

PS

edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price

number 4

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PS *number 4 2008*

Darren Hayman and the Secondary Modern (Track and Field)

Richard Price

"Give the kids what they want!" Darren Hayman sings on the rousing opener to his new collection. "Art & Design" is a song about the allure of trendy teachers to pupils and colleagues alike, it's about adultery avoidance and confused state-sponsored educationalism. "But they don't know what they want!" he replies to himself in anguished but energetic tones.

This track is the beginning of an album of songs whose great hooks belie their rich narrative content. It is surely among Hayman's most catchy batches of songs and that's saying something. The electric blue-grass band he has assembled gives this record a fuller sound than his last outing with the appropriately named solo project *Table For One*. Occasional use of horns, uplifting saxophone here, delicate trumpet there, and the presence of guitars now fully back since the electronic experiments of *Dead Media* and *Local Information* all up the power but don't deaden the wit.

As "Art & Design" and Hayman's new band's name suggest, schools and I think education-for-life are a central theme here. There's a sympathetic portrait of the doomed "Pupil Most Likely To Succeed"; and with "Rochelle" the eponymous and rather hopeless teenager is mocked at the same time as the singer conveys genuine parental concern. Parental concern? – looking back on the last three albums, back to The French project, it is this maturing and enlarging shift in Hayman's outlook that is most striking. Previous songs did cover schooldays but were the mythmaking of twentysomethings without the experience to make much of anything else (I know this begs a subject-to-content question, but experiential, testimonial, elements are important to Hayman's work perhaps because narrative is so important to him, though that is not to say that they are autobiographical; i.e. don't really look to him for actual dad-type advice, though his love of dogs, one such adorning the cover of this album, may mean he's quite good on canine tips).

Here love has got older and more nuanced. The affectionate "Elizabeth Duke", named after the high street chain of jewellers, recounts a wedding when the narrator "took the whole afternoon off" for the special event (I like that "whole"!) and, he adds fondly, "the whole of the next day." And a Darren Hayman album wouldn't be right without a pervy-but-funny song, the criminally memorable "Tracy" and its voyeuristic

enthusiasm for walking shoes, sextants and keeping an "eye on a flat in Leigh-on-Sea." In "Higgins vs Reardon" Hayman collides the legendary snooker game in 1982 with a revelatory and catastrophic wedding toast, not to mention something two lovers "shared in her parents' gazebo".

These are warm, clever, witty songs, propelled by the musical and singing energy of one of our greatest contemporary singer-songwriters fully on song.

A Darren Hayman Information

(more information, including lyrics, videos and soundclips, at www.hefnet.com)

with Hefner

Hefner forms	1995
Breaking God's Heart	1998
The Fidelity Wars	1999
Boxing Hefner	2000
We Love the City	2000
Dead Media	2001

(A programme of Hefner recordings re-issues with extensive extra material is underway on the Belka label, available from hefnet.com)

with The French

Local Information	2003
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solo / with backing band

Caravan Songs (first of four holiday EPs)	2005
Ukele Songs from the North Devon Coast (EP)	2006
Table for One	2006
Eastbourne Lights (EP)	2007
Minehead (EP)	2007
Darren Hayman & the Secondary Modern	2007

Darren Hayman

Interviewed by Richard Price

This interview took place on 20th July 2007, in the Duke of Uke, the ukele and banjo shop on Hanbury Street, off Brick Lane, London.

RP: In a way there's no need for this interview because your web site is so good. But there are a few things, well quite a few things really, that I'm interested in which aren't answered by the web. The first is the whole life before Hefner. Now all I know about you is that there is some kind of Essex connection. Could you say something about where you grew up and what that was like?

DH: I grew up in a town called Brentwood, which is just the other side of the M25. My family before then is an East End family, just from round here. My great grandmother was Mayoress of Bethnal Green and so my, my Dad worked very hard to move out to Essex and was quite disappointed when as soon as I got to the right age I just run back to London. I think he thinks we worked hard to get out of London and now it's the opposite and people work hard to get to London. So I grew up in Brentwood and I, with my Mum and Dad and I have one younger sister three years younger than me. And I went to ordinary comprehensive school and then after my O levels I went to art college and did a two year foundation rather than do A levels and then from there I went to Maidstone College of Art to study illustration which is where I met Antony. And Antony went to school with Helen, who I'm now married to, and so in a round about sort of way, although that took quite a few years to meet her properly, but by meeting Antony that would lead on to meeting my wife.

Then after that, I was about 21, 22, then there's quite a lot of nothing for about five or six years where I was learning how to write songs and working for the National Blood Transfusion Service. And I worked for them for about five years and in that time I also moved to London, with Antony again. We both went home for about a year because we were just broke, after uni, after doing a degree. So we both just went back home with our parents for about a year. So then about 22, 23 I moved to Walthamstow, which is where I still live. And so, yeah, about five or six years then of different bands. And then probably about half way through that so when I was maybe 25, 26 starting to use the name Hefner with two different guys that didn't end up

being the Hefner that released the first record. And then, yeah, 96 or 97 releasing the first single and then that line up solidified.

RP: When you were at Maidstone were you actually living in the area?

DH: Yeah, I lived in Maidstone, yeah.

RP: And was there a scene there, what went on?

DH: Art college there's always people who play guitars. There's always bands at an art college. There was a place we could play so I think that me and Antony did a few shows at the college, bands that weren't Hefner. I wouldn't call it a scene really but there were a few bands, maybe three or four college bands or something. You know, yeah, and a bar with a PA that you could play. I don't think that was as important as just being in Ant's bedroom or Ant being in my bedroom. I think it's really important meeting someone who played guitar and wrote songs. I think that is the most important thing. And me and Antony not being afraid to play each other rubbish songs and helping each other with it. And so we learned together over years and I'd go round to his house and play a song and looking back they were all bad. We were both writing really bad songs but it helped not doing it in isolation.

RP: Is that the first time that you had started to play, or were you playing already by the time you got to college?

DH: I was playing already for maybe a year, about a year, I was perhaps a year into playing guitar when I met Antony [Harding]. I remember meeting Antony and working out that he played guitar. So I said 'Do you play guitar, do you write songs?' and he said 'Yeah, but I'm really bad'. And he said 'Do you?' And I said 'Yeah but I'm really bad, I'm terrible at guitar, I'm terrible at writing songs.' And he said 'Well, no, you should hear me. I'm really bad'. And it went like that [in that] self-deprecating way. And we eventually got together and started playing guitars and Antony went 'No you're right, *you're* really bad.'

RP: [Laughter]

DH: Antony could play a lot better that time. It took me a long time to catch up with Antony. It's only really my more pushy nature which ended up with us being in a band that became successful with me being the singer and him being the drummer.

It's only just that I'm a more pushy personality than Antony. It's not necessarily anything to do with talent or anything.

RP: Was it all about song making or was there a word interest before the guitars?

DH: I can't remember not being interested in words. I'm always interested in, in you know learning more about words, or learning more new words. I've always wanted to be more intelligent. But I understand...my wife's an English teacher, a big reader, and I understand if I talk to my wife and what books meant to her and what reading meant to her growing up and I know it didn't mean as much to me as it did to her. So I understand, you know, it was definitely records for me that did that thing that would make things ok when I was on my own. For Helen it's books so I know words don't mean as much to me as they do to Helen.

So not really no. I think with me and Antony [we] would have both been happy, I think at any stage in my early twenties, I would have been happy being a guitarist in someone else's band, or a bass player in someone else's band. It was just more that we were in isolation, me and Ant, so somebody had to sing, or if you're just doing it on your own. And then about half way through college we both blew our grants on four tracks, little four track tape machines not dissimilar to that [signals to RP's tape recorder]. So then we both simultaneously learned about overdubbing. And I'd put guitar and a vocal on it and I would give it to Ant and he would add guitar and vocal on it and so I think it is purely like, the nec, the necess, the necessity to have words on the songs. They weren't songs if they didn't have words. So we were kind of forced to do words.

I still think like that a little bit to be honest. [...] I find it quite easy to come up with tunes but then there comes a point when it's not really going to be a song unless it has words on it. So I suppose I've got to do the words. Obviously I'm interested in words and I obviously like to make the words as good as possible but it... I only do words because I do songs. I wouldn't, I don't, I've never felt a desire to write a short story. I think I've written maybe three short stories in the past 15 years, probably all about a sheet of A4. That's the other thing as well because of doing songs I'm so used to editing so when I try to write a short story I write a short story and it might be say 1000 words. And I just edit and edit and that's one thing I do think I'm quite good at, I'm quite good at editing. Like a song normally that you'll hear of mine is perhaps the sixth or seventh draft of the words.

And so I'll edit the short story and in the end the short story is just about 16 lines because I know that I can tell a story in 16 lines. So it seems impossible for me to write anything longer than a song.

And sometimes if I can't fit it in a song I think the idea isn't strong enough.

RP: And with it being a song your voice can give it a spin and a depth that isn't always there?

DH: Well you can, you can, yeah, you can also use clichés and stuff. You can sing I love you in a way that could make it interesting. You can get away with less on both sides. You can... I think cos I'm a songwriter the world does need dumb songs and just because I have a reputation for lyrics I don't... I really don't, I don't like Elvis Costello's lyrics - obviously, obviously verbose, clever lyrics. And some people have, Lou Reed has these ideas [...] that I can get, the ideas you put in a novel you can put in a song. And even though Lou Reed walks the walk and I think he talks the talk really, and I do like Lou Reed cos I think his songs are perhaps dumber than he thinks they are, but he has these aspirations: 'Why aren't I treated as a novelist is?'. Yeah, Costello is somebody that would be better if he were stupider. He just doesn't seem to want to write a stupid song any more.

A long time ago now but Lloyd Cole was someone so preoccupied with his own cleverness. And I think that can get in the way of writing a good song. [...] Even though someone like me doesn't get in the charts, it still is pop music and there's not really anybody that's broken out of that. Even Randy Newman or Van Dyke Parks, even though they're sort of old men, it still is related to this teenage pop thing about boys and girls. Like words and music, apart from opera, haven't really ever expanded out of that. I know there's concept albums but I like that limitation, that limitation seems to irritate perhaps some people. And that's why, someone, I don't know, like Nick Cave starts to write a book or a screenplay. It makes some people feel constrained after so many albums of oh no I've got to write another four minute song. But I work quite well with limitations, I quite enjoy the limitation.

RP: I suppose part of pop is often about [the] excitement of being in love. A lot of your records are like that. It's almost a kind of soul. It's a kind of soul energy there to do with this peculiar energy of meeting someone for the first time, or the first date.

DH: Yeah, I can always return to write a song like that. I can always, I can always write another song about something to do with that, about the girl not liking me as much as I like her, or something. I do it less because I've done six or seven albums now and it's harder to turn out. I also do it less because I am married and I don't mind, I don't feel that every song has to be autobiographically true but I just, I just don't think about those things as much. I just don't think about them as much and so it's just less likely for those songs to be written. And I'm not afraid to put different types of things in songs. I'm not afraid to write songs about whatever, songs about architecture or cars or whatever. I like to put unlikely things and unlikely language in songs but I still want it to be successful as a song.

RP: Well I know what you mean. I mean, a classic Hefner song would be 'The Librarian' song but you are fascinated by astronauts as well. There's another Hefner song, 'Alan Bean'. What's with the astronauts?

DH: Because I don't sell many records and because nobody sells many records it seems like if there's an advantage to that it could be that you could do more of those ideas that you used to leave in the pub. You know ideas that I used to perhaps reject cos I thought well it's OK, it's a good idea but nobody would be interested and it doesn't seem to make much difference now, if I'm only going to sell a couple of thousand copies of every record I do. And so a lot of what I do when I write songs is I set myself exercises. And there's loads of examples of this throughout Hefner, my career, where I've set myself limitations, or almost like a writing exercise that would be set in English.

So for instance like there's a series of hymn songs. So I'd write songs about things I like, or things that I consume with a central device being alcohol or cigarettes. Another series of songs that not many people seem to pick up on is that I've done a series of songs where the title is the name of another act. So there's a song called Wu-Tang Clan.

RP: OMD

DH: ...and there's a song called China Crisis and a song called OMD. And trying to work out what would a song called China Crisis be.

RP: It's not mentioned in the song either.

DH: Yeah I kind of cheated there. But then also musically I also set myself challenges. So in The French album [*Local Information* by The French] there's a challenge to not use a guitar and also that every instrument should be played monophonically. That is to say one note at a time, not chords. And so it just seems to work, and also because they're my rules I can break them anyway. Cos they're my rules so I can break them. So often it's a good starting point. For the album I'm doing at the moment – there must be no electric guitars on it.

RP: [Laughs nervously] Are you sure you want to do that?

DH: Yep, yep it's fine. I've done so many now with electric guitars on. So the astronaut idea is, is a really hard one. It's that I would write a song about the twelve men that have walked on the moon. But the real challenge for that is to not make it an album that only people that are interested in astronauts would listen to. Can't just be every song, can't be 'I'm walking on the moon, I'm checking my altitude and I'm wearing a space suit'. They've got to be emotional songs. And I don't know why I've set myself this because the song 'Alan Bean' anyway was really, really hard to write. It took me like about three years to write that song from the idea of writing a song about him to it actually being finished and being a successful lyric. I constantly had to return to that every few months and trying to get that song to work.

So even the astronaut album I've been kinda thinking about that now about a year and I've only written six, seven. Every now and then there's a little burst. And some of them are quite boring. Some of the people, quite a lot of them are quite boring. They're quite sort of, they're not very emotive people. If you read their interviews they're kind of military men so, so you can't get a very emotional response about anything. Like 'What was it like on the moon?', you know, whatever. And I've spoken to Alan Bean twice and it's just kind of like, even Alan Bean who perhaps is one of the most emotive. A lot of them are just like 'Oh well, I was just doing my job, just doing my duty'. They're very square-jawed people. But yeah, it's just a way, just a way to write songs, just a way to keep my mind busy. I mean, I mean I think the astronaut album will happen but a lot of these ideas don't happen. I set myself a lot of these things they don't happen. But it doesn't matter, because they might, the whole album might not work but they might have given me two or three songs so it's OK. So as I say I can break my own rules and it doesn't matter if tomorrow I do decide to put an electric guitar on this

album. The limitation had already given me six songs, so that's OK.

RP: Do you think what you could say is, in a way, you've got a quiet concept album way of looking at things even though they're clearly not grandiose works. Do you think that started with *We love the city* where there's a beautiful trajectory across the tracks?

DH: No, I think it starts with *Fidelity Wars*. I think *Fidelity Wars*, *We Love the City*, *Dead Media* and The French album are all quiet concept albums. They're more *conceptual* albums. That's not to say they're a story but they are linked. And certainly with *Fidelity Wars* those songs are in that order for a reason. It's easier to point out the ones that aren't. Only really *Breaking God's Heart*, *Table for One...* and *Boxing Hefner* are really only collections of songs. And the one that's coming out in October also is just a collection of songs. I don't know why it is; it's just really natural. I can't imagine being any other way. It's just like when people show me ProTools, 'I just got ProTools, I can get any synthesiser sound on this'. You know ProTools is a computer program to make music on and like 'I've got unlimited tracks'. That sounds like hell to me. The idea that I would have every sound open to me. I can't ever imagine that I would make a decision.

It's the same if someone said 'Here's a studio. You can have any instrument, any musician you want and you can be here for as long as you want'. I wouldn't know how to create in those circumstances. I always have to constrict myself. Even like the way I do the covers, the Hefner covers, a lot of the covers I would say 'You're only allowed to use five colours'. I guess, I'm starting to think now, I'm almost a bit obsessive about it. It's like one of my obsessive, slightly obsessive compulsive things now that I always have to have a set of rules to create. [...] And so many people that do what I do seem to be wracked with indecision, and I seem to get around indecision by doing that.

RP: Yeah, oh yeah I think that's great. Erm, I recognise it in poetry but I won't say too much about that.

DH/RP: [Laughter]

[...]

DH: It's like that rather disheartening thing when you're doing poetry at school and the teacher says 'Well it doesn't have to

rhyme'. And I remember being crestfallen when they told me that. 'Well, I can't do it then'. You know I need some kind of guidance to it, otherwise it's just words, and I still think that a little bit about poetry, like 'Oh it's good when it rhymes though'.

RP: Even free verse is striking off something, and you have to be very careful with that. But that's another story.

DH: Well it's good to break from it as well. I like having rhyming patterns where you might have say three rhymes and the fourth breaks off. I might even have an extra few syllables. Once again you need a rule to break. You need der der der der de, der der de de der, and then have one go into the next.

RP: The songs don't all have a regular shape, do they? They're quite fluid, they move.

DH: I mess around with that. I like internal rhyming patterns as well. I don't know - the bright light at night, within [a line] as well. And I like the sound of words. It can be quite frustrating when you... it can be quite frustrating to be the type of lyric writer that wants to say something specific. You know I don't really do sort of mood songs, or adjectives or descriptive words just to conjure mood. I often want to tell a specific story. So it's quite frustrating to be that kind of lyric writer but also be very interested in the sound of words. So that can cause quite an impasse at times. You know when you've got a line of words that have a certain spiky sound. You've got lots of k's and t's and you want another word like that to have that kind of sound.

RP: You're quite satirical as well aren't you? There's an edginess, and sometimes just great fun with what you're doing.

DH: Yeah, yeah. I think it has to amuse me. A friend criticised my lyrics once saying there's almost always a get out clause. It's almost like you get too cross and here's almost [always] the bit in every song where you're going 'I don't really mean it'. A little wink to the audience and I sometimes wonder about my stage persona because on stage I just, through nervousness I normally talk a lot and then. It's not really nervousness. I mean I've just found a way of it working, by being funny. And so I sometimes wonder how that works with being funny, joking and then doing a song like Hymn for the alcohol. And trying, that dichotomy of having heartbreak songs or having jokes and songs that are about heartbreak. And often when it works I think you're just sharpening the knife a little bit more, in the way that two blokes talking about splitting up with a girl they'll tell it via jokes. [...]

You know I've got a friend who's extremely depressed in New York at the moment who I'm quite, quite worried about. He's very, very depressed but it's impossible for us to talk, for me to talk to him straightforwardly about his depression, about why. I just, I just can't. We have to talk around it cos we're men. And we're talking about it in a sense. Do you understand what I mean...? So maybe that's the way I write songs. I'm not sure if I can ever really write - who's an example of someone who is incredibly cathartic and emotional? Someone like Will Olden maybe. Oh I know, I know, yeah. People like Jeff Buckley, or Muse or Tom Yorke, that sort of thing. I couldn't possibly be that serious. I can't imagine, even though I probably, I definitely do feel sometimes like Tom Yorke sounds. I don't really want any one else to, inflict that on anyone else. I'd rather tell that more subtly, you know.

RP: Sometimes I feel that you are in character though. That there are some songs where there is desperation at the same time as there is - it's almost like a Woody Allen desolation. It's funny and has immense pathos at the same time.

DH: It is, it is funny isn't it? It is funny. It is funny being down and depressed. [...] I haven't used this in a song lyric but a couple of years ago I was having this legal battle with Too Pure [the record company] and I was very, very depressed and the way my depression manifested itself, or a coping device I used, was I became addicted to internet chess. A large portion of my day when I was feeling moody, that was really funny, that was a really sort of ridiculous, funny...

RP: That's quite low.

DH: Yeah, you know I think my wife would have preferred it if it was like pornography or cocaine.

DH/RP: [Laughter]

DH: But yeah I am in character a lot of times when I sing. I can't really sing entirely about something I don't know about. So even if I'm singing about Alan Bean, or Peter Gabriel I'm [thinking] what would I be thinking if I was Peter Gabriel? [...] I couldn't possibly [do what] Nick Cave did, an album of murder ballads. I just thought that was preposterous. I just thought that was a ridiculous thing to do. It was a really childish approach to writing songs. It's like a really middle class thing to do. You know where you have middle class people around a table, talking

conceptually about 'I was really beaten up at work today' when they have never been beaten up in their life or talking about rape in an ironic post-modern way and not knowing anything about it. I just thought it was a really immature, middle class thing to do to write a whole album about murder. It's like what would you feel like Nick, if your wife got murdered? Would you feel like it would make a good song? I don't think it would make such a good song then, would it? So even if I write songs about astronauts...

RP: [Laughter] So there's no moral-high-ground-taking here then?

DH: Yeah, I just find I can write songs about astronauts but that's the joke in itself really. You'll find when you hear this album you'll find the astronauts seem to talk like someone who grew up in Essex. They seem to use slightly colloquial Thames estuary slang. So it's always really what is Darren dressing up as?

RP: But what about America? You have a love hate relationship with America in the songs don't you?

DH: I guess I do. Yeah, I haven't been to America for ages. I kind of don't really want to. It just doesn't seem like the sort of place that I want to go to.

RP: Did you live there at any point?

DH: No, I've been there quite a few times. I was really good friends with a band called the New Bad Things, at the beginning of Hefner, and they would come over and tour England and sleep on my floor. And so before I signed a record deal or anything I went and stayed with them for about a month or so. So I had a really long holiday in the West Coast and played shows.

Hefner did a really long tour of America, just once and we spent like a month out there, and a few odd trips as well to play shows in New York. [...] Some people liked us but I just think there are probably more interesting places to go to at the moment. Jack, in Hefner, made the observation that you go round Europe, you travel these places, and they've got different languages and stuff but when you go to America then you really feel that you're abroad. America's far more foreign than France or Spain or Italy, even though we share a language and it's true you go there and think God this really is abroad, this is nothing like England at all. And so it makes it ridiculous how we are supposed to think of it

like a close cousin. I just think, you think just because you've watched CSI on TV that you understand what's really happening. It's odd, Americans are really odd.

RP: But of course you're influenced immensely by country, and folk to some degree.

DH: Yeah a shop like this. Yeah, well the ukulele comes via Portugal, [with a] Hawaii American background, yeah, and I've got a blue grass band. Yeah, but I can live without. I can leave or take the bit I like and leave the rest. It's always been really important to me to ...

[Interruption from customer in shop]

DH: ... Yeah it always been really important to me not to sing in an American accent.

RP: What is your singing accent?

DH: My talking voice is perhaps a little posher than my singing voice, but I think they're both just Thames estuary, aren't they? Just glottal stops, just a non-descript South East England accent I think.

RP: I want to go back to that in a bit but I want to stay with America just a little bit longer. There's at least one America bating song [...] about [...] terrorists who are setting fire to a forest. Can you say anything about that?

DH: Only that was written before September 11 which I always feel I have to always point out because I think it was released after it. And, I don't know what happened to American terrorists. They just like just disappeared, didn't they? There used to be loads and you used to have Louis Theroux and Jon Ronson would always be going up to the mountains to see weird Americans who thought there was a new world order and had loads of guns. And they just like, as soon as 9/11 [happened] they didn't exist any more, cos all terrorists had long beards and had dark skin.

I thought that was a shame really and that the American terrorist has been slightly undersold by that and they should speak up more, cos I think they're losing the propaganda war. Yeah I guess the most famous terrorist thing before then was the uni bomber.

RP: And the Oklahoma bombing?

DH: Yeah I'm now trying to think what it was specifically about. I'm trying to remember, it definitely was a documentary I was watching that specifically made me write that song. And [...] I think it was the Oklahoma one or something about that. I guess the idea of the song is that even terrorists fall in love.

RP: There's something taunting about it. And quite a few of your records are taunting, or bating, teasing. There's "Peter Gabriel", there's [an attack on] Margaret Thatcher which is much stronger. But there's also a witty, class thing going on, particularly for people on the borders [between the] working class [and the] middle class. Suburbia gets brought into all that. Where's that coming from?

DH: Well the new, new record. The record not that's coming out soon but the record I'm making is all about that again. It's all about similar things to what The French album's about. I find that what I tend to write about more and more now is where I'm from. I think with *We Love the City* I was trying to write about the city cos I love London, I'm very much a city person. But ... I drift to write on about the suburbs. And I think it's tricky, I think it's interesting for me to write about because I really don't like the suburbs. I often find them quite irritating but then I'm very aware that that's where I'm from, and that's where I grew up. And so, and I also struggle with that. I understand what you mean when you say taunting, and I struggle with that a little bit. I really like, do you know who Martin Parr is, the photographer?

RP: Oh yes, yes I've met him.

DH: Yes OK, I really like him but he's even more on the edge of that thing of 'Are you laughing at them or with them?' And I find that quite difficult because you know my Dad did work very hard. My Dad striked, I remember my Dad being on strike. I was brought up as working class socialist and then I of course went to art college and then the minute I went to art college really I kind of kissed goodbye to something working class about me.

RP: What did your Dad work as?

DH: My Dad worked for British Telecom and they had a lock out in the 80's, it was as they were privatising everything. So it was kind of like my early education was trade unions and how that all worked. So I have quite confused things with that and, and, I, these songs I'm writing now, I find it very easy to make... There's a song, new song [...] and there's a verse in there about

carveries, you know what carvery is? It doesn't happen inside the M25, I'd be surprised, I bet we're ten miles away from a carvery now. I think it's since you get into Essex. But anyway [...]. It's very funny, it's very easy to take the piss out of it, in some ways you should take the piss out of it. You know loads of people with their plates sky high with bad meat. That is funny, you should take the piss out of it. But I also have affection for those people, and also my family are those people. You know I'm writing about my sister, and I'm writing about my Mum and Dad so I can't be too cruel. [...] There's a video for "Protons and Neutrons" we filmed on Ianappa. You know my sister got married on Iannapa. So this one video is just pretty much drunken women falling out of bars.

RP: I'd have to give that quite a lot of concentration I think.

DH: Yeah and that is very Martin Parr, it's very influenced by Martin Parr. But definitely a few people said to me that's really quite cruel. There you are, you're sober, three o'clock in the morning with your video camera and they're in a completely different mind set and here they are in the cold light of day, overweight, red faced, from too much sunburn the day before. And so then the one after that which is the video for the Caravan song I was trying to be much more affectionate. I was trying to be much more affectionate about it. It's this caravan park in the North East where my wife's from, my wife's from Newcastle, a little village outside Newcastle. And I really, really do like it there [...] but unfortunately I was filming it, I was filming this woman with kids. And then she sits down and she's, she's trodden in some dog shit and she's wiping the dog shit off her shoe. And I got the clip and it's so good and it's so funny and I was like I've really got to use that. So, yeah I'm aware of what you're talking about and it's something I think about a lot and I'm just constantly going either side of the line. I definitely couldn't be as cruel as Martin Parr, if you know what I mean. I think he does like the people he's taking photographs of but he definitely is playing a more daring game with that line than I could I think.

RP: He's literally using lenses that are used in operating theatres. He's playing with the filtering which is literally a clinical approach.

DH: Yeah, yeah. It's all great, I mean he never does anything boring. Yeah that last retrospective, the very last room he was doing it on Xerox paper, or copy paper, so it was all super real colours. [...] There were lots of photographs of food he'd done, and he'd pretty much made it look inedible.

RP: One of the things that comes up, perhaps as an index of the way you're interested in suburbia is there's a lot of actual *stuff* in the songs. Lots and lots of clothes, sometimes mentioned by label. There are lots of brand names and they're named as a kind of class or taste marker, a shorthand for placing people. That's quite risky in song writing because...

DH: It's not a very successful thing to do in terms of publishing you know. Mark Lamarr was interviewing Nick Lowe who makes his career out of really writing an album and then having people more famous than him cover the songs on it, and he was saying how he has to. Do you know Nick Lowe?

RP: Yes, but I didn't know he did that.

DH: Yeah I mean, he, I think there was this famous thing where somebody covered a song of his and it was on the sound track of *Four weddings and a Funeral*. And I heard him say once that he earned more money from that one song than all of his career put together. So he says he finds it hard to forget about that now when he's writing a song. It's kind of trying to write these songs that anyone could wear or sing.

RP: But if it's good enough for novelists I don't see why it shouldn't be good enough for song writers.

DH: It makes songs more believable. I am always trying to find a way to use the way I talk. I'm trying to find a way to bring conversational elements into songs. To use an example that we used earlier I just know Tom Yorke wouldn't use those words in conversation. And nobody ever says to me 'How do you feel like, how do you feel today?' and they say 'Oh my heart has been torn wide open, it's a flame of desire'. Nobody talks like that and so I'm quite interested in songs being conversational... but still emotive. [...] You know a line about somebody's iPod being dropped to the floor and breaking in two is quite heartbreaking, if you do it in a minor chord, that could be quite sad.

RP: I suppose another aspect of that is the way you talk a lot about very specific places. There's a lovely line about the North London line and how you would lay yourself in front of it [for the singer's lover]. And with *Local Information* there are references to extremely specific places, Canada Water and [so on]. I can see that within a kind of modernity of the local. That's one of the great pleasures I get from all the work: that you've had the bravery to push them into a wider world. I can't see anyone

being alienated by that, by a very specific reference. These aren't difficult songs because you are mentioning very specific places.

DH: Well it never bothered me when Old Blue Grass and me are singing about Cripple Creek and I don't know where that is, or somebody singing about Alabama, or something, and it doesn't bother me when Jonathan Richman is talking about his local corner shop. I don't have to have been there to understand the song. It just makes me think I've got a little keyhole into his life. And so when, if he mentions his shop, and he mentions the street he lives on and he mentions a few of these details and then he says that his heart is broken, I am more liable to believe that his heart is broken, because he's set up all these other details leading up to it. It's more likely that he's going to convince me.

