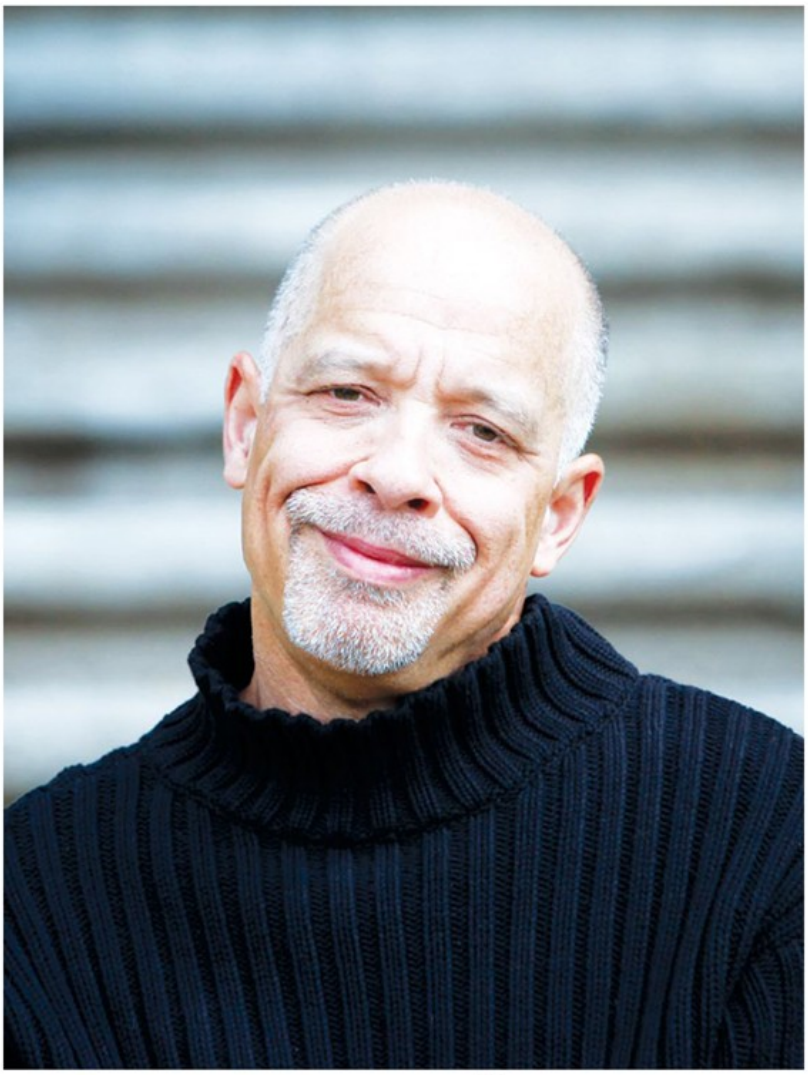
Good News Toronto
OUR EVERYDAY HEROES



Dan Hill
photo by Tory Zimmerman

Memories Die Hard, Love Dies Harder Still

"Memories Die Hard, Love Dies Harder Still" — a lyric from the song "I Am My Father's Child." I had the pleasure of discussing with Dan Hill his memoirs I Am My Father's Child. *Dan played his music and shared the insights he had gained spanning from his early life to the "Sometimes When We Touch" years, and then to his reinvention as a songwriter and author.*

MARTIN C. WINER

GNT: *Your book tells of your complicated relationship with your father, the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Are you politically active in the realm of human rights and social justice?*

DH: Living in my parents' house, it was impossible to avoid the subject of social justice. However, as young men often do, I tended to move away from my father's direction to find my own — my music. Only later through all my various projects have I come to be a *de facto* scholar in Black History. For example, I wrote two songs for Joe Sealy's "Africville Suite," reflecting on the life and times in Canada's first black community.

