

“Yes, I smoke, I drink, I swear, but I also believe,” My conversation with Dan Tyminski

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If you've listened to bluegrass music in the past 25 years, you've heard the voice of Dan Tyminski. His vocal on "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" drives the action of The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and his collaboration with Avicii on the EMD mega-hit "Hey Brother" has kept dance floors hopping the world over. Long before that, he was a key member of Alison Krauss & Union Station and an earlier incarnation of the Lonesome River Band. But the days of being someone else's version of Dan Tyminski are over. Now he's fronting his own band, singing the songs he wants, drinking whiskey with one hand and smoking a cigar with the other. Here is my conversation with Dan Tyminski at The Sheldon Concert Hall in St. Louis.

Keith Dudding: Two weeks ago, you were on the stage of the Grand Old Opry with the reunion of the *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* cast, celebrating 25 years of that movie and that remarkable soundtrack. What was that like?

Dan Tyminski: Well, I mean, 25 years, first of all, the thought that it had been that long since we recorded, you know, and worked on that project. I mean, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* It changed a lot of lives, not just ours. So it was so amazing to get to see it come together. And I mean, the Grand Ole Opry experience, I mean, not only did we have a bunch of the people, the original cast, but a host of the new people that influenced, you know, and kind of shaped as musicians. And it was, it's just, it's always amazing to see the effects of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, man. I've been watching it now for decades, and it's still a phenomenon to me.

Keith Dudding: I've been a DJ for 31 years, and I can mark time in the period before *O Brother* and after *Oh Brother*, and it really, it was a game changer.

Dan Tyminski: I couldn't see it coming when it happened. I mean, we were so excited to work on it, of course. And then, all of a sudden, man, attendance changed. The demographic of our audience changed. Bluegrass Festival attendance changed. Like, just it was a surge that this music needed.

Keith Dudding: It takes a long time to make a movie. It doesn't take as long to make a record. How much time were you involved in the production of the soundtrack and recordings that you sang?

Dan Tyminski: I mean, I was kind of ... I got to be a fly on the wall for some of it. So I got to see a lot of stuff go down, that the other people did. I was there when Ralph Stanley was recording and while the Peasall Sisters were recording. I got to see a lot of the other stuff. I mean, my part in particular, I mean, I did two versions of "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow." There was a solo version that was just myself and the guitar. And then we had the band version with all of the Soggy Bottom Boys. You know, that was just, that was a couple days. I mean, I was, you know, I was recorded for a couple days, but you know, there was a a lot of recording that went on for that. And then of course we got to be in the movie so I spent a few days on the shoot and I got to go in and give it a whack with George Clooney in the studio who almost sang it, you know, whether people know or not. Very close, I came very close to losing my gig to Clooney and he was very gracious and came out and said, "I'll make you a deal, Dan. I'll act, you sing." And my life was forever more changed.

Keith Dudding: So you heard George sing "Man of Constant Sorrow."

Dan Tyminski: Completely. And contrary to what he says, because I have heard him in interviews say that he's just really not a singer. No, I will disagree with that. I thought he's sang just fine. The spirit of the song had to be, you know, well, it had to be, first of all, recorded in its entirety, no mistakes, first and foremost. So it had to be pure, you know, there were no punch-ins or overdubs or fixing any lies. And he messed up a word or two after the first take, and he did the same in the second take. And then he didn't, he wasn't getting, I think, the excitement that he wanted from in the studio room. And after he messed up a little part of the third take, I think he walked out. It was then when he said, "Dan, you know, I don't know what we're doing here on a day off. We're in the studio when we should be having, you know, relax and I'll make a deal. I'll act, you sing." And he shook my hand. And I was, to be quite honest, I was crushed. It broke me because the really exciting part for me at the time would have been to record it with George Clooney, have him sing it. I was playing with him. I would have bragged to everyone about that \$327 studio fee. I would have got to back up George Clooney for this song, right? But because he came out and said, "I'll act, you sing" ... Oh man, I got to raise a family on that song. I mean, it put my kids in college. covered my houses and cars and it was just, you can't imagine that something like that, that's been the type of music you've played your whole life, can all of a sudden spike and it can be a life changer like that. But oh brother, where art thou? I can never be thankful enough to, you know, like I will be repaying what it's done for me for a lifetime and happy to do it.