RP: My view is [that for] the great English song writers it's just part of how they write. There are localities within these songs. You think of Ray Davies, you think of Morrissey.

DH: Still not a lot though is there? There are a few. They're examples. I think actually, recently there's been a bit of an explosion of writers like that. The guy from the Streets and Lily Allen and now Kate Nash. I think they would all put a brand name in a street. I can imagine Kate Nash singing a song about Hanbury Street and being quite specific in her detail. But still generally in England there's not a lot.

RP: Is it fair to say there was a generation around you that were either your friends or if you can have colleagues in the music business [then colleagues] – who were with you, or just ahead of you and that you were influenced by or that you were, as it were, sparring with?

DH: I don't know, I don't remember really sparring with people. When we started some people would mention Stuart Murdoch, from Belle and Sebastian, but I never really saw a connection really, I mean apart from I guess he does similar things with details. I think he's written some really good songs but I generally don't really understand the world that he's talking about.

RP: And you briefly worked with Stuart, didn't you?

DH: Yeah, I met him a few times. He did something on the first album and then we played maybe two or three shows with him

and then also just ran into him a few times but probably only met him six or seven times. He wrote me a letter once, which was quite odd, and his letter was exactly like one of his songs. I don't know like he was like sitting in a laundrette and the window was misting up and he had like a Raymond Carver. It seemed quite ridiculous and I thought wow you do really live like that, it's not just in a song, like every day is like that, you know!

I think there were like people that sort of I nicked ideas off of and listened to a lot but I think [most] of them being really unpopular.

RP: And who were they?

DH: So, like a guy called John Darnell, he's got a band called The Mountain Goats and he's doing better now actually. He's on 4AD now so... You can buy anything of The Mountain Goats and he's a really clever lyricist, he's really great. I nicked quite a lot so he would be someone that I listened to and thought I'd like to do something like that, or try and do it better. Yeah, a lot actually, really quite a lot. I think he's better as well, I think he's a lot better than me.

RP: Can we talk about *Dead Media*? Listening to it, the first time I heard it, it was a shock. But listening to it since then it doesn't feel like the big departure. Really the only shocking thing is the extent of the electronica, which isn't as extensive when you listen to it again as you originally feel.

DH: Well I think when people listen to it they listen to it in the context of the other electronic album now [The French's *Local Information*]. I don't think it's very good really, I don't think it's that great. I think it ranks pretty low amongst the records I've done.

RP: And what's wrong with it?

DH: I think it's probably shy of two or three better songs. I think if I like waited six months, perhaps for two or three, maybe four songs that should be taken off and better songs [put] on. Just the songs not being good enough is one thing and I think also it's actually too much of a half-way house and it should have either been really, really electronic, or not. [...] I think probably what should have happened is we should have taken longer over it and then perhaps there should have been two albums, because there were enough songs for there to be two albums.

But a lot of the reasons with that record were financial as well so at the time the band could support all of the band as long as we did an album a year. But it was actually quite hard to do an album a year. I mean it wasn't up until then and perhaps isn't now. At that point I don't think I'd written enough good songs really. So there are all sorts of things, quite aside from the fact that I was using synthesisers which also contributed to it not being popular. But I think often people talk about it being because of synthesisers, rather than it just being that it wasn't very good. Even if it had been on guitars, those songs had all been on guitars, it still might end up not being good.

RP: Synthesisers. When did it all begin?

DH: I think when I was on tour in America and my friend Joel in New York sold me his Moog synthesiser and then I think we used that quite a bit on *We Love the City*. There is quite a lot of synthesiser on *We Love the City*. And I just can't explain it. Like when I had guitars I was never bothered when somebody was saying oh this guitar is a, this guitar is a 1960 Telecaster or whatever. Yeah, never found that particularly interesting. Are you OK?

[Customer:] I'm good, I'm just you know, OK.

DH: I never found that particularly interesting. I could never fetishise it but as soon as I found synthesisers I could. As soon as I was interested in what the difference between a Pro One and a Prophet 5 was. Yeah I just like it. They just, the way they look. They look much more exciting than guitars, you know, I like all the knobs on them. There's a certain type of synthesiser that I like which is an analogue synthesiser from the 70's pretty much with a cut off point of about probably about 1983, 1982 and any synthesiser after that I'm not really interested in. Perhaps a bit later from sort of 75 to 85.

RP: And is that because at that point the different synthesisers could sound different?

DH: It's just once again a [productive] limitation I guess. There would be limitations to what they could do. It wasn't like a keyboard that could do anything. It's quite funny: my Prophet 5 has got this booklet that comes with it and tells you how to make the sound of a tuba or a banjo, or this or that, and you can follow all the things and put the knobs in. And it obviously doesn't sound like that at all. And now what I've got is a modular synthesiser, which is where it looks like a switchboard. And it

doesn't even have a keyboard. You play it by [...] loads of leads that connect it together. Just when you're on the internet type in modular synthesiser and you'll see the instrument I'm talking about. It's very odd, very anal and not many people have. And this modular synthesiser I have I actually have the phone number of the person who built it so when something goes wrong I phone up the person that built it and he talks me through it.

But I know that I'm better on guitars. I know that my records should really sound a little folky and stuff and I might be a little way off doing a... Oh this lady's back. Hi, did you make a decision?

[Customer:] Yeah I'm just going to get it.

DH: OK.

[Tape break]

RP: And how did the ukulele start?

DH: Well I was looking for something when we were going to do some shows for The French and the live shows for The French were pretty much miming. You know we just had backing tracks or the synthesiser. So I just wanted something to have in my hand really. So I thought a ukulele might be quite funny against the electronic so I just bought it almost just as a visual prop. And then just started writing songs on it. I know it's small, take it as hand luggage.

RP: One of the things that occurs to me about *Local Information* is the way that your voice is different from the previous records.

DH: Yes it's very...very... very under-sung isn't it? I think it was quite hard. I can remember writing the songs and, and recording all the songs and I can remember just constantly re-singing them. Just very hard to... to... to sit a voice on top of that instrumentation. And you know when you listen to a lot of 80's records which have a lot of synth's on them the vocals are often quite affected in a way, with an effect or something, so we experimented with that but that didn't seem to work. And I guess just with these instruments, like guitars and stuff, the music's more dynamic so your voice is more dynamic there's more of an up and down and that's why people like drums and guitars. I guess it's more human, to have more ups and downs, whereas when you have something metronomic and very precise

perhaps the singing needs to be more precise. It's a tricky one, it's a tricky one to work out how to sing.

I remember it being quite an issue, and I remember several different approaches being taken whilst we were making the record. Yeah I think I'm singing very quietly and very sort of close to the mike. I guess also I forget how I sing live if I don't sing live for a long time. I think the way my voice is often is because of live gigs, cos the way I sing is to try and make my vocal go above the guitars and stuff. Maybe it's something to do with that and after I've done shows I think I sing louder.

RP: Is there a possibility of The French being another project where you keep those same rules but you make a different sort of record?

DH: No, I don't think there will be another French album. No I think it was just too disappointing to us what happened after that. Even though I think it's my second favourite. I think my favourite is *We Love the City* and I think my second favourite is The French.

RP: It's a great record.

DH: The French, that experience of it is still a bit tainted by the legal case with Too Pure and just having a few years where I wasn't able to record. The memory of it is still tainted by that. Well firstly The French album itself was like 10 songs chosen from about 30. So when we reissue The French album which will probably be next year - we are going to start with *Breaking God's Heart* in autumn, then it will be every two or three months it will go through - The French reissue will be two CDs. So there's going to be a whole CD of 16, no probably more probably, about 20 songs that you haven't heard.

RP: And these will be proper extra songs?

DH: Yeah they won't be like different versions. As well as that we did make a second album which never was released. There's a second French album called Home Time that hasn't been released, although some of the songs are coming out on the other albums so, for instance, 'English Head' and 'Protons and Neutrons' and 'Table for One' were from the second album. But I think what I might do, most of the songs are with this next album, I think most of the good ones are out on the album. So what I might do is when I feel like it's all been plundered I think

I might just release it free, like totally free. I must just put it on the website...

That record is a proper concept, like a proper little story. But we did finish it, but it was just John, I don't know his heart wasn't in it. I just couldn't release an album, we just had had enough of The French. And then I just thought well these songs are good. Perhaps the second French album doesn't work [...but...] there are some good songs and it would be better just taking those songs off. [...] The French versions are all electronic and some of the versions on my albums aren't. So there is a lot of French stuff but I don't think there will be a new album. Yes I think when this 2 CD thing comes out I think there will almost be everything on 2 CDs, a reissue.

RP: Do you feel a new lease of life now you are recording under your own name?

DH: I think *Table for One's* OK. It's pretty good. It was really hard to write cos once again it was written under that cloud of the legal action and it was such a relief to get anything out at all. I don't think I felt a lease of life by releasing a Darren Hayman record. Probably more what's been a lease of life is the last 18 months and that's starting the shop, Simon's studio, Ellis Island Sound and just there being a community of bands. Yeah, I think that's perhaps more which has made me feel much more creative. And I'm writing. I think there was quite a drought really. It's quite lucky that *Local Information* and *Table for One* are as good as they are, but if you look chronologically at how much things slowed up I think I did dry up a little bit. I didn't find it as easy to write for a few years and now I'm finding it easier again, writing more songs now.

RP: What was the legal issue, as far as you can say?

DH: Oh I can say whatever I like I think, cos it's over. The only reason that I wouldn't say is cos it's a bit boring. But when I finished Hefner Too Pure wanted to sign me but they didn't want to give me the money to pay for the whole band. So I said to them well that's OK but then perhaps probably what the best thing to do is perhaps end Hefner because it's very much a band of 4 people and perhaps just re-sign me on my own. Anyway I wanted to do a synthesiser record and perhaps it might be better not to do it under the Hefner name. So they said fine and then they signed me to this contract. And there's all sorts of negotiations when you are doing a recording contract. But in one of the meetings Martin Mills who is the head of Beggars Banquet

a reasonably powerful man in the music industry, certainly a millionaire, said to me 'Oh and Darren the first 2 albums is 2 albums firm'. And I'm not even sure if I properly understood what that meant but it transpired what it meant was that they were legally obliged to do 2 albums. So The French album came out and it didn't sell any copies and I guess it wasn't what they thought, it wasn't what they expected. There seemed to be this constant thing. I think Martin Mills saw me very much as he wanted me to do something with strings, he would always mentioned strings. He wanted some kind of very much more sombre album. So [one] day after The French album they said we're not going to do another album. And then I remembered this thing from the meetings - I'm sure they said they had to. So I took it to a lawyer and the lawyer said yeah, you do have to, they do have to. They either have to pay you for the album or release the second album. So that was the start of the dispute really, about me saying you're legally obliged to pay me for this second album. So that amount of money was 25 grand. And it's hard with legal things. It's like if I knew at the beginning of it how much trouble it would be, how much heartache, I would probably have said it's not worth 25 grand. But you don't know at the beginning. And certainly at the beginning when I took it to a lawyer he said, 'Well you know I'll win this easily for you. We'll do it on a no win no fee. I'll just take 10%', or something, can't remember. So OK, fine, if it's going to be that easy. You know, if it's not, if he's that sure.

And he was sure and we did win it but it just got really nasty. You know, people talk about lies a lot but it's very unusual to see, like to get a letter, or a fax saying you said this and you did this and it's just like a lot of it. I think a lot of what they do in those things is that they try and make you scared to go to court. They say look do you really want us to say this, it's horrible, really horrible. And eventually what happened was is that they instead of just giving me this 25 grand they said we'll just give you your back catalogue back. But even then like on the telly when somebody wins a court case, you've been awarded so much money and they go out and shake hands and they're like that. Even from that moment when I won, even then it took like another 8 months of negotiation to get the contract, the settlement contract done, from which time also I couldn't record or release. So that's kind of it, does that make sense, as much as it can in the music industry?

