



WILKERSON

He's been a Mayor, a Pickle, and a Pengwin. He's played music all over the world, sang on a Weird Al Yankovic record, and recorded at Abbey Road Studios. Danny Wilkerson has accomplished quite a bit since he first began playing music at age 13, but there's one thing he hasn't been able to check off his bucket list – until now.

But we'll get back to that in a minute. First, a bit of background on the multi-faceted Mr. Wilkerson.

Like so many musicians, Danny cut his teeth on the music of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. "I remember seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*," Danny says, "and at just under 5-years-old, it changed my life. I knew right then what I wanted to pursue in life."

So Danny and some boyhood pals from Fort Worth, Texas spent their days imitating the Fab Four, playing guitars made out of balsa wood and kite strings, and banging on drum kits fashioned out of hat boxes. From there he began "collecting all things Beatles" and spent all his available time listening to, reading about, and watching them on television. Music was already starting to become his passion.

Danny began learning how to play drums in middle school and received his first drum kit on his 13th birthday. ("It was orange sparkle," he recalls.) Never one to waste time, he set about forming a band the very next day.

While learning songs for the band, Danny came up with a unique method that would serve him well in later years: "To learn songs, I would put a record on my Longines Symphonette record player, place the speakers behind me and turn it up as loud as I could. Obviously, this was a dinky system with very little power and I couldn't hear the music over the drums, so I got to the point where I would just sing the songs - lead parts and all - and play along to myself singing. I didn't realize it at the time, but it really helped me down the road to be able to play and sing at the same time."

While in high school, Danny not only gigged around Texas in several bands, but he also began branching out into other areas of the music biz: he wrote an entertainment column for his high school newspaper (reviewing records, sharing news about upcoming concerts, and conducting the occasional interview); he dabbled in concert stage lighting; and he worked for a company called Concerts West, mainly helping with the promotion of local concerts. Danny remembers the promo job fondly: "I got free

tickets - almost always great seats and sometimes backstage passes - to nearly every show that came through Fort Worth, and any tickets I didn't get through Concerts West I would spend the night in line to get. For Paul McCartney's 'Wings over America' tour, I cut class to get the tickets...I'd do whatever it took."

It was at this point in his budding career that Danny also began sneaking into clubs to see local bands, as well as doing a bit of living on the edge (as only a high schooler can) with his popular local band Windswept: "We would rent a hall in Kennedale, Texas, purchase kegs of beer, and then charge a cover to drink the beer and see our band. The crowds were actually pretty good, but it still amazes me that we didn't get arrested as we had no liquor license and certainly weren't checking ID's. Thank the Lord no one ever got hurt!" Members of another local pop-rock combo called The Pengwings would attend these Kennedale beer bashes, and although Danny didn't know them well at the time - "I would go see them play; however, we were just casual acquaintances," he remembers - he would soon join their ranks.

"I was a maintenance engineer at an apartment complex in Arlington, Texas and got a work order to check out an air conditioner that was not working in one of the apartment units," Danny says. "The apartment was literally right across the hall from the unit I lived in. When I walked into this apartment, I saw all these records; it was the first time I had seen someone else other than myself with as many records as I had." Danny chuckles at the memory and continues: "I fixed the AC and left, and then a couple of days later as I was entering my apartment, a guy was entering that apartment I had just worked in a few days earlier. That was when I introduced myself to Lannie Flowers, who was a singer, songwriter and vocalist with The Pengwings. We became fast friends as we had so much in common."

Things happened quickly after that fateful meeting. Danny met the rest of the Pengwings, ran sound for them for a short time, and then joined the band as a drummer/vocalist. The band's popularity was growing quickly, and they began playing gigs beyond their hometown. Initially the members of the band also worked day jobs, but an ultimatum from Danny and Lannie's boss led them to abandon the 9-5 world. Danny relates the humorous tale of how it happened:

"We would be playing gigs in Houston, which was five hours from home. We'd finish at 2:00 am, drive all night, literally go straight to work, then drive back to Houston for the next night's gig, and so on. This kind of scheduling went on for about 18 months, and I'm sure the quality of our work was in steep decline! Eventually, our boss sat Lannie, myself and our soundman down for a big talk; we were all working in maintenance by now for the same apartment owner. He gave us the ultimatum that we would either work for him or continue playing our shows. We all looked at each other and within about five seconds said, "It's been nice working with you," and we were out of there!"

Diving headlong into music as a full-time occupation, The Pengwings' touring spread to more new markets, as they hit states such as Colorado, Kansas and Arkansas. Playing a winning mixture of covers and originals (most written by Danny and Lannie), the band

gained new fans wherever they went and did some recording. The Pengwings also toured Europe (“a dream come true,” Danny remembers fondly) and even though they all subsisted on a very small stipend, they were beyond thrilled to be there. While in the UK, Danny recalls he and Lannie cold-calling record companies (“everyone we could think of, from EMI to Pye”) and giving them copies of The Pengwings’ demos. During the course of their travels, The Pengwings opened shows for artists such as Cheap Trick, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Joe Ely, the Beach Boys, and many others, “and Quiet Riot actually opened up for us,” Danny chuckles.