Keith Dudding: I must live in a bubble because I missed a couple big things. The first \ was the original release of "Hey Brother" with the artist Avicii. Am I saying his name right?

Dan Tyminski: Absolutely, yes.

Keith Dudding: How did you get hooked up with that artist to record that song?

Dan Tyminski: Okay, so I just, honestly, I got a phone call one day from my assistant who said there's a guy out there in the EDM world would like you to sing a song on his record. And I believe how it ultimately happened was because they had been aware of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* And they were working on a song, "Hey Brother." It just reminded them of me -- *O Brother, "Hey Brother"* -- and they said while they were writing it, they had me in mind.

Keith Dudding: Really.

Dan Tyminski: Well, they, absolutely. They said they had thought about *O Brother* with "Hey Brother," you know, the whole thing. So as that song was being penned, they said they had me in mind. So I think it's just my niche is that My niche is that I get to sing all the brother songs. Hey brother, oh brother, another brother from another mother -- that's it. I'm the brother singer.

Keith Dudding: That was 2013. And now a billion streams later, a billion people have listened to that, or at least a billion, there's been a billion clicks on it.

Dan Tyminski: There was a billion clicks the first year. There was a billion clicks the next. And 15 years later, Spotify still had over a billion this year. It's not just a billion. It is billions and billions and billions. It's been just the biggest phenomenon. And my name is not on it. So when people, even if they go and research that song and look for, you know, you will not see Dan Tyminski on it, but everyone that knew me, you know, when that song came out, my phone blew up. It was amazing to see my friends, you know, calling up. And I had one call me and say, "Dan, you got some guy out there trying to rip ripped you off, man. You ought to call a lawyer because he's trying to sound exactly like you and he's doing all this EDM stuff." And it was, and I had to laugh. I said, "You know what, is it a song that goes, 'Hey, brother...'"? And he laughed and he says, "Well, that's it." I said, "That's me." He goes, "No, it's not." Right? Because he had done thorough research and he tried to inform me that it wasn't. And I was like, "Dude, yeah, I'm pretty sure it's me. I just did it."

Keith Dudding: And cashed the check for it.

Dan Tyminski: No, well, it wasn't, this wasn't a big payday in the same way that *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* was. This was by far a much bigger song, a much bigger money generator. But I was work for hire. You know, I got paid once the day I went in the studio, was happy to do it. And listen, this song, I would do it again in such a heartbeat because "Hey Brother" led to a whole catalog of songs that I would not have without the courage to step that far outside of the box and try to write stuff that was different. So I really owe everything that I have done from that point forward to "Hey Brother."

Keith Dudding: And then you obviously, you recorded your own bluegrass version on your most recent album, which was the first time that I heard it. I did not hear the other one. I thought, well, that's a great song.

Dan Tyminski: You know, when I first heard the song, it was a guitar demo. So when I listened to it, I was extremely happy because to me, it sounded like a bluegrass song. I heard banjos and fiddles, like I hear everything, you know. And yeah, I was quite shocked myself when I heard the song come out in Avicii's version, you know, for the first time, because when I recorded it, there was no music. I didn't record it to a track of music. I recorded it to a click track. I literally just sang to a little click in my headphones. I was just going "tick tock, tick tock, tick," right? And the guy in the studio, he hit a G note on the piano, so there was my pitch. So, you know, and I just sang the song, you know, to that click track. So when I first heard it, you know, a couple months later, the music that was behind it, I was shocked. I was awed. I didn't know what, you know, I just, my jaw dropped really. Yeah.

Keith Dudding: As I said, I must live in a bubble, because when I heard Alison Krauss was releasing *Acadia*, her first new album of Bluegrass in, I forget, 14 years, I thought, "great," you know, "Dan Tyminski." And no Dan on the album. When did you separate from Alison?

