

# DAN LAYUS

## LIVE FROM THE LIVING ROOM

AUGUSTANA DOESN'T DO SLICK. "We try to make the show feel like we're all just hanging out in our living room," says frontman/pianist/guitarist Dan Layus. "If the guitar's a little out of tune, it's no big deal. I guess I'm really influenced by that Bob-Dylan-and-The-Band sound. Their mistakes are classic, and you really can't imagine the recordings any other way."

That's not to say there's not plenty of thought and rehearsal behind Augustana's performances, adds Dan. "But maybe one of the reasons our fans have been so faithful is because we try to keep it interesting and fresh onstage—and very real."



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Layus is still in his early 20s, but his conversation is rich with allusions to classic rock songwriting. He grew up in Greenville, Illinois, listening to his parents' vintage rock discs. He took up guitar at age 10, and later taught himself piano, but he didn't begin taking music seriously until years later.

"You know that summer after high school graduation?" Dan says. "You feel so free. You have your driver's license. It's probably the most fun time in any kid's life. I was spending a lot of that time in my car, listening to Ryan Adams' *Gold*. Something about that record propelled me into a whole new sense of music. Counting Crows also inspired me—I was obsessed with them for a while. Then I got into tracing back through music history. It was a long chain of, 'Oh, that's where that came from!' For example, I recently got into *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, the Joe Cocker live concert from 1969. I realized how many singers took so much from him. Anyway, I love that sort of discovery process."

In college, Layus considered a music major—but ironically, his love of songwriting derailed that plan. "I failed piano class twice," he laughs. "We had a piano lab, with a bunch of electronic keyboards and headphones, and the teacher would listen in on what we were playing. But instead of practicing note-reading or finger exercises, I'd be playing some song I wrote. I had the same problem when I was learning guitar. I tried to learn note-reading, but I'd get distracted by pop songs. I really just wanted to learn a song by Nirvana or the Beatles."

Layus started Augustana with Greenville buddy Josiah Rosen. The duo moved to LA, where they completed their lineup and signed with Epic records. Their debut album, *Midwest Skies and Sleepless Mondays*, propelled them to national prominence, largely on the strength of the piano-driven hit "Boston." A revamped Augustana, minus Rosen, released a follow-up, *Can't Love, Can't Hurt*, in early 2008, and they've been touring relentlessly since.

Layus has mixed feelings about the road. "I love touring," he says, "but I love being home with my wife and daughter. But it's hard for me to write at home—I only want to spend time with them. I get more inspired on the road, when I'm bored in some hotel room somewhere."

For years Layus wrote and performed his piano songs on a Yamaha P250 Professional Stage Piano, but he recently upgraded to a CP300. "The CP300 keyboard feel is perfect," he enthuses. "I've played a lot of other brands over the years, and they're really difficult to work with if the keys aren't realistic. And there's more to realism than just having weighted keys. I've never played another electronic piano with the realistic quality of the CP300."

Yet Dan insists he gets his best ideas when he's not playing any instrument: "They usually come in the shower, or while I'm driving the van or whatever. A melody just starts happening in my head. I try to capitalize on those moments, because I have a hard time making anything sincere when I start with just a couple of chords on an instrument. I need to have an inspiring melody, and then work off that."

But once inspiration strikes, Layus refines and edits. "I put a lot more thought into the process than I did when I was starting out," he says. "It used to be, 'I've got a chorus, I'll add a couple of lyrics, and there you go!' I made a lot of progress on *Can't Love Can't Hurt*, and Mike Flynn, the producer, really helped with that. Now I try to make every melody and lyric mean something." Dan chuckles. "I don't know if I'm accomplishing it, but I'm definitely trying!"



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