



Bill Daniel (left) in Tucson, AZ, Dec. 2014. Photograph by Lila Lee.

Incisively and poetically documenting the crooks and crannies of the American cultural periphery, and tenaciously taking what he has found and crafted out on the road, Bill Daniel has three decades of remarkable creation to show for his tireless efforts. His vivid chronicles of the fevered punk scene in early 1980s Austin, Texas is where it all began, with indelible photographs of everyone from the Butthole Surfers to the Stinky Shits to Toxic Shock featured in the incomparable hand-sewn The Western Roundup. Consequently, he segued into an exploration of the then-disappearing railroad hobo world, the heirs to the denizens of Jack Black's You Can't Win, resulting in Who is Bozo Texino?, which is justifiably known as "the greatest hobo graffiti film ever made." A cultural anthropologist of the elusive underside of our times who employs a hauntingly evocative black and white aesthetic, his accomplishment lies in recorded facts presented with an almost mystical ambiguity. To quote, in his own words, "No matter what the disappointment might be in finding the lonely reality behind a particular myth or graffiti, there is a mystery, or truth, that will always evade the documentarian and the audience." He has carved out an unmistakable domain including his own films, salvaged cinematic artifacts presented in unusual locations (junkyards) projected on unlikely surfaces (sails), and with printed matter, including Mostly True, The Zone System, and Tri-X-Noise, Volume One coming out on Radio Raheem in the spring of 2015. If that wasn't enough, it's Daniel's gung-ho determination to take his artwork to the people—crisscrossing the nation, showing in often off-the-beaten-path and sometimes-improbable venues—that consolidates his achievement into a singular and all-encompassing work of art and life.

Starting here, at the Chaffin Diner in Tucson, let's begin in the present. This tour, the Tri-X Noise tour, you woke up one day and wanted to get on the road again? How long had it been since you'd done that?

Once I landed in LA in 2011 that was the end of a phase of a lot of touring, though I went out with Ralph White earlier this year for a couple of weeks; a regional thing. Really me just providing A/V backup for my friend Ralph, him playing his tunes, freak folk legend. A quickie. But this is a last minute thing, too, waking up about six weeks ago and going, "God damn, nothing is happening," feeling like it's been a year banging my head against the wall trying to get *The Texas Punk Problem* published. I've travelled with a lot of these photos before, this checkerboard wall thing. The first time I used that was in 1995 and some of the older prints I've got are the ones from then. You can tell because they're really beat-up, but they're going to have to go on the wall because *Tri-X Noise* needs one hundred and twenty-eight photographs. A photo show with live performance. A lot of the recent tours have had photo as one part of their components. The Sonic Orphans tour in 2010 had 16mm films of lost and found music films, and I had these prints, so I put them up, too.

The one I saw in Detroit? The day we went to the Packard Plant, with the films of the Avengers and Boy Problems?

Yeah, an early Raul's (Austin) era band, early 1980s. Billy Pringle's first band. As far as the name *Tri-X Noise*, it could be, "Bill, I thought it was a website, I thought it was a Big Cartel store," but it's just a catchall name. The title can apply to a lot of different projects. *Sunset Scavenger* was the same way; I find a title I like and it represents a group of ideas, not necessarily a specific configuration.

Is Tri-X Noise all Austin punk pictures?

No, but we sell the punk, because people want to see pictures of The Misfits, though when they show up they get to see pictures of a house show in Shreveport and that sneaks into the viewer's consciousness. But it's really The Misfits that draw. They're at the top of the marquee.



Tony Offender and H. R. Bad Brains, Esther's Pool, Austin, Texas, April 6th, 1982. Courtesy of the artist.

Tell me about the logistics. The term has been drained of meaning, but it certainly is the definition of DIY.

Well the logistics is really the art of it. You know, if you're poor you wash your own clothes, or mow your own yard, or change your own oil. You could aestheticize it if you want to but it's really a matter of organization. Certainly all visual artists have music that guides them—or most do. With this tour specifically I am trying to do that. At each spot, I am finding somebody local to share the gig, which is the punk DIY touring model that makes sense and continues to work. On the other hand it's experimental. When I look at a picture, I've got some music in my head. There's a soundtrack I'm thinking of or feeling, or using as compositional form, so why not have that when people are looking at the pictures live? And why not have that be different every night?

Which vehicle is it on this tour? The van you were driving in 2010?

