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NASHVILLE -----Songwriter Dan Penn recently got a fax from a devout fan in Italy who heard his stirring "Do Right Man" record, released earlier this month on Sire/Blue Horizon.

In part, the letter read:

Dear Daniel:

I heard your tape and found it most pleasant, but lacking in the deep soul.

"I agree with him," Penn said over crackers and a bowl of soup at a Music Row restaurant. "It is lacking in the deep soul. What he don't know is that radio ain't ready for the deep soul in America. We could use some more deep soul. But deep soul has to come from the black people. We can facsimile it, but they are the ones who got it. They've always had it and they're going to keep it. But they aren't letting it out right now."

Penn is a remarkable figure in American music.

He wrote soul classics such as "Dark End of the Street," a hit for James Carr. With Spooner Oldham, Penn wrote the James and Bobby Purify smash "I'm Your Puppet" and Aretha Franklin's "Do Right Woman - Do Right Man," from which his album got its name. For Alex Chilton and the Box Tops, Penn and Oldham wrote hits such as "Cry Like a Baby," and Penn produced "The Letter." Author Peter Guralnick called Penn "the secret hero" of his book *Sweet Soul Music*.

About the time Penn was lunching in bib overalls for this interview, jazz trumpet player Wynton Marsalis was lecturing on black music at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Marsalis contends that young black musicians tend to reject anything that isn't African or African-American, and consider European styles as white and irrelevant. He calls that cultural snobbery.

Marsalis also said technology has eclipsed the creative space of the pop and soul of Penn's era. He said, "Look at pop music and rap. There's not even a drummer. The (electronically produced) drum rhythm is on a continuous loop, always the same. How can anybody play off of that and come up with any new ideas? No wonder they can't play."

Minimalism and dialogue are the essence of a Penn composition.

"Sparseness is important to whatever you do," he said. "If you have just one sound

coming at you, it's uninteresting. It gets on your nerves. If you got that hole, the listener can step into the song better. The hole is like a suction that draws them in. To me, the bigger the hole, the more personal the song. If you have no holes, you make too many records that are too busy.

"And I've made some of them."

Penn carefully crafted his style over the years. Born as Wallace Daniel Pennington, he arrived in Muscle Shoals, Ala., from his native Vernon, Ala., in 1957. Penn was a green 16-year-old in love with Bobby "Blue" Bland and Ray Charles. As a songwriter, he quickly slid into the steamy groove set up by what was to become the Muscle Shoals Sound Rhythm Section - guitarist Jimmy Johnson, Roger Hawkins on drums, bassist David Hood and Barry Beckett on keyboards. They played behind more than 500 rhythm and blues, rock and country records. With the exception of Beckett, they all played on "Do Right Man."

"What finally hits you is how to find something to draw people in, rather than trying to overpower the listener," Penn said. "You never know what means you're going to use to get it - or if you're going to get it at all. You don't plan it. You hope. Usually, it happens between the bass and the drummer. Then everybody else lays out. Spooner (keyboardist Oldham) is the greatest lay-outter of all time. Reggie (Young, longtime Penn lead guitarist) is good, too. Still, if the bass and drummer don't have control, it's not really happening."

Vernon, 90 miles south of Muscle Shoals, is the Lamar County seat. Penn's parents were farmers and factory workers. His father, who died in 1963, led a back-porch band and sang in church. His mother played piano in church.

Penn learned about soul music by listening to WLAC-AM in Nashville. "When everybody went to sleep, I turned my radio down, where you could barely hear it," he said. "I could hear all the blues records. It wasn't hard to accept. