

an interview with

# DANIEL JOHNSTON

by Mark Maynard

Legend has it that hard-drinking bluesman Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil one midnight at a Mississippi crossroads. As Johnson had hoped, the devil approached him from behind and tapped him on the shoulder. Without turning to look at him, Johnson handed over his guitar. A few minutes later, when the guitar was handed back, the deal had been done. Robert Johnson had, in that single moment, become the greatest guitar player in the entire world.

It's difficult to imagine what future generations will say about singer/songwriter Daniel Johnston, but I imagine that it will be at least as mythic in scope and the devil will probably play a role.

The facts themselves, even now, unfiltered by history, are difficult to believe. A boy born to a devoutly religious, fundamentalist Christian World War II veteran and his wife, is brought up in the mountains of West Virginia, where the ideas of good and evil are drilled into him from an early age.

By most accounts, he's not a typical kid, even before the signs of manic depression begin to express themselves in his behavior. As a child, he obsesses on movie monsters and cartoons. He dreams of Casper the Friendly Ghost and creates a fantasy world where he and Casper are friends and other imaginary creatures abound. He wants to grow up and draw comic books.

At a young age, he also discovers the Beatles and decides to become a musician. (Like the Beatles, he also decides early on to foster a self-referential mythology that will run through the imagery of his songs (i.e. the Beatles' "Glass Onion.")) He begins playing piano.

In college, at a branch of Kent State, he meets Laurie, a woman who pays him the



Daniel's boxer fights Vile Corrupt

kindness of listening to his simple, homemade songs. She is repaid for her kindness by being entered into Daniel's mythologic lexicon, where she, still even today, represents the unattainable ideal of pure, innocent love.

After a short while, he drops out of college and begins to travel with a carnival, where he cooks and sells corndogs. When the carnival closes in Austin, Texas, he decides to stay. He gets a job at McDonald's and continues to make his music. When he's not working, drawing or recording, he's on the street, handing out duplicates of his tapes to pretty girls and musicians.

People in the local music scene appreciate his laid-bare lyrics, his cracking voice and the music he creates with a child's chord organ, an acoustic guitar and a household tape recorder. They adopt him as the gifted,

but fragile, symbol of the then booming Austin music scene.

When MTV comes to town in the mid 1980's in order to profile the local scene, the more well-known bands suggest coverage of Daniel. He gets on TV and then promptly falls apart as a result of the attention. With this, an ongoing cycle is set into motion where each step up in the recording world brings with it a bigger price in terms of his mental health.

Among other things, during the ensuing years, he physically assaults his manager, he runs away repeatedly, fights with the police and spends two weeks in jail, and attempts to break into a 68 year old woman's apartment, convinced that she is possessed by the devil. This final incident ending with the woman jumping from a balcony of her apartment in fear and breaking both legs. His institutionalization follows.

At the same time, his work is being seen increasingly as what it is, the work of a brilliant yet tortured person, who doesn't quite

draw the line between what can comfortably be shared, and what can't, where most others do.

His success seems to peak in 1994 when Atlantic Records signs him to their roster and releases his album, "Fun." Despite the praise of such luminaries as Kurt Cobain, the album does not sell well enough to convince Atlantic of his marketability. Five years later, he writes and records "Rejected Unknown," which, for various reasons, has still to be released outside of Austin.

And that's where we find Daniel today, trying to get his career back on track from his parents' home in a small Texas town two hours outside of Austin.

Last week I met him in Texas. Last night, he and I spoke briefly on the telephone.

What you are about to read is a slightly edited transcript of that call.