No, that was my dear Toyota four-wheel drive. And then the E350 Diesel just became too much to repair.

That's the one you drove from Braddock (Pennsylvania) to Danny's Lot in Brooklyn to do the show at the dumpster pools in 2009?

The diesel was the one I was going to drive, but it blew out the water pump the moment I got on the freeway. So I had to double back and get the orange van, which I hadn't driven in months and had rust in the tank that clogged the fuel filter on the way. It was leaking oil and when I hit the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel they signaled me over to the bomb squad area and those guys were just like, "Are you kidding? No way! You're not getting in the tunnel with this thing, it's going to blow up." It was leaking a lot of oil.

But you made it to Brooklyn eventually.

Late, but I did. I had to.

So now you have the pickup truck. You built the walls, the display device—they go on the roof—and the prints are packed up in the bed of the truck. It's a lot of work and I suppose sometimes you might want to just have them put up on a wall in a gallery and get a check in the mail?

Well the artwork would be better if I didn't spend ninety percent of my time on logistics. Of course, everybody has the same complaint. But when the amount of effort and time that you put into the artwork is about five percent of your total economic output, it's like, wow man, if I could only work at ten percent. An hour and a half a day instead of forty-five minutes.

But how you present it and take it on the road has become inextricably linked with the work. Is that a trap? Would you rather be sitting poolside sipping margaritas?

No! Absolutely not. I'd just like to put more time into the work. But showing it this way is part of it, and I believe that how you show it is part of the work.

And the transition to the white cube can come with a whole new set of problems and nuanced contradictions in the commercial sphere. If you were to show in that kind of environment, would you want it to be presented in a very clean, orderly fashion, prints framed on the wall just so, or replicate what you are doing out on the road?

I like both things. For me the work has to be viable in both contexts. The idea for next year is to take this thing around to cleaner art spaces, but it comes with the same extension cords. No museum extension cords, you know? No museum lights, no wall labels. It comes whole.

Tell me about Garry Winogrand and Texas punk.

I have a theory that goes like this: Texas punk was informed by the presence of Garry Winogrand in the art department at the University of Texas in Austin in the



Twist, Ozol, California, April, 1994. Courtesy of the artist.



Reminiscence and environment, SOMA, SF, circa 1993. Courtesy of the artist.

late 1970s, where a whole bunch of the kids were starting bands and studying with him. Tim Kerr (later of The Big Boys), Steve Marsh (who formed Terminal Mind), Tom Huckabee (the drummer of The Huns), and others. I've got a pet curatorial project that is the work of the students of Garry Winogrand from when he taught at U.T.: painters, photographers, script writers. Tom Huckabee became a great storyteller and filmmaker who teaches script writing in Fort Worth. Like The Huns' bust at Raul's.

What was The Huns' bust?

That was the big bang in the universe of Texas punk. The Huns were arrested onstage at Raul's by officer Steve Bridgewater who, we find out years later, was actually a closeted aspiring actor. Tom, a few months before the bust, was making a film called *The Death of Jim Morrison* and they were filming down on Sixth Street, just running with no permits or anything. A cop came up and said, "What the hell are you doing," and they said, "We're shooting a film, the guy in the gutter is not really dead, he's supposed to be Jim Morrison. And we need a cop in the shot, so could you stand over here?" He played along and was in the movie. So at The Huns' show when the same officer Steve Bridgewater walked into Raul's Club, on some level he recognized that this was a performance he was in, and performed the arresting cop role.

What was the supposed crime The Huns were perpetrating?

Might have been a noise complaint but really the Austin police were gunning for Raul's because of full-male nudity on posters on the drag (Guadalupe Street) for punk shows there. I'm sure once they walked in and saw what was going on they thought, "We've got a big fish here, we're going to land this." If you're a cop, and it's just boredom, boredom, boredom, and then you get to bust up a punk show, it's like, "This is heroics, this is a poetic moment in which we can live out our role." Not just stopping kids from driving too fast but really getting to the core.



Bill Daniel installing *Tri-X-Noise*, Fort Houston, Nashville, TN, December, 2014. Photograph by Lila Lee. Courtesy of the artist.

Speaking of that era, describe what was going on at the Pflugerville [skating] ditch circa 1980.

Pflugerville was the spot. It was an example of public infrastructure that was there for the taking where you were going to create your whole deal around it and not be bothered and live as if the ditch was made specifically for you. Generally no hassles. It was out in the country then, but now Dell Computers is there and it's really built up and the ditch is under dirt. We think that they just filled it up and that it's still there.

Like the Buena Vista pool near Santa Cruz that has been filled in with dirt and dug out multiple times over the years. So, where do you get your *Tri-X* film?

Freestyle Photographic Supplies in LA. Kodak reformulated it about twenty years ago and maybe took some chromium out, so possibly it looks a little bit different, but it still acts like it's supposed to.

You started documenting the hobo graffiti train scene more than twenty years ago?

Well *Bozo Texino* started as a still project in 1983, and then I started shooting film in '88.

Going back that far, was part of the impetus to record a subculture that was disappearing?

Salvage ethnography, that's what I'd call it. What's great about the whole subject of American hobnobbing is that it's a giant plastic myth that you can attach yourself to and spin it out for whatever story you need to tell.

There's a whole new crop of people interested in that, a younger generation of train hoppers, like Brad Westcott, who makes the zine Never Heard of It, or Mike Brodie, to use a more notorious example, who are interested in this folkloric tradition. When you started, were there many young guys or girls riding trains?

No. I never saw any. But in the last twenty years there have been multiple new waves. The initial thing started in the early '90s.

Where'd that come from?

It was a cultural inevitability. The trains are there and they beg to be ridden and certain people are begging to get out of the house and not sleep inside. Especially in this country, driving east to west, every motel backs up to the train tracks and every train calls your name. All of it is a continuation and every step along the way is equally legit but also equally legit is building on this falsified myth, and it has been since the get-go. You know, at the turn of the century it was a really popular subject and there was all this mainstream pulp literature about it and it was in the vernacular. But this mechanism of exploitation is part of it.

What about in practical terms? There are a lot fewer wooden boxcars now and there has been the rise of containerization.

That's true, but that turns out to be the least of it. Really the problem is the security state. That's not only a problem for riding trains but for everything. You used to wave at people at crossings and they'd either wave back or shake their fists at you, though they couldn't do anything about it. But now they call on their cell phone or whatever. And once those buildings in New York went down, everybody, citizen and cop alike, wanted to be a hero. Poor rail fans couldn't take pictures of bridges anymore.

Ok, you're a salvage ethnologist, you've got folk art, and then you've, got in the last fifteen years the ascent of what is most often called "street art." Do these two things have anything to do with each other? Monikers and street art?

Yes, graffiti going back to Lascaux, and on trains in New York in the 1970s, and the whole train, ship, or even on a tree kind of expression. On the other end, recently, something else cluttering up the streets, an overabundance of not only illegal but also sanctioned "street" art. In some districts. Where I live in Pasadena, Texas, there is zero graffiti. I found one, well, some, under a bridge, some swastikas and penises.

Back to the basics.

These kids do not get *Juxtapoz* magazine, but if they get a can of paint, and they get under a bridge, and then you know what comes out.

What I'm talking about is validated graffiti vs. renegade graffiti. Are they related? Does one come out of another? You've got monikers, and, here I'm quoting from the editorial at the beginning of *Mostly True*, you've got "put-ons and art scene fakery."

Well, you know, that's the "editor." That wasn't me. I was in the role of the editor. And I like that guy, and I mostly agree with him. But yeah, for sure.

So where does genuine, for lack of a better word, mark making and monikering fall in that huge art-money-sanctioned, public projects world out there? Or where doesn't it?

That's the swastikas and penises I found under that bridge in Pasadena. It's going to come out, and when it comes out in a complete vacuum it's probably more interesting and a pure impulse. A destructive, juvenile impulse.

To cite the eminently quotable editor again, "But we have since found ourselves in an era of such suffocating media saturation and heretofore unmatched mindless rapidity of communication that the aggregate effect of the once generous act of information sharing has become like the wind—a hurricane to take refuge from."

Instagram, Facebook, exactly. Too many pictures, make it stop.

But you can't.

Well actually my phone got swamped at what I call Cell Phone Beach at the ship channel, so I didn't have a cell phone for two weeks, and it was fantastic! I saw a lot less images in those two weeks and the image processors in my brain finally got a break.

There are a billion more every day. How do you make one image that stands out? Actually, it's more about the dissemination. That's what has changed. Garry Winogrand took as many pictures as someone on Instagram today, but he didn't print them, or even develop them all. It's not so much that it wasn't possible to take so many pictures before, it's that the one-to-one relationship—a zine, a print, or even the one-to-one of a few of emails—has been supplanted by the one-to-the-rest-of-the-world. Do you have anything profound to say about that?