While those times were not necessarily financially fruitful, Danny looks back on them today with a mixture of nostalgia and wisdom: “I learned a lot about myself during these times, as we were all literally broke,” he says. “There were times when we would have to sleep in a truck and share what little food we could afford. You could literally see every rib in my body, but it never bothered me for long because getting to do what I had always dreamed of was worth the price I paid, and I really believed in what we were doing.”

In 1985, Danny left the band to launch his own company called Direct Management. Their main act was The Pengwings, and Danny officially became the band’s manager. “My goal was to get a record deal,” he explains.

Danny relates what happened next: “The band recorded some new songs and I went to New York to shop them to labels. A relative who was in the music business let me look through her Rolodex, and I copied every number I thought could possibly give me an “in.” One of those contacts resulted in a meeting with Liz Derringer (wife of guitar wizard Rick Derringer), who was definitely a mover and shaker in the industry at the time. The meeting was set at a recording studio and then at the last minute got changed to her house.”

Danny arrived for the meeting to find that Liz wasn’t home, which led to him having an impromptu meeting with her rock star husband. “Rick and I sat down, and he picked up a guitar, started doodling around and began singing. I instinctively started doing a harmony and we just hit it off. During the course of our conversation, I told him I was shopping a band to labels and asked if he would like to hear a tape. As I was setting the tape up, I told him I would love to have him produce a demo for the band. So he listened, said some nice things, and we hung out for quite a while. Liz never showed.”

Danny continues, “When I got home a few days later there a message on the machine from Rick saying he would love to work with band on a demo. I started meeting with investors to raise the money to get the band to Woodstock, NY to have the demo recorded at Bearsville Studios with Rick producing and Tommy Edmonds (Lenny Kravitz’s soundman) engineering. Once the money was raised I flew to Los Angeles to meet with Rick to deliver all the songs to be considered for the demo and to work out final details for the sessions.”

Here's where the story takes an odd – and very cool – turn: “I arrived in L.A. and call Rick, who asks me to meet him at a recording studio. When I arrive, someone lets me in and starts guiding me back to where Rick is. As I get closer I start hearing a Rolling Stones tune being played on an accordion; it's Weird Al Yankovic in the studio, with Rick sitting behind the mixing board acting as producer. After a while, they take a break, and we all eat some Chinese food they had delivered.” Legendary drummer Carmine Appice joined the group for dinner and conversation, and soon after, Weird Al went back to work in the studio.

“So Rick and Al start talking about what they want to work on next,” Danny remembers, “and Al says, ‘Let's work on some vocals.’ Rick replies, ‘Okay, which song?’ At this point, Al looks at me and asks, ‘Do you sing?’ He then takes me out to the studio, they set up a vocal mic, he pulls out some lyrics, and next thing you know I'm multi-tracking background vocals and harmonies throughout a song called ‘Spam,’ which was a takeoff on REM's song ‘Stand’.” This bit of “spontaneous, fun and very surreal” music making was released on Weird Al Yankovic's 1989 album, *UHF – Original Motion Picture Soundtrack and Other Stuff*.

There have been many other special moments – musical and otherwise – for Danny Wilkerson over the years:

---He played in a band called The E.P.'s with three other former Pengwings (Alan Petsche, Delbert Raines and Kelly Creighton); they recorded a CD of all original music that featured Rick Derringer on a few songs, with former Beatle Stuart Sutcliffe's artwork gracing the cover.

---He produced an album for 16-year-old country music artist Emily Rogers (“a little girl with a big voice”) in 2003 and wrote eight of the LP's dozen tracks.

---He's played in a variety of cover bands over the years: The Nurse (“the entire band played every gig in hospital scrubs”), The Pickles (“they were a big dill for a while”), The Waltons, with Lannie Flowers (“a party band”), and Generation Rumble (“we played only what we wanted to hear”).

---Danny served as Mayor of Annetta North, TX for four years and as Mayor pro-tem for a decade.

---He wrote the Alma Mater for Trinity Christian Academy when his daughter attended the school. (“I still attend some of their graduations just to hear the choir, students and faculty sing it.”)

--- His son Joshua is a member of the popular Texas-based rock band Green River Ordinance, who have released four full-length discs, including one on Virgin Records. (“My entire family loves music,” Danny admits.)

In 2005, what could be seen as the second phase of Danny Wilkerson's career began in earnest when The Pengwins reformed. Now (a little) older and (more than a little) wiser, the band has been active ever since. They've recorded at the legendary Abbey Road Studios, released four deluxe box sets combining new and vintage material (with a dozen more on the horizon), and performed in such far-flung locales as England, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, New York, and California. And, bringing everything full-circle for Danny, they've performed several times at the storied Cavern Club in Liverpool.

