

DAVID GIFFELS

## An Interview with Dan Auerbach

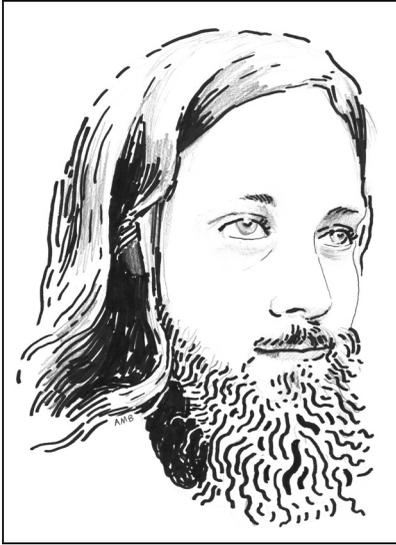


Illustration: Amy Breedon

The Black Keys began in a basement, by accident. Which is how most interesting things seem to happen in Akron. And then they made something of it by working really hard. Which is also how things tend to happen in Akron. And so it is part strange accident and part no accident at all that in the week he answered these questions for the *Rubbertop Review*, the rock duo's singer, Dan Auerbach, was about to embark on a major-arena tour for the Black Key's latest album, *El Camino*. That record, the band's seventh full-length, debuted in December 2011 at No. 2 on the Billboard 200 chart, landed the band on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, the *Saturday Night Live* stage, and a slew of critics' Top 10 lists. Their previous album, *Brothers*, won three Grammy awards in 2011. The band's 2012 tour includes a headlining spot at the Coachella festival and a Madison Square Garden show that sold out in less than fifteen minutes.

Auerbach grew up in a middle-class West Akron home steeped in art and music, with a father who bought and sold art and antiques and uncles who played bluegrass and blues. One of his uncles, the late Robert Quine, was a legendary guitarist, a virtuosic iconoclast who played sideman to Lou Reed, Tom Waits, Matthew Sweet, Brian Eno, and others.

The Black Keys started when Auerbach went over to his friend Patrick Carney's parents' house one afternoon to record some music on Carney's four-track tape recorder. The two were graduates of Firestone High School halfheartedly shuffling through classes at The University of Akron, far more interested in music. The drummer who was supposed to play along with Auerbach's guitar playing didn't show. Carney, who wasn't a drummer, took his place behind the kit. Before long, they'd recorded the first Black Keys record, *The Big Come Up*.

Through constant touring and an ambitious, knock-it-out recording schedule, the duo worked its way through the indie ranks, recording for Fat Possum Records, then joining prestigious major label Nonesuch Records.

Along the way, they've become strongly associated with the spirit of their postindustrial hometown. They recorded one of their albums in an abandoned General Tire facility and called it *Rubber Factory*. They've toured with a giant inflatable tire as a stage backdrop (with "Black Keys" mimicking the Goodyear logo) and with a giant replica of the iconic Indian chief sculpture that stands in front of Resnick elementary school.

Auerbach and Carney have both relocated to Nashville, but still maintain their strong association with their hometown.

**DG:** The Black Keys have released seven albums, plus a couple of EP's, the Blakroc collaboration (an album recorded with hip-hop artists), and you've done a solo record (*Keep it Hid*, 2009). That's a lot of material in ten years. What drives that high level of productivity?

**DA:** I feel like I've always been a driven person. I grew up watching my folks work their asses off every day. There's no reason for me not to do the same, I guess. I work just as hard now as when we were making no money at all.

**DG:** How much do you think you're influenced by growing up in a Rust Belt city? Is there an inherent work ethic in a place like Akron, or maybe a stronger drive to succeed in a city that has struggled?

**DA:** I think being from Akron influenced me greatly. You have to make your own scene in a city like Akron. I think that's a good thing. Nothing is handed to you. You have to work a little bit harder to get any recognition.

**DG:** Can you describe your writing process? Do you and Pat write the music together? Do you work on lyrics and music simultaneously or separately? Are you constantly scribbling down ideas, or is writing time more blocked-out and formal?

**DA:** I try to write every day. I read and listen to music, watch movies, meet people and see all kinds of things every day that inspire me to wanna create music and write lyrics. I have no set writing schedule but that's mainly due to the amount of recording projects I work on and the touring I have to do. I try to find the time in between the running around. Even just ten minutes here and there can be very helpful to me.

**DG:** Do you remember the first song you ever wrote?

**DA:** The first songs I ever wrote are on *The Big Come Up*. They are mostly blues and folk lyrics that I repasted onto our music like a collage.

**DG:** Even though the Black Keys are often tagged “blues rock,” your influences are obviously a lot broader. What do you listen to for inspiration, and for your own entertainment? How much does the music you’re listening to at a given time affect your writing?

**DA:** I listen to all types of music. Really, there is nothing I won’t listen to. And I find it all endlessly inspiring. I’ve never been much of a fan of blues rock. I do love blues music though very much. And I play rock and roll. So, I guess that’s where that comes from but I’ve never been inspired by only one kind of genre. There’s just too much goodness out there to be closed-minded about music or any art form for that matter—your brain filters it all anyhow and it will always end up coming out sounding like “you” ... no matter what style of music you’re listening to.

**DG:** You have kind of a unique situation for a rock band, with only one other person to play off of. How much different is that for you than other situations—for instance with your solo backing band—where it’s more of an ensemble? Has incorporating a keyboardist and bass player into the live shows (on recent tours) changed the dynamic between you and Pat?

**DA:** I’ve never been in another band, really—I’ve never written music with anyone else on a regular basis. So, I can’t really compare the two. I just know that Pat and I have a natural musical connection that’s genuine and effortless. It’s hard to explain. Playing with other folks is always a joy but the connection that Pat and I have seems to be special. We’ve also grown up together—it’s hard to define how much impact that’s had on us.

**DG:** Your uncle was Robert Quine, a brilliantly oblique guitarist, and Pat’s uncle is Ralph Carney (sideman of Tom Waits, the B-52’s, They Might Be Giants, Elvis Costello and others), a brilliantly oblique horn player. How much influence did those two have on your musical upbringing and interest? Did the four of you ever have an opportunity to play together?

**DA:** Lots of oblique brilliance in our bloodlines ... ha-ha. I played with Robert a few times at his mom's house. We got along great. I think he was really excited to find out that I was into a lot of weirdness—odd strains of music. He really dug Junior Kimbrough when I played it for him. We sat for hours and talked music and life and touring and recording. I wish he were still here.

**DG:** Because so much of your music gets used in commercials, do you tend to think of catchy riffs as their own sort of self-contained pieces of writing? Like the entire song is one form of creative expression, and the hook is another?

**DA:** In pop music, melody is king. We've only started thinking about our music like that recently. You hear it when you listen to the Beatles, Motown, Stax, Abba, Joe Meek productions, Creedence, and so on and so forth. I think the greatest achievement in music is when you can be melodically catchy and lyrically meaningful at the same time. I personally think there have only been a handful of artists who have reached that point—Marvin Gaye, John Lennon. I've got something to work toward, I guess.

**DG:** You guys have used a lot of Akron-specific imagery and references in your music and presentation. How would you describe the "Akron aesthetic," and what attracts you to it?

**DA:** The Akron aesthetic is honest and unpretentious. I'd like to think you don't have to dress in fancy clothes, drive fancy cars, or live in a big house to be able to say or do something profound. A lot of people look at some of the Akron imagery as being dismal but I always felt the opposite about it all—it always made me feel energized. It was like I'd grown up in a magic city that had been frozen in amber. Oftentimes, directors and writers try to make their movies resemble what Akron looks and feels like naturally. It's easy to overlook that if you never get to see the outside world but we toured so much that when we would come home it would just smack you in the face.

**DG:** Now that you live in Nashville, what's one thing you really miss about Akron?

**DA:** I miss the Cuyahoga River and national park, Lake Indigo, the Village Thrift, Seoul Garden and the snow.