Dan Tyminski: I mean, during the album, unfortunately, yeah. during the album, it was a weird situation. So we had spent eight years, I think, between playing any music and coming back and doing anything, in which time I had started a life in a band and a machine that I, didn't want to stop. But at the thought of doing another Alison Krauss Union Station record, I felt like I owed it to the world. Like I felt like it just made sense that didn't matter what I was doing to me at the time, right? I just, I felt responsible to go into doing it. But this time around, it was different than it was before. It was hard to explain the ways that it was different, right? But it wasn't the same, it didn't feel like the same version of what we had in the past going and do it. And meanwhile, laying off to the side is my band that I had just recorded a record with and am so pumped. I mean, for the first time in my life, I get to be Dan Tyminski's version of Dan Tyminski. And ultimately, at the end of the day, I just didn't want to let that go. I spent a lifetime of being, you know, I've only been in two or three other bands and I was their version of who people heard. You know, they picked the songs and I sang them. And with Alison, you know, she went after the material and I sang the stuff that was her version of me. I'm doing a thing now to where I'm getting to steer the ship for the first time and call it selfish or call it whatever you want. The thought of letting it go became more than I could bear. And they were able to find an amazing man, you know, that is playing with Union Station now in Russell Moore, who really, holy cow, how was he not there the whole time? He's like the best singer on planet Earth, right? So he's killing it. allowed me to do what I'm doing. So I was, I mean, I wish I had the courage to step right up and say right at the start and not even be involved with the record because part of me's bummed because I recorded a lot of that stuff with him. I mean, I've recorded the record, but when it came right down to it, I decided it didn't make sense to jump into that and then jump right back out. I wanted to make the hard switch and it's Dan Tyminski Band for me.

Keith Dudding: Good for you. A bold move and a brave move because one of the...

Dan Tyminski: No, it was not easy because again, I've had the best career I could. I could not emphasize strongly enough how positive the career with Alison and Union Station. I mean, I had thirty of the best years I could ever want. And I wouldn't tarnish those memories by trying to go out and make it work right now while my it was somewhere else is what it came down to. So I get to follow my heart and I get to know that I was with the best band, that there could have been for all those years. I mean, it's ... it made me who I am.

Keith Dudding: Let's talk about the most, well not the most recent release, but *God Fearing Heathen*. Knowing Bluegrass's often very conservative Christian bent, that's a song that most bands would not touch, much less title their album. Where does that come from? That's another sort of bold move on your part.

Dan Tyminski: I think I felt like the reason that song made sense was because it was a bold move. And I think it's one of those things we find ourselves in very sensitive territory with a lot of anything that we talk about today. There's a lot of things that you have to kind of remain politically correct to talk about, if you know, if you will. And when I came up with the, first of all, I made that comment as a joke to my wife. She was, we were out on the back deck and I forget what we were talking about exactly, but I remember the question. She says, "Well, then describe yourself in the fewest possible words." And while I was sitting on the back deck, I was quite aware that I was drinking with my left hand and I was smoking with my right hand. I looked down at my hands, I said, "Well, babe, I guess I'm a God-fearing heathen." And I said it as a joke, but the light bulb went off. The songwriter bulb, it flashed, and I thought, that's a title. And I called a very good friend of mine, Ira Dean, who's a great songwriter, and asked him if he would come over and help me out with this song, and it came to us really quick. Once he got there, I mean, he knew exactly what I meant by it. And I wanted it for lack of anything else, to be real and just to be honest with it because I know a lot, everyone knows the self-righteous people in their life that walk like theirs doesn't stink. And that's just not the truth, man. The truth is, yes, I smoke, I drink, I swear, but I also believe and I thought "God Fearing Heathen" was the only song that I could have titled that record.

Keith Dudding: And after that, you followed up with the live recording at the Ryman. Now, did you set out to make a live album or did you just play a show at the Ryman, roll tape and go, "Hey, this sounds pretty good. Let's put this out."

Dan Tyminski: Well, this one came about somewhat by accident because we had booked a show to play at the Ryman. So the Dan Tyminski Band had a date on the books at the Ryman Auditorium. That's a big deal for anybody because it's the place everyone wants to play. I was at a cigar shop. Once again, smoking, there I go, smoking again, right?