I also co-wrote "The Railway Porter Song," which celebrates the plight of black railway porters working on the railway in the mid-20th century. This was a highly esteemed job for a black man back then and relatively well paying. Oscar Peterson and Joe Sealy's fathers were both railway porters. So in a sense, the song is a celebration of this. One of the few job opportunities open to black men in mid-20th-century Canada.

GNT: *I think the thesis for your book can be found in this excerpt:*

"[We were] outsiders: wary of the world hovering just beyond our doorstep. … To survive in such a world … you had to embrace cunning and gamesmanship … while always remaining on the highest alert. [If you failed] the world [would] reach in and rip you apart from the inside."

This sense of constant threat led your father to "hyper-succeed." Have you arrived at a more measured definition of success?

DH: Human connection. The most important success in life is to achieve human connection such as the connections I have with family, friends, fellow songwriters, and performers. I find I can keep on an even keel if I have three things daily. First, exercise on daily basis. Next, creative output — be it writing or song writing or performing. Finally, some measure of human connection. If you can have these three things on a daily basis, then that is to have success.

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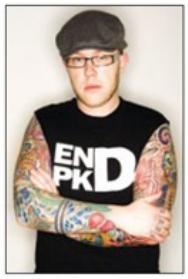

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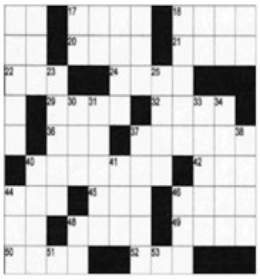

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Memories Die Hard

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Dan Hill at home making music *photo by Barry Shainbaum*

GNT: *Now a father yourself, have you taken any special steps to ensure that your son is not pushed to hyper-succeed?*

DH: Bev [,my wife,] and I have been very careful not to pressure David to succeed. David has chosen to be a writer, but we've made clear that he doesn't have to be a Hemingway to earn our love. Our love is unconditional and not contingent upon his success. Having said all that, he lives in a driven household with my wife being a lawyer and I frequently eating dinner with stacks of music or manuscripts in my hands. It's difficult not to inhale the driven lifestyle in our house, so we've had to be extra clear in our message that he needn't earn our love in any way.

GNT: *Your songs and lyrics have always been very honest, but I think over the years, especially with the song "I Am My Father's Son," you have more truth to share.*

DH: I find it interesting that song writing can occur at any age, but you typically need to break into the scene when you are young. I had my first hit by age 23; Dylan, Lennon, and so many others all started out young. But as I've grown as a person and accumulated life experience I find that being a songwriter is more like being a therapist. You have to learn to channel other people's thoughts and emotions through you. I have never personally experienced the terrible pain of cancer, yet I'm just about to perform a song Paul Quarrington and I wrote together before he passed away from lung cancer. I think the key to writing meaningful songs is empathy.

GNT: *The acknowledgments section notes that the manuscript for this book was some 800 pages long. Editing can be a painful process, especially with this being the story of your life. Where their any treasured stories that needed to be cut?*

DH: I think there is an entire book to be written about the Don Mills community that I grew up in. I was exposed to some very talented and remarkable people. Take for example Matthew McCauley. Now here was a kid in the '60s with a recording studio in his basement. He even had a synthesizer long before anyone knew what a synthesizer was. Not only that, his grandfather Leslie McFarlane wrote some of the Hardy Boys books. I mean, these are some pretty remarkable people. Then there was Paul Quarrington, who went on to be a notable musician and a highly acclaimed writer.

My book mentions that we fought with our gifts and not with our fists. It was a unique community where losing an argument was much more devastating than losing a fight. Don Mills was, on the surface, the suburbs of suburbs, and very conservative at that. But, if you scratched beneath the surface, all manner of dynamic and talented people emerged.

GNT: *Were there any things you were prevented from saying?*

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GNT: *Your father's "conversion" to atheism occurred during his army years. For so many African Americans the pain of slavery served only to draw them closer to God and religion. In this case, the racist regimen of the US army drove your father away from religion. Can you offer any insight here?*

DH: Human connection is one of the key components of life. In the US army my father was socially isolated being surrounded by the racist blacks or the sharecroppers of the South who were familiar to such treatment. My father was in the rare one-tenth of educated black men and couldn't find a community to support him through his experiences. Had there been a social group in which he found comfort and that group was church attending, it's quite possible that there may have been a different outcome.

This interview continues!
Please read it online at
www.goodnewstoronto.ca

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Sister Susan Moran: Founder of Out of the Cold & Lazarus House

"Out of the Cold is one of the most remarkable and successful institutions helping people in Toronto. It's really an outpouring of one person's inspiration. All of this has grown from a seed planted on very fertile fields."

– Richard Alway,
former president of University of St. Michael's College,
University of Toronto

KEVIN MEADE

This one person is Sister Susan Moran, of the Order of Our Lady's Missionaries, who received the Order of Canada for her incredible work in founding the Out of the Cold Program. That started 22 years ago when Sister Susan was serving as a chaplain at St. Michael's College High School in Toronto. Providing a truly interfaith movement, Out of the Cold helps homeless and marginalized individuals survive subzero temperatures in Toronto by offering hot food, clothing, and other services in churches, synagogues, mosques, hospitals, and community centres every day of the week. While Sister Susan is primarily motivated by her Catholic faith, she is quick to point out that a desire to serve the poor is deeply embedded in the Muslim and Jewish faiths. This is "Caritas" — true compassion, the gifts of selfless love and sharing what we have with those we love — especially the less fortunate in our society, our communities, our neighbourhoods.

Sister Susan is no stranger to these gifts. In 1963, at the age of 24, she joined Our Lady's Missionaries, drawn by the order's love for the poor. Her missionary work involves ministering to people sleeping on grates, on park benches, on the streets, and in telephone booths right here in Toronto. She later became Chaplain of St. Michael's College School.

Out of the Cold started because a homeless man called George slept at the Spadina subway station, near St. Michael's College School. The students would visit him, bringing food and clothing. He died homeless, in hospital, in 1986.

On January 15th, 1987, Sister Susan, along with two co-founders, a Basilian priest from St. Michael's and an Anglican priest, opened the first Out of the Cold Mission on St. Clair Avenue West. Students from St. Michael's helped set it up. Soon their "little mission" was feeding 50 to 100 people a week!

Out of the Cold has grown tremendously since then — so much so that 19 years later, on October 6th, 2006, Governor General Michaelle Jean invested Sister Susan with the Order of Canada for Social Service for her work with the homeless, in a ceremony at Rideau Hall.

"The programs have taken on a life of their own," says Sister Susan, who, now at the age 71, still has the energy of a 24-year old. She still visits Out of the Cold programs all over the city to inspire today's volunteers, who are honoured to have their founder visit them.

Sister Susan credits her Order for her spiritual support and being an example for her work.

Sister Susan now runs Lazarus House, a completely confidential, supportive home "somewhere in Toronto" for women, founded in 2001 and governed by the Seeds of Hope Foundation. There, she assists women who are recovering from poverty, isolation, addictions, and health setbacks, as well as providing assistance to women in need of a temporary place to stay, often with their children. Many women drop in for a meal or an overnight stay.

Sister Susan Moran continues to care for the marginalized and homeless

Through simple acts of hospitality, occasions for shared meaning, and innovative approaches to community building, she has created a true "place of caring."

Lazarus House is also Sister Susan's home base for continuing her Outreach, helping people living on the streets in downtown Toronto.

Sister Susan Moran is a truly incredible woman. We are proud to know her.

Kevin Meade has been involved in drug and alcohol recovery support work and not-for-profit social marketing for 17 years

Online Full Interview...