RP: So the dispute was with Too Pure, but what did Beg..

DH: Beggars Banquet owned Too Pure. Too Pure has been lots of different things even in the time that I was on it, like by the time we did *Dead Media* there was no-one at Too Pure when we did *Breaking God's Heart*, like not one person. Too Pure was like completely different. Too Pure was a company started by a really nice guy called Paul Cox who now runs *Art Rocker* magazine. And he's the guy that kind of signed Polly Harvey, Stereolab, myself. But yes, a label with a troubled history. But it's nearly, for most of it's life Too Pure has been owned pretty much outright by Beggars Banquet, so it's not as indie as it may appear, it's got big people behind it.

RP: What's the Secondary Modern?

DH: Oh it's just a name really. It becomes a bit tiresome on the website to say oh this gig's an acoustic one or this one's with a band, or I'll be playing these sort of songs. I wanted to just make it easier so people go OK this is Darren Hayman and Secondary Modern. So actually already we're on our 3rd line up with Secondary. So just anyone round the shop or anyone who can make a gig, as long as I can rehearse the songs. Simon [Trought] was the bass player in the Secondary Modern for a while. I'd like it to be a bit more permanent. It's been a bit bad, I've had a bit of bad luck really recently. Just a lot of people that have jobs really, people that have jobs and they use up their leave and they can't do it. And then the band I've got now are good, they can really play, but they're about 22, they're just so young.

RP: Yeah, I think I saw them at the 100 Club, is that the same band?

DH: Ah no, that, that's Secondary Modern version 2. the band at the 100 Club [were]... that's the Wave Pictures. So they are their own band. When I'm not with them they are called the Wave Pictures and they've just finished their new album downstairs [in the studio beneath the shop]. And that's who me and Simon were talking about, the Wave Pictures tomorrow night at the Macbeth. And so really that was only ever for this Spanish tour. I wanted to take them to Spain so they were the support band and it just made sense. And they were all Hefner fans. And they're a great band and they knew the songs already so it was really easy.

RP: Tell us about touring, because you're a god in your own lifetime in Spain apparently.

DH: Yeah I mean it's smaller in Spain now than it was in the same way as it is in the UK. Less people come now. Did a really nice show last week, last Thursday in Seville. We played in the grounds of a monastery.

I don't really understand why it took off. It was around *Fidelity Wars* we did this festival called Buena Casa and we had an unnaturally high place on the roster because somebody pulled out. It might have been the Manic Street Preachers and they jumbled it all around and we ended up really high up so we played to a lot of people. And then people started talking about it. It was a lot to do with *Fidelity Wars*. Like in Spain *Fidelity Wars* gets mentioned in lists about lists and they really like that album. I like the way Spanish people like music. It's kind of funny when you come off stage they're very kind of like 'Oh that was really good, do you wanna beer, or a game of pool?' They're very, very casual about fandom. They're never really intense or ask you about lyrics. The other weird thing about Hefner in Spain it was very much to do with the music. It was never interviews. They'd be quite happy interviewing John or Jack or Ant. It wasn't so fixated on the lyrics, it was just about the sound of the band, whereas in UK or other countries it was much more about me and the songs, rather than the band. Yeah it's great, yeah. It still gets me out there every now and then and [I] still sometimes release records on Spanish labels. That one, *Cortinaland*, from last year was on a Spanish label.

RP: I noticed in some of the things you said just now, but also in some of the things on the site, that you are often trying to spread the interest around with the band. But do you think you sometimes struggle with being the focus, being perhaps even the engine of whichever group you're with?

DH: I think I'm used to it now because the records have my name on it and I just do everything on my own. And so when like Secondary Modern, whoever they are, or people who are working with me downstairs you know I'm paying them to do it, I pay a wage to do a gig with me. So it is me. And also as a fall out from the legal case. And this, I won't tell this story cos it is boring and it's not as juicy as it may sound but I am also Hefner now. It's not that I actually own He.. with the other three guys at various reasons have dropped out of the business part, mainly because with the legal case there was legal costs and just generally, I don't blame them at all, but people were just like 'you know I can't handle this - I don't think it means as much to me as you' and obviously it meant a lot more to me. So in terms of the reissues now it's one and the same thing. It's obviously

only a difference in terms of branding that Hefner was different to Darren Hayman but in terms of business it's the same thing; that all my records are my own. So no I don't find it hard now, I think I did and I think it was, I think sometimes it could come over as false humility but I don't think people genuinely appreciated how much the other three did.

And when you have all songs written by Darren Hayman that can be quite misleading. It is true that all the songs were written by me, [but] particularly John the bass player, you know they really did produce the records and I really didn't. I've had to, since Hefner ended, learn how to arrange music. And John was very good at it. You talk about the brass on *We Love the City*, I mean I didn't have anything to do with that really, I mean apart from making the decision that I'd really like to have brass. John arranged it all. So I genuinely felt that they were underplayed. I felt that in contrast to other bands that have a main song writer, definitely the band produced the records. I think it was OK to be that way then but I think I've got used to it now. You know I get so little attention now anyway compared to then that I don't think I could possibly be uncomfortable about too much attention now. This week, I've done two interviews, that's quite a lot, you know.

RP: Well if you want it to, I hope that changes. I think things will change.

DH: I think that some of us are just in it for the long game. I think my friend Pete, Pete Astor who's in Ellis Island Sound and used to be in bands right through the 80s and 90's, is just like some of us, [we] are in it for the long game. And the reason why a lot of people disappear, the reason why people stop making records is they just stop and there's not really a secret to it. You just don't stop making records. And I think that it's a war of attrition sometimes. And I think people like Robyn Hitchcock and Billy Childish, if you make enough records the Guardian Weekend will eventually do an article about you...

RP: [Laughter]

DH: They might do it at album 20 but they will, and sometimes you have a relevance by your own tenacity and I think that's my plan now. I'll release so many records that people can't possibly ignore me. You know once I've released, like you [and your poetry books], 10,000 albums somebody will surely find that noteworthy to say something about.

PS

the prose supplement to Painted, spoken

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Richard Price

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