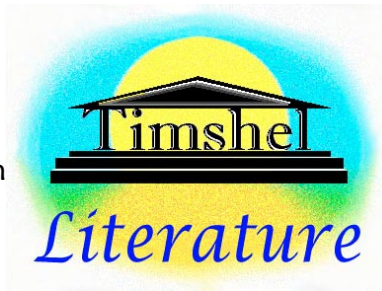


Justin Katz

*Timshel Literature*

jkatz@timshelarts.com



www.timshelarts.com

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

401-835-7156

## **Just Thinking, 04/14/03:**

### **Reconciling the Rhapsody and the Puppets**

by Justin Katz

Dan Lipton was my high school's *other* Piano Kid, and by far the better. We shared a piano teacher, so we shared recitals, and when Dan played a version of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, I took that piece as a goal of my piano-playing career. *Rhapsody in Blue* always seemed to me a blend of accessible aesthetics and impressive musicality. It's fun to listen to and represents a, perhaps perfect, marriage of the popular style of its day with the "art music" tradition in which it might be classified as a concerto.

Whenever I thought of one day tackling that Gershwin archetype, I recalled Dan's playing it in the ballroom of a New Jersey nursing home. The recollection has remained significant in my mind for another reason, one indicating our different approaches as people and as artists. Before playing, Dan took the announcer's microphone and dedicated his performance to the recently deceased Jim Henson.

Owing to the memory of this confluence of serious musicianship and affection for puppets, I was intrigued when, on a bored workday years later, I typed "Dan Lipton" into the Google Internet search engine and discovered that he had a CD. *Travelogue* did not disappoint. A concept album stripped to piano and vocals (including three duets), it is brilliant in its composition — with a classical artsong structure, jazz improvisation, and a pop/rock feel.

In keeping with the genre and the pretensions of a budding professional musician, Dan's first album strove for philosophical depth, occasionally letting vocal and lyrical limitations poke through. His voice sometimes lacked the timbre begged by the power of the music, and the lyrics sometimes seemed out of place, drawing on his less-artistic predilections. Consider the first part of this rhyme in "Honey," a song that I'm convinced could be a major hit with fleshed out instrumentation: "Do they start their day together / With the most important meal? / Can you miss the word 'together' / If 'together' wasn't real?"

For his next release, a five-song EP entitled *Fazed*, Dan focused on the guitar and expanded the orchestration. Not only had his voice improved palpably, but the dispersal of his profuse ideas across multiple instruments blended more reliably with his lyrics and overall tone. It also enabled him to make more explicit the range in styles and depth of his songs than voice/piano arrangements allowed. As compelling as the EP is, however, the songs give the impression of being new ground. They have the feel of those "album-only" gems that never make it to radio. Nonetheless, from the moody "Mine All Mine" to the more frivolous "Spygirl," Dan's playful experimentation grabbed my attention, and I couldn't wait to hear what he would do with a full-length album.

Well, the wait was nearly a year, but when I first listened to *Life in Pictures*, frankly, I was floored. The songs are arresting, pushing the boundaries of their idiom, but keeping well enough within them for the broad audience of radio. Dan's voice is, for the most part, right on tonally and stylistically. He also capitalizes on the relationships with other musicians that he's formed in the New York music theater scene to enhance his arrangements.

Furthermore, the lyrics show that he's reconciled his divergent inclinations. Unburdened by overt story lines, Dan's quirky images and clever wordplay are mixed with just the right number of "deep" phrases to give the listener the sense that there's more just beyond the range of

comprehension. Moreover, as a sign of his musical maturity, he allows the songs' depth to derive from the area of his talent in which he is strongest: it is the music itself that conveys the message, that picks up where the lyrics do not — perhaps cannot — go. This is particularly apparent in “Keychain,” in which the music transforms the sentence “Nothing’s lighter than my keychain” into a grand metaphor in expression of angst.

Listening to the album, which hasn’t a weak song out of the eleven on it, one would be hard-pressed to point to anything as evidence that it suffered by being an independent release. Indeed, with a major commercial venture, Dan may have been compelled to restrain, somewhat, the variety and experimentation that make the album so ingenious. There are catchy pop/rock hits-in-waiting, such as “Needy,” “Someday Somehow,” and the song that Dan is highlighting on his Web site, “Cheap Camera.” But there are also artistic tracks — including the inventive “Never Thought” and the profound “Shed That Skin” — as well as pieces that are irresistibly fun, like the funky “Everybody Thinks.”

*Life in Pictures*, in short, sounds as if Dan has found his voice. Leavening the serious and emotive with whimsy; phrasing catchy pop artistically. While neither of us seems likely to reach rock stardom by the time of our proximate ten-year high school reunion, Dan has reached a level in his music to which many stars who rise quickly seem to gravitate. When approached from pop it can sound contrived, or stretched beyond what the songs want to be. On the other hand, many who approach from “art music” are reluctant to shed the weightier aspects of their craft.

Having managed the transition with *Life in Pictures*, Dan Lipton has arrived. And I’ve a feeling that he’s just getting warmed up.