But although Danny has accomplished quite a bit over the course of his career, there was still that one pending bucket list item - a solo album. With the release of his most excellent, 10-song debut - simply titled *Wilkerson* - Danny can now cross that off his list. Danny is understandably excited about the record and has made sure that great care has been taken with every aspect of its creation, from the songwriting and production down to the mastering. He was more than ably assisted during the songwriting and recording phase by singer/songwriter/producer Bleu McAuley, someone whose powerful, layered pop music Danny had enjoyed for some time.

"Bleu and I met through a Kickstarter campaign and a follow up from a songwriting session that Capitol/Virgin had arranged for him to write with my son Joshua for their band," Danny explains. "My wife and I are big fans of Bleu; we would listen to his music almost every morning and drove six hours to Oklahoma City on a 'road trip' to attend one of his shows. I jumped at the chance to get to write with him, but at the first session I was so nervous I could barely play my guitar and my voice was all shaky. He was very gracious, though."

From there, the partnership bloomed. "I fumbled around for a while with several of my ideas and finally managed to get the first verse and chorus of what became 'Let it Go Tonight,' in which I sang the slide intro and string parts to him. He had me sing the intro parts a couple of times and we got to work. It wasn't long before what I was hearing in my head was coming together right in front of me. Bleu is incredibly talented; he can play just about any instrument, he has an amazing ear, an incredible voice, and he knows his music. He has amazing sense of exactly what needs to be there, technically and musically. "

Sometime later, Danny traveled to Los Angeles for another writing session. "I had a more definite idea of what I wanted this time. The song was 'Enough for Somebody,' and the session went great. At this point we were just recording demos, but Bleu's demos are not your typical demos - they almost sound as if they are ready to be mixed and mastered."

The third time Danny co-wrote with Bleu, inspiration came from an unlikely – and potentially devastating – source. "We were at dinner the night before the session and I was starting to suggest an idea when Bleu stopped me and said, 'Nope, tomorrow I'd like to meet up with no preconceptions and just start from scratch and see what we come up with.' I had been having medical issues for some time prior to the session and

had recently undergone a biopsy for prostate cancer. Right as we were sitting down to begin our session, my cell phone rings and it's my doctor telling me I need to get in to see him as soon as possible. I knew that meant the results were not good."

Danny was stunned but soldiered on. "Bleu offered some encouraging words and I had all these emotions overwhelming me, but I didn't want it to ruin the session. He's doodling around on the piano and I'm doing the same on the guitar trying to come up with an idea we could build on and then he plays this beautiful little part and I throw out the line, 'A thousand times I made a mess/a million times I made amends,' and we were on our way to writing 'When Your Number's Up.' Lyrically, things were flowing easier than at some of our earlier sessions, as I was right there in the midst of all these unknowns with fear, death, sorrow and regret, thinking of my family and life. The song is a reminder that life should not be taken for granted and you'd better make the most of it while you've got it. It's also a song of hope." Fortunately, Danny is now cancer-free.

Wilkerson turned out to be a bi-coastal affair, recording-wise. Half the album was recorded at Bleu's studio and Taylor Locke's Velveten Laboratory in L.A. and was mixed by Grammy-nominated David Spreng, who has worked with Bob Dylan, Alice Cooper and Lucinda Williams; the other half was tracked in Boston at two-time Grammy winning Ducky Carlisle's (Flashcubes, The Major Labels) studio with Carlisle mixing, as well as drumming on a few tunes.

Other luminaries who offer vocal and instrumental support on *Wilkerson* include Roger Joseph Manning Jr. (Jellyfish, Beck, Imperial Drag); Joe Sieders (The New Pornographers); Jesse McGinty (Pharrell Williams, Meghan Trainor); the Boston Symphony Strings; Josh Kaufman (Season six's winner on *The Voice*); and Pat Buchanan (Idle Jets, Hall & Oates, Cyndi Lauper, Don Henley).

As an admitted audiophile, Danny is downright thrilled that Miles Showell (Beatles, Stones, Who, Police, Queen) mastered *Wilkerson* at Abbey Road, using the same lathe on which the Grammy-winning *Sgt. Pepper* reissue was mastered on in 2017.

And the songs! I was treated to a sneak peek of the ten tracks that make up *Wilkerson* while visiting Texas last summer and suffice it to say that I was absolutely blown away by each and every one: they all feature peerless musicianship and thoughtful lyrics, which mesh perfectly with Wilkerson's pure, emotive lead vocals. The album is truly a feast for the ears.

With the release of *Wilkerson*, not only has Danny Wilkerson crossed a major item off his bucket list, but many pop-rock fans will no doubt be adding the album to their list of the finest records of 2018.

Oh, and just to bring things full circle, a few years ago Danny had a chance meeting with two of the musicians who inspired him all those years ago. If you ever have the opportunity to chat with Danny, you'll definitely want to hear about the night he met Ringo Starr and Paul McCartney, nearly 50 years to the day that a wide-eyed five-year-

old from Texas watched the Beatles perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. That bucket list of Danny Wilkerson's just keeps getting shorter and shorter...

- John M. Borack
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April 2018