Keith Dudding: I sense a theme.

Dan Tyminski: There is a theme. There has been a theme in my last thirty years that has been smoking, yes. So anyway, I'm at the cigar shop and I'm sitting with a buddy and he's asking what's going on. I tell him I'm playing the Ryman Auditorium and just kind of joking, I said, "You know, I said, if I had, you know, a little bit of extra money," I said, "I'd throw at it." I said, "I'd make a recording" because it's such a cool thing, to do. And I threw out a kind of a absurd big number, as the joke. And my buddy, he said, "Well, what if I could make that happen?". And I was like, "What do you mean?". He said, "Well," he said, "I mean, if this sounds like it could be a big deal, are you serious? Would you want to record it if I could make it happen?" And I kind of got nervous. I remember right at the time and I said, "Listen," I said, "I don't even know what to say to this, but if you're serious, let me give you my manager's number and let me just erase myself from this conversation" because I didn't, you know, that was a weird place for me to be in. I don't negotiate business deals when it comes to stuff like that. But I gave, I let him talk to my manager and my manager talked and my manager came back to me and said, "We can make this happen. Do you want to do you want to record a record?" The answer was such an astounding and obvious "Yes." And yeah, my buddy, my buddy Joe, man, cannot thank him enough. He kind of made a dream come true to be able to record. a live record at the Ryman Auditorium, I don't know what to say. It was not a plan, no. But after I found out I could, then the nerves came in and then we started really getting, really, really trying to figure out how we could make it the best. And I wanted it to be very much like if you went to hear the Dan Tyminski Band. You know, I wanted it to be a real live record. I mean, we didn't, you know, we didn't go back and post and, you know, and change everything. Man, we took the best of what we could from the night and put it out. I mean, my only regret, if there is a regret, is that it wasn't a double album because we left as much on the cutting room floor as we got to put out because we wanted it to be on vinyl. And vinyl gives you a hard limit on how much time you can put on a vinyl record. So we had to leave a lot of the show off the record, but what an experience. I'm so thankful.

Keith Dudding: You were just at the Grand Ole Opry two weeks ago. I hear you talking about the Ryman now. I sense that there's a difference in those two stages for you.

Dan Tyminski: I think there's a difference to people in general when they start considering what the history, I mean, I'm at the age now where you start thinking about how you've tied into all this and what the history of the music is. more so when I first started playing, I just wanted loud and fast and exciting and I didn't really think too much about the history of things. I mean, I was still overwhelmed to play the Grand Ole Opry stage because when I grew up, my parents were such big fans of it and they held it, they put it on such a pedestal for me that it was like, it wasn't even a real place to me that the thought of you getting to play that later in life, it was surreal. It was a very strange thing, And then of course, the position with Alison and Union Station, I mean, I got to see more stages than I ever, ever, ever thought I would as a musician. And when you get to see as much as we have throughout our very long, successful career, Yeah, you appreciate the places that are special. And the Grand Ole Opry, the people that they have influenced, the generations of music they're responsible for, yeah, that's one of the big ones. The Ryman Auditorium, same thing. When you get to play certain stages, you have to carry, I think you owe it to them to carry a high level of appreciation.

Keith Dudding: I was looking at the releases, your solo releases, and except for *Southern Gothic*, your other solo releases have all come out like within a week of your birthday. Is that deliberate or accidental? Is that a gift to yourself or your gift to the world?

Dan Tyminski: Well, it's going to be from now on. I had no idea. I was never aware of it once. This is the first I've ever even been aware that has lined up. I'm completely unaware that has been the case. But I'm, now I'm going to start maybe releasing stuff as a happy birthday to me. Yeah, that'll be the next one I work on. (Sings) "Happy birthday to me."

Keith Dudding: That's in public domain now, so you don't have to play royal on "Happy Birthday" anymore.

Dan Tyminski: I don't need to make any money off that one. That's okay, man. I still like to share.

Keith Dudding: Thank you very much, Dan. It's been a true pleasure.

Dan Tyminski: It's been my pleasure. Thank you so much for your time.