Dan Hill ~ Memories Die Hard, Love Dies Harder Still

- by Martin C. Winer

Dan Hill at home making music
photo by Barry Shainbaum

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GNT:	Your father's father was a minister?
DH:	Yes, a Methodist minister.
GNT:	One might think that this would give him a solid foundation in religion which he would use to carry himself through these times.
DH:	This is yet another example of a son rebelling against the model set by his father. If rebellion doesn't apply to all young males, it certainly applies to Hill sons. Although, I'll say this: my rebellion was "within the rules." I didn't have the daring of my father who was in a group called the Red Wine Boys because they drank so heavily. My father's rebellious ways caused him to lose his job, which then led him to be drafted. My rebellion was channelled into my music.
GNT:	That you and your father both had rebellious early years, and only settled down when you both found the right woman — are you aware of the similarities?
DH:	Our lives are eerily similar and it was only through the writing of this book that I became deeply aware of them. During the writing of this book, I felt my father was still alive. It was only at the gentle prodding of my brother and editor that I was eventually able to let go.
GNT:	Speaking of finding the "right woman": I would like to read you lyrics from Johnny Mercer's "When a Woman Loves a Man" (not "When A Man Loves a Woman") and ask you if this best describes your mother and/or wife: "Maybe he's not much / Just another man / Doing what he can / But what does she care /When a woman loves a man? … She'll be the first one to praise him when he's going strong / The last one to blame him when everything's wrong / It's such a one-sided game that they play / Ah, but women are funny that way."
DH:	Those lyrics speak of both my mother and my wife.
GNT:	Specifically the section "just another man / doing what he can" — I believe you met your wife during an IRS investigation and a lawsuit?

DH:	That's right, and her love and dedication brought me through those terrible times. What's more, my father was having trouble finishing his PhD thesis and there was my mother, on the phone to professors, proofing and typing his research, and encouraging him all the way. My father and I are both very fortunate to have found the women that we did. It wasn't until we both found them that our lives had found structure and direction.
GNT:	Your father had an opportunity to return that love when your mother suffered from what was colloquially called "an episode" in your family — a nervous breakdown. Your book tells of valuable lessons you ended up learning from your mother's hospitalization.
DH:	Many, many lessons. First is the role of a husband, a loving partner, to be there unconditionally and without fail. Despite my father's busy schedule, he would always go to the hospital with flowers, candies, and warm letters. I learned from his example never to abandon those that I care for. Many people might have left my mother for a "more stable" woman. Not my dad.
GNT:	Your book mentions that your mother's breakdown helped mould you as an artist and your brother as an author; how so?
DH:	Life is all about what you do with situations. You have very little control over many situations, but you can channel and redirect your response to them. My brother and I were both horrified when my mother was hospitalized. We were scared, but we channelled that fear into artistic expression. I developed my music and my brother developed his writing.
GNT:	Speaking of how you react to situations, you mentioned that your song writing was hampered by your indulging young women who had suddenly become attracted to your fame. When Cole Porter moved to Hollywood, his romantic endeavours (admittedly not with women) increased dramatically, yet his career flourished. Can you explain the discrepancy?
DH:	Being 23 with my first hit, I started touring. And with touring comes the relentless schedule of criss-crossing the country and life on the road. I literally had four hours a week to myself to devote to song writing. I didn't put in those hours, and — competing with the likes of Stevie Wonder — I needed to. Song writing is a very demanding art and a 23-year old being exposed to fawning fans for the first time, I chose them over my craft. [Note: Cole Porter was a composer who didn't need to tour.]

GNT:	While reading your book a passage of poetry kept coming back to me: “We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time.”* I see this theme of traveling only to discover the same place for the first time occur in your relationships, your music, and your professional associations. I was wondering if you had any reactions to this passage? ** T.S. Eliot, from “Little Gidding” (No. 4 of “Four Quartets”), first published in 1943*	 photo Tory Zimmerman
DH:	Yes, unconditional love. Through all my travels, in all the things I’ve done, I’ve come to realize that unconditional love is at the core of human happiness. In my 20s I was largely selfish, and also pretty unhappy. Through all that I’ve done, through all that I’ve seen, giving and receiving unconditional love is the only thing that has reliably made me happy.	

Martin C. Winer is a freelance writer in Toronto. He enjoys writing articles about social action. More details can be found on his blog: www.martincwiner.com