

Charlie Daniels says he has 'mellowed' in recent years

The well-known fiddler has eliminated drug references and profanity from many of his songs

By Joe Edwards
The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Charlie Daniels has performed everywhere, from smoke-filled, beer-stained honky-tonks to Billy Graham crusades to most major arenas from coast to coast.

Daniels, a fiddler and guitarist who hits the road almost every week with his five-piece band, has performed twice at the White House, once at the Super Bowl and throughout Europe. He has done a casino in Council Bluffs, Iowa; a yacht club in Cape Coral, Fla., and a chocolate festival in Burlington, Wis. He has traveled 97,000 miles this year alone, always on a bus.

He'll play any place, he says, that offers a good crowd and a good paycheck.

But those who associate Daniels with provocative, in-your-face lyrics should know that at 61, he has softened a bit.

His "Simple Man," recorded in 1990, suggested lynching drug dealers and using child abusers as alligator bait. "In America," released in 1980, delivered a harsh directive to the nation's enemies. It was this kind of stuff that got him guest spots on ABC-TV's "Politically Incorrect" and the G. Gordon Liddy radio show.

But he has cleaned up the language in "The Devil Went Down

to Georgia," his signature song, about a fiddling duel between the devil and a guy named Johnny. And in "Long Haired Country Boy," he no longer sings about being "stoned in the morning" and "drunk in the afternoon." Now he sings, "I get up in the morning. I get down in the afternoon."

He even released a gospel album two years ago, leading to his appearance with evangelist Graham. "I guess I've mellowed in my old age," Daniels says.

One recent Monday, he took time out from touring for an interview. He had played in Pittsburgh the day before and was headed for Gray, Tenn., the next day. Then it was on to Louisville, Ky.

Daniels' Southern boogie, blues and country-rock celebrates the South, individualism and patriotism. He has made more than 30 albums. The latest, "Fiddle Fire," features blazing fiddle tunes like "The South's Gonna Do It (Again)" and "The Orange Blossom Special."

And, of course, there's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," but now the devil has been toned down from a "son of a bitch" to a "son of a gun."

Interviewed on the second floor of his log-cabin office 20 miles east of downtown Nashville, Daniels looks like a character right out of the Louis L'Amour novels that he reads voraciously. He wears a sky blue Western shirt with longhorn designs, a huge silver belt buckle, black jeans and his trademark bull-rider hat. "We've grown gray together," Daniels remarks to an

old acquaintance.

An acoustic guitar sits against a wall near an old-time floor radio. Animal skins are spread throughout the office, whose windows look out over lush green fields and sprawling shade trees near his Twin Pines ranch.

Daniels takes a seat at a desk and reflects on one of country music's most enduring careers.

The son of a North Carolina lumberjack, he started playing guitar when he was a teen-ager and then went on to the fiddle and mandolin. He got into rock 'n' roll, recorded with Bob Dylan and Ringo Starr, and was featured on albums by artists like Tanya Tucker, Earl Scruggs and Papa John Creach.

His first solo effort came in 1970, and he put together the Charlie Daniels Band. It released its first LP in 1972 and had its first major hit with "Uneasy Rider" from the second album. With "Million Mile Reflections" in 1979, the band exploded to worldwide recognition and went on to win a Grammy award.

The following year, Daniels appeared in "Urban Cowboy" with Debra Winger and John Travolta, and became closely identified with the rise of country music generated by that film.

Daniels will continue to be outspoken and he'll continue to tour.

"I have never played those notes perfectly," he says. "I've never sung every song perfectly. I'm in competition to be better tonight than I was last night and to be better tomorrow than tonight."

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