

DAN HICKS & HIS HOT LICKS

Swinger.

by David Smay

9

Title: "I Feel Like Singing"

Artist: Dan Hicks & His Hot Licks

Written by: Dan Hicks

Produced by: Tommy LiPuma

Credited Musicians: Dan Hicks (lead vocals, guitar), Maryann Price (vocals, percussion), Naomi Ruth Eisenberg (vocals, percussion, second fiddle), Sid Page (violin, mandolin, occasional harmony), Jaime Leopold (bass)

From the Album: *Where's the Money?* (1990). First released in 1971 on Blue Thumb Records.

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Special Thanks: Dan Hicks, Tricia Tierno, Allison Sundberg, Clare Wasserman



The worst marketing firm in the world put Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks together by committee—that's the only possible explanation for a San Francisco band in 1968 taking their inspiration from Glenn Miller's vocal group, the Modernaires: "You know what the kids want today? Big-band group harmonies and cowboy songs! No drummer, though, and no electric instruments. We'll sell a million!" Perhaps one other plausible explanation involving massive

drug use. But it wasn't marketing or LSD that produced Dan Hicks; it was Arkansas.

The wry and dapper swing music that Dan Hicks created pulls from sources more humid than those found in his Northern California childhood. Depending on how much credence you put in geographical destiny, Hicks's 1941 birth in Little Rock, Arkansas, is either incidental—an Army brat passing through—or deeply significant. Logic dictates that we distinguish correlation from causation, but

logic never looked at the list of musicians born within the circle encompassing Little Rock and Memphis: Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Conway Twitty, Levon Helm, Al Green, Louis Jordan, Charlie Rich, Ike Turner, and, of course, the man who stands above them all as an icon of the Mississippi Delta blues and all it has meant to American music, Justin Timberlake.

The family Hicks moved to Santa Rosa,

which is north of San Francisco, when Dan was five. By fourteen, Dan Hicks was a self-proclaimed “jazzier” and played drums in the Dixieland Dudes. In the late '50s, working through the Santa Rosa musicians' union, he gigged through his teen years. A digression is required here, because this is a lost cranny of American pop-music history. Nobody hired full bands for their weddings and bar mitzvahs back then; they'd contact the local musicians' union hall and a band would be assembled from a call list of available players. You ordered your band like it was Chinese food: “I'll need a drummer, a vibes player, and two girl singers. Do you have any oboe players? No? Okay, I'll take an accordionist.” Even if they'd never met before, these interchangeable cogs were expected to mesh and play a standard repertoire together. Instant bands capable of ranging from “Take Five” to “Tutti Frutti” were deployed. This is a bizarrely appealing idea that deserves revival. Imagine them arriving at your garden party, the bored teenagers and embittered middle-aged indie rockers and gray ponytails grinding through Nine Inch Nails golden oldies and OutKast's greatest hits.

Dan landed at San Francisco State University in the early '60s in time for the folk-music scene. As he began to write songs, he learned to play guitar with a drummer's impeccable sense of rhythm. He and a friend toured the local coffeehouses as Dick and Dan, slogging nightly through “Tom Dooley” and urging Michael to row his boat ashore. Then, almost by accident, Dan and his friends helped invent the San Francisco scene. (Because these things are never tidy, they did it in Nevada.)

One of the signal satisfactions of middle age comes from decrying the shallow, overhyped, image-driven contemporary-music scene and lauding the *realness* of music from one's youth. Let us forgo that warm, smug sensation, but still celebrate Dan's bandmate, the dandy who jumpstarted the '60s. George Hunter was one of the great aesthetes of the decade, and he put his band, the Charlatans, together almost as an art project. An architecture student at San Francisco State, his circle overlapped with Dan Hicks's circle at a time when the Charlatans needed a drummer. In the spring of 1965, they decamped to Virginia City, Nevada, and the Red Dog Saloon, which hired them as house band after an acid-dosed audition. They hollered and thumped their way through something between folk and frat rock laced with jug band.

Hunter barely played music, actually, and contented himself with plinking away at an

autoharp on the side of the stage, while looking enigmatic and stylish in a waistcoat, fob, and gambler's hat. The Charlatans raided thrift shops and shot hundreds of publicity stills and had a look that stirred up excited interest in San Francisco even before the band played there. Davin Seay describes the impact: “George Hunter took paisley, Victoriana, Maxfield Parrish, Marvel Comics, the Wild West, and rock & roll and synthesized something so unique, so patently new and wonderfully appropriate that it overnight became the *de rigueur* aesthetic of San Francisco's flowering Golden Age.”

The Charlatans sparked the San Francisco scene and then neglected to put out an album until it had bypassed them. From '65 to '68, while the Charlatans played regularly around San Francisco, Dan Hicks worked up an opening act. At first, it was just himself on acoustic guitar, David LaFlamme on violin, and Jamie Leopold on upright bass. Then, inspired by the popular pop-bossa act Brazil '66 (best known for the hit “Mas Que Nada”), Dan envisioned two girls upfront on vocals. Sherry Snow and Tina Gancher were recruited to look fetching and sing harmonies (in that order).

In 1968, Hicks officially split off with his own band, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks. Just weeks before the recording dates for their debut, violinist LaFlamme left to start It's a Beautiful Day. Fortunately, Hicks took his mom out for a birthday lunch around that same time only to experience Sid Page playing light classical over their shrimp cocktails. Hicks hired him on the spot. Page, a former classical prodigy, had never played jazz before but brought impeccable chops to the group. He'd learn on the job. The Santa Rosa musicians' union would have approved.

Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks put out their first album on Epic in 1969. While many music fans prefer an artist's debut record to everything that comes after, there is wide agreement among Hot Licks fans that *Original Recordings* was a dry run. The songs were already there—Mose Allison would've happily claimed “How Can I Miss You When You Won't Go Away?” But the harmony singers on the debut came from a folkie tradition that sounds stiff and wobbly against Hicks's fleet, jazzy chords. *Original Recordings* isn't without charm. It comes fully stocked with out-of-leftfield compositions like “Shorty Takes a Dive” (Hicks's meditation on the fish he's about to eat) and “The Jukies' Ball” (as introduced by Jimmy the Ventriloquist Dummy). Nevertheless, the first album tanked and Epic declined to release their second album.

Dan re-jiggered the lineup, first finding Maryann Price and then Naomi Eisenberg as his new girl singers, and signed with the independent label Blue Thumb. He retained Jamie Leopold on bass, and ace violinist “Symphony” Sid Page. For the second album, *Striking It Rich*, they added John Girton on lead guitar, and for *The Last Train to Hicksville*, their third album, the drummer Bob Scott. The difference between the inaugural lineup of the Hot Licks and the group assembled for the albums on Blue Thumb is the difference between a decent hippie jug band and a band that delights in, and builds on, virtuosity.

“I Feel Like Singing” leads off *Where's the Money?* (1971). They whip through the quick tempo, zinging harmonies, and repartee, swooping in and out of the lyrics, the fiddle and the rhythm guitar snapping them along and the bass just barely keeping them anchored. They're flying high without a net; it's a live album. A curious decision by the label until you hear how both loose and exact they are, like a nimble five-way juggling act.

To record *Where's the Money?*, they premiered an entire album of Hicks originals live at the Troubadour, a Los Angeles club. Dan Hicks has a sly trick that forces music writers to contradict themselves and reference imaginary collaborations that never happened. “Ahhh, yes, this is from João Gilberto's bossa nova tribute album to Bob Wills” and “I remember that Ellington small combo with Stuff Smith on violin and Charlie Christian doing cartoon music for *Betty Boop*.” Is this music original and unprecedented, or is it an instantly accessible mix of pre-rock pop styles? Yes, it isn't. No, it is!

You can hear the Modernaires call-and-response vocals (they were the ones singing “Pardon me, boy/Is that the Chattanooga Choo Choo?” with the Andrews Sisters) between Dan and the girls. Sometimes it sounds weirdly like cowboy bossa nova, other times like hippified, thrift-shop Boswells. It swings like the Light Crust Doughboys, but the acoustic guitar paired with the jazz violin recalls Django Reinhardt's duets with Stéphane Grapelli. The nearest recent analogue would probably be the jaunty, Franco gypsy-jazz soundtrack for *The Triplets of Belleville*. Except with loopier lyrics and a Western-wear fetish.

Striking It Rich continues in the same vein, adding John Girton's stylish, tasteful lead guitar. Here the Hot Licks balance their blithe, rhythmic goofs with “I Scare Myself,” which debuted on *Original Recordings* but receives

its definitive treatment here. Sid Page's extended violin solo over Hicks's hypnotic composition soars and swings, obsessive, gorgeous, and mesmerizing—a masterpiece. Twelve years later, Thomas Dolby, of all people, would cover it. On songs like “News from up the Street” (*Where's the Money?*), “Moody Richard (the Innocent Bystander)” (*Striking It Rich*), and “It's Not My Time to Go” (*Last Train to Hicksville*), Hicks twists sour jazz chords into ominous pop songs, teasing out a darker strand to offset the playfulness.

Judging by the ratio of songwriters to brilliant songs, songwriting is the hardest stunt in the business. But in just three years, Dan Hicks wrote a ridiculous number of great songs that are as witty musically as they are lyrically. Out of his bent sensibility, and laid down by a band of near limitless range, the Hot Licks produced gem after gem: “Reelin’ Down,” “Dig a Little Deeper,” “The Buzzard Was Their Friend,” “My Old Timey Baby,” “Where's the Money,” “Canned Music,” “Cowboy's Dream No. 19.”

Then, in 1974, after three albums and three years of hard touring, with each album charting higher than the last, and on the verge of mainstream success, Dan Hicks broke up the band. He moved down to Los Angeles and into the Tropicana Motel, where he had a nodding acquaintance with Tom Waits. He had signed up to do the score for Ralph Bakshi's animated movie *Hey Good Lookin'*. He finished work on that album in 1975, but the album wasn't released until 1978, and was never used as the movie score. Titled *It Happened One Bite*, it's yet another brilliant, breezy slice of Hicksiana. After that Hollywood disappointment, Dan Hicks decided to take a vacation. It lasted twenty years.

Maryann talked Dan and *Austin City Limits* into a reunion show in 1992, and all the Hot Licks showed up. They still had that exquisite telepathy. Before and afterwards, Dan Hicks gigged around the Bay Area, bothering to release a CD by his Acoustic Warriors in 1994. His chops were intact, his voice was even better, he'd dried out and cleaned up, and his songwriting remained quirky and vital. But without the Hot Licks, without Maryann and Naomi as his foils, the music felt merely two-dimensional.

In 2000, Dan recorded *Beatin' the Heat*, his first album with the Hot Licks since 1973. He got what he called two session singers to back him up, which understates their credits considerably. His new singers were Karla DeVito, the singer who famously squared off against Meat Loaf in the video for “Paradise by the

Dashboard Light,” and Jessica Harper, a star in such film classics as *Suspiria*, *The Phantom of the Paradise*, *Pennies From Heaven*, and *Stardust Memories*.

According to Boyle's Law, “For a fixed amount of gas kept at a fixed temperature, comeback albums suck, particularly when they feature big name guests.” There were some very big names on the album: Tom Waits, Rickie Lee Jones (one can't help but imagine them crooning “Old Timey Baby” to each other over breakfast at the Duke's Coffee Shop in 1977), Brian Setzer, and Bette Midler. Defying the laws of physics, Dan Hicks made a great album. When he remade “I Scare Myself” with Rickie Lee, he didn't coast on the original, but created a true duet, an intimate little chase movie through the narrow streets of an Algerian medina. The duet with Tom Waits, “I'll Tell You Why That Is,” is an almost perfect marriage of complementary brain stems, filled with bluesy barstool jibes. Brian Seltzer gooses “I Don't Want Love” with rockabilly runs while Dan ticks off all the reasons why onion rings and sushi trump love. Most improbably, Dan coaxes a vocal out of Bette Midler that's sweeter, easier, jazzier, and lighter than anything she's recorded in thirty years. She just floats over one of his patented Latin gallops.

Dan Hicks might be the laziest genius the music industry has ever produced. He could have been making albums like this all along. He roused himself to do it again on *Selected Shorts*, which came out in 2004.

Nobody's ever come up with a proper label for Dan Hicks. That's partly because he leapt over the vast jazz divide created by bop. Bebop subdivided the rhythm and broke the melody into cubist fragments until swing was something you did between your ears instead of out on the dance floor. But there was a time from the '20s through the '40s when swing—“hot rhythm”—rippled through every form of popular music. That's the music Dan Hicks plays, and there's no single word for it because it wasn't limited to any one genre. Django Reinhardt and the Mills Brothers and Spade Cooley and Hank Garland and the Boswell Sisters and Stuff Smith and Bing Crosby all swing. You can make yourself nutty trying to define what Dan Hicks is. Then again, you could just say: Dan Hicks swings. And while he may be an idler and a roué, nobody's written ten better songs about breezing down the road than Dan Hicks. And in the rarefied genre of songs about buzzards and bacon grease, well, he's the master. 🐔

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