All day long, when I'm driving, to myself. Sure I think about that and ask hard questions, like why would I burden the world with another picture? Does the world want another picture? No. I think long and hard about that: am I going to ask people to look at another picture?

It devalues the individual photo, obviously, in the digital platforms we're talking about. You see it in a moment, but then it moves down the line and is gone. Do you find yourself out of sync, or think you have to adapt?

Well, they're kind of gratifying, putting them up in a way, but really it's a task I have to do for marketing purposes. It's kind of fun, but I'd rather not do it. It's time consuming and distracting. Really, I have to learn another app? Another password? Is it the right amount of time that's gone by for me to put up another Instagram picture? No, I'm about three days behind on posting. That's commercial suicide, and I'm trying to make a living. So to make a living I have to put up an Instagram every day. It's kind of fun, but I don't have to time to fool around with it. Of all the things to do with the day, that's one that's way low on the list. It's absurd that's what it requires, but I have to do it.

Back to the antediluvian age, were the first pictures you took at Raul's? 1981, then 1982 at The Ritz on Sixth Street.

Why are people so interested in that time now, over thirty years later, including many people that weren't alive then?

Well, one answer to that is it's really sad. "What happened? Why aren't people doing things?" It was an interesting time, sure, but it's the next thing? A lot of stuff did happen after, and I think the most interesting and crucial is the radical environmental movement, and punk/traveler types, and the whole W.T.O., and Occupy, and all of that comes out of the same impetus of the '80s punk thing did. But the punk thing was rock and roll, and rock and roll is inherently sexy and fun, not so much do-gooderism. In some ways punk carried a positive activist message, but essentially it was rock and roll. So what we don't have now is a rock and roll version of fuck the state, fuck capital. Fuck capital now seems like a more serious undertaking and it's not as fun.

But those movements don't have a soundtrack. And Occupy didn't come up with a cultural effusion or produce something like punk and it didn't even have much of a "look."

Which is probably a good thing.

The encrustation is strange to me, the sixteen year-old kid dressed up in the Crass uniform of thirty years ago, to a T, sartorially immaculate but historically and contextually unmoored.

That's just where we are evolutionarily as a species. Our media culture just exploded at that point and the whole thing became much more complex. Before, there was a monolith of corporate rock and that was smashed, in a way, though the power is still there. Culturally, things became much more atomized, which is a good thing. Now it's difficult to know what to rally around; then it seemed like a simple us vs. them. You're a punk, I'm a punk, and we're on the same team. Now there are a million teams.

You can be a punk one day, a raver the next, then rockabilly on Friday. It's odd, at the very least, this institutionalization of the punk look broken down into highly specific subsets. Crusty jugglers. Why do they all have dogs, Bill? That's what I want to know.

'Cuz it helps you spange.

I heard you say the other night that you've gone back to being interested in figures—figures in motion. In the photos of skating and punk from the early '80s that's very much there, but now?

Yes. Skateboarding is just a way of creating figurative gestures, and I love board dynamics, too—how boards work mechanically and the physics of skating and the interaction with the human body. You could say that skating is a kind of choreography that is performed to be photographed.

With skating you have published a number of ball shots, which are usually verboten.

Well, partly, I have a lot of ball shots because people were bailing a lot. And bailing shots are the ones that started to look more like the slam dancing pictures.

Like when you first saw the back cover photo by Ed Colver on *Wasted Youth's Reagan's In LP* with the guy flipping off the speakers upside down with Vans on, and it was totally skating. It was a skate trick. Are you taking pictures of skaters now?

No, but about six years ago I started shooting 35mm stills again and got a Nikon with a 28mm lens and a Sunpak flash, which was basically the same thing I was using in '82—same film stock, same developer, same 72-degree water with the film sitting there for eleven minutes. It's amazing how things can still be the same even though technology has changed so much. Like charcoal and a piece of paper. I wanted to get back to that, to shooting some art events, some music shows, but, you know, really unlikely music shows.



Kenny Peyton, Flowmotion Skatepark, South Austin, Texas, 1981. Courtesy of the artist.

As opposed to the likely shows in the likely venues. It's also strange to me how you go to these places, like this show at a squat I went to in Switzerland back in April, and it was packed in this basement and really jolly and there was a band with a good girl singer screaming, but it was like, where's the danger? Everyone is hugging. What's up with that? Everyone's all friends. There wasn't going to be a fight.

Well if you want fights there are plenty of opportunities at the liquor store right around the corner or on the streets of downtown Tucson. Half the people there will oblige you.

True. So, in The Western Roundup, the zine you made in the early 1980s, and much more recently in the Mostly True book, there is a very distinct reliance and incorporation of historical graphic motifs.

That all comes from Mike Nott, who was the designer for *The Western Roundup*. They were my photos, but Mike was the designer. He was a great poster designer too. He'd write "NOXX" on them instead of "Nott."

They're almost seamless. The Western Roundup looks like it could be a real 1950s dude ranch pamphlet, albeit with pictures of the Bad Brains, and Mostly True really does look like it could have been published in 1908.

It's a form of mimicry, but the point is to get an object-metaphor to work from. It's not supposed to be a replication of the original but I have to have a visualization to attach things to; a template. The style came from Mike. We were all on board, for sure, but that was his deal. I can tell you who else I learned how to operate an object metaphor from, and that's Craig Baldwin.

Who do you know from living in San Francisco through his film series Other Cinema. You worked on his films?

Tribulation 99—that was the first film I worked on with Craig, and it takes the form of a right-wing paranoid rant, a tract, and a lot of Craig's films are built on an inverted metaphor. They're falling into the ventriloquism of a counter-side. Like, he would tell the history of American interventionism in Central America from a crazy right-wing perspective rather than from a liberal one. You can take a style from an object, and it's also—looking for a voice. The editorial voice of *Mostly True* is a funny guy with a pipe. It's like, "I know that guy!"

Who did all the ads, the make-believe ones?

All of us. The design team was Gary Fogelson, Phil Lubliner, and Rich McIsaac, all in Brooklyn. There was a fortunate like-mindedness at work. Everybody got it and everybody shared in making the voice feel right. The second edition also had some design help from Eric Kneeland and Mike Enron.

All right, so you're stranded on a desert island and you can only bring one movie. Is it Robert Frank and Rudy Wurlitzer's Energy and How to Get It, or Les Blank's Burden of Dreams?

For that it might be something with fewer words involved—Bergman or something. Something that would take on a religious deal. But *Burden of Dreams*, that's something I could watch over and over.

You are obviously interested in peak oil and its aftermath, the Sausalito houseboat scene, the coming breakdown, but at the same time you're driving a truck and putting gas in it.

It's a four-cylinder.



Singalong during a performance by *The Mel Coolers*, Liberty Hall, Dallas, February 26th, 1984.

Point taken, though there's still a contradiction inherent in your work. A good one that shows there's this wasteful advanced capitalist society and, on the other hand, your tools—the camera and the truck—are part of that.

That they're part of civilization? Of course they are. And Al Gore flies in Learjets and lives in giant mansions with climate control.

That's more problematic than you driving a four-cylinder truck.

Maybe.

There are levels, degrees involved.

Yeah, like driving here with a headwind, and the fastest I could go is 62 miles per hour because my truck has roughly the engine displacement of a motorcycle.

There's a very substantial technical foundation to your photography, in the old-fashioned sense. Is that aspect not necessarily something you want to trumpet?

Oh, no, I'll talk all day long about that. But it's both photo technical and just pictorial. And it's crucial that it's both. In the content-and-form-relationship, the form is made with something, and that form is an output of a tool. Photography is of course super geeky and a lot of people in photography are obsessed with just the tools. And that's groovy, I love the tools. But what do they make? Certain tools make certain things and then it's about what these things embody. I feel like tools with a high degree of automation make work that feels disembodied.

To speak plainly, there's often form with no content.

I'm no less obsessed with my tonal scale than Ansel Adams was. I hope at some point to do an interview in which I only talk about the grayscale.

You're immersed in the practical side of your craft, the lenses, the cameras . . .

I know, it's horrendously unfashionable, and I think it's important to recognize that. I mean, look what's in the art world.

Well there's that. But the cameras, the trucks, the vans, there's a very nuts-and-bolts gearhead side to what you do, but it's superlative as art because that's all there but it's not about the zone system or like a Hollywood movie in which the CGI wows you but it's empty. I don't see your photographs and think about what lens you used, though obviously that's critical. Is it important to you that the viewer in the end is not aware of the how it was made? Or should they be aware of the technical prowess?

No, the most important thing is that they should stand in front of it and fall into it and we just see their feet disappear into the picture.