

I hadn't written much in a "Music Hall" style of the '30s, so this one gave me a chance to do just that. By pure coincidence, my friend, Probyn Gregory, came to town with Brian Wilson's band. He stayed with my wife and I for the weekend, so while he was in my studio, I drafted him to play both

trumpet and banjo on the song.

6) It Happens Every Time

This is one of two songs that were left over from other album projects. I wrote this during the "Cabaret of Love" sessions, but never got around to recording it. It was recently featured on an Australian charity album to raise funds after the terrible wildfires they had there.

7) Mrs. Van Buren

Like the lyric in this song, I actually did find some old love notes that I had forgotten about in a box. I was also inspired by that old song, "Traces," where it talks a lot about old memories.

I didn't want to use the name "Dear Abby" in the song, because it's been done already, so I chose to call her by her last name. This is probably my favorite song on the album.

8) Willow Tree (Dana Countryman/Frank M. Young)

I wrote this lyric with my friend Frank M. Young. The chorus was something newly-written, but the melodic verse was something I'd had in my trunk, from an abandoned song I had written way back in the '70s. I had admired the work of singer-songwriter Ronnie D'Addario for some time, so I asked him to sing on the song with me.

9) Ecstasy

I originally wrote this song as a tango, never having written a tango before. But as I kept working on it, it started sounding better as a traditional pop song. I like to put triplets in my stuff, so there are some in the instrumental interlude, as well as some 2/4 breaks, just to keep it interesting.

10) You Gotta Love Jeanne Marie (Dana Countryman/Brian Gari)

This started with a little melody I wrote while driving. (Don't worry, I was being safe, as explained above). I've admired Brian Gari's work as a singer-songwriter, so I asked him to write a lyric for this song.

He sang his part from NYC, and I recorded mine here in the Seattle area. My Canadian friend, Dee Long (of Klaatu fame), added the electric guitar from his studio in British Columbia.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

11) Then She Smiles (Dana Countryman/Joel R. Cooper)

The lyric for this was co-written with you! Joel, I remember we bashed out the lyric using our iPhones and Facetime. You were in Phoenix and I was up here in Everett. We had started out co-writing songs in Hollywood about 40 years ago, so it was good to do it again, all these years later.

And do you remember the boxes of Sears popcorn we ate while walking around trying to come up with song lyrics?

Now that you mention it, I do. Ha!

12) Better Let Her Go

This was inspired by a song by The Mamas and Papas. I liked the bass line in one of their songs, so I thought I'd try something similar. My longtime lead guitarist friend, Chad Quist, played electric guitars on this from his home studio in another county of Washington State.

I also liked the way the Mamas and Papas songs used sort-of "call and response" background vocals on some of their songs, so I wanted to try that out, as well.

13) The Girl Is Gonna Stay

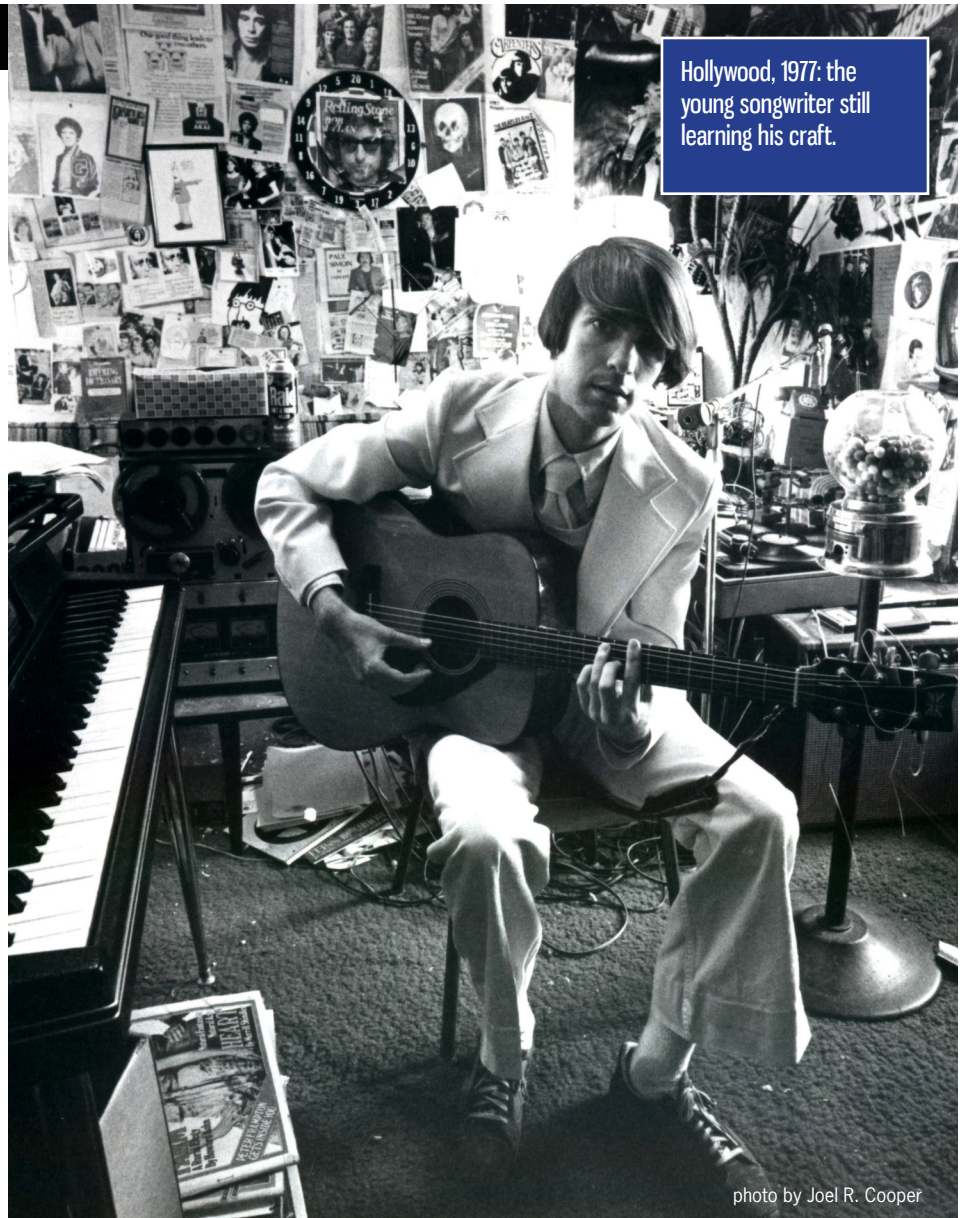
I hadn't done a lot of ballads on my previous solo albums, so I wanted to include a couple on this one. I like the imagery of the girl leaving her parents to move in with her boyfriend. I'm sure it's happened millions of times.

I also wanted to describe in the song, how the girl changes the way the house looks and feels by adding all the touches that only a girl can add.

14) Whenever You Walk By

This is another song I wrote in the car, just driving around. It was originally written to be a solo number, but I came to realize that it was going to work really well as a duet. My wife Tricia was working on an album of duets at the time, so I presented it to her as a possibility. She loved it, and we got our friend Scott to sing with her, since I had already done a couple of duets on her album with her. We did use it for her album, and I decided to include it here as well.

15) Shame, Shame, Shame, Shame



Hollywood, 1977: the young songwriter still learning his craft.

photo by Joel R. Cooper

When I was nearing the completion of this album, I realized I really needed something a bit more spicy to offset the overall sweetness of this album. Originally, I had intended to write something more rock 'n roll, but then I got the idea to write a sort of R 'n B number.

The original plan was to go into another recording studio and record a trio of girl background singers, including my wife Tricia. I had used some other great female vocalists in the past, and I booked them for the session. But because of COVID-19, the studio was suddenly closed, and anyway the girls didn't feel comfortable being closed in a small space. So the session was canceled.

I also had another session lined up with my favorite saxophone player to play on the song. He didn't feel comfortable playing in a small studio, so he canceled as well.

Fortunately, Tricia was able to sing multiple harmony parts, and she saved the day

by creating her own "girl trio"! In addition, another sax player that I had worked with in the past agreed to step in and play on the song, and what he played was perfect for the song.

Bonus Track: It's Christmas Time (Matt Tyson/Dana Countryman)

On every album I put out, I always include a Christmas song as a bonus track. This time, I didn't have any fresh ideas, but I remembered that a few years ago I had co-written a Christmas song with Matt Tyson that we hadn't used.

I asked Matt if it would be OK to include the song on this album, and he wholeheartedly agreed. Matt added his vocal to the song, and I got Scott Bennett, formally of the Brian Wilson Band, to play electric guitar on it.

photo by Rick Hoekendorf



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

ing process that helped me develop as a songwriter.

So you started with analysis – and then you let inspiration carry you forward?

Analysis – and curiosity! I listened to records a lot in my early years and played guitar or piano along with them. Eventually, I played around enough with chords, melody, and rhythm to write my first few faltering songs. The music of the Carpenters was also one of my first influences into both songwriting and vocal arranging. I was thrilled with the Carpenters' harmony.

Inspiration alone, while helpful, is rarely enough. It doesn't always come naturally. Sometimes, in fact, it takes less than an hour to write a song, other times it takes weeks, months, years, or decades. I've had some snippets of songs lying around for years and years, accumulating dust before I finally clean them off and do something with them.

It's really all about the standards I've set for myself. If others like what I do, that's great, but if not, it's not going to influence me or make me stop doing Vocal Retro Pop.

When I turned 52, I challenged myself to write, produce, and record one new album of original songs a year, for as long as I can. I'm 65 now, and pretty proud that I've been able to keep to that yearly schedule! I plan to keep going, doing what I love.

So Dana, for people who want to purchase your new album or stream your music, where can they find it?

As a physical CD, my latest album, "Come Into My Studio," is available on Amazon.com. For digital downloads, it's out there on Bandcamp, iTunes, and Amazon mp3, as well as a bunch of other digital outlets. I recommend Bandcamp for downloads, personally. The album can be streamed on Spotify, Deezer, YouTube, Pandora, TikTok, Napster and about 15 others.

About the author: Joel R. Cooper is a professional writer/reporter and award-winning journalist who doubles as a songwriter/composer. He also has an interesting day job: physician (board certified in family medicine). He currently practices medicine – and writes songs – in the Phoenix, Arizona area.

Dana today, with his wife of almost 30 years, Tricia.

The diversity of your styles is incredible, Dana. I would like now to ask you a few questions about songwriting. It's a topic as near and dear to my heart as it is to yours. Ready?

Do you think songwriting can be taught, like drama or pottery making, mathematics, or metal working, in school, or is it more of an innate ability or talent?

I think it can be taught, to a point. Someone must have a raw talent in those areas, for it to be developed. I have strong opinions about if it's worth it for people to take voice lessons, for example.

I just think that the spark of talent needs to be there already, or it's pretty much a lost cause. I've always been self-taught, so I can't speak for others.

What comes first for you – the lyrics or the music? Or neither – or both?

Never words first. Always melody, and maybe a snatch of a lyric arrives along with that.

How long have you been writing songs, and what were the first steps you took to become good at it?

I've been writing songs now for almost 50 years. It's hard to believe, but it's true!

I first became interested in writing songs when I began listening to the Beatles. I had two Beatles songbooks, and I dutifully went through each song with a pencil, totally deconstructing the songs, so I could understand exactly how they were built. This included the song form, the chords, the title, the structure of the melody, the rhyme scheme, and the lyrics.

I still have those songbooks, and in the side columns my teenage notes still remain about the structure of the songs. I really took the time to learn what made each one tick. It was an invaluable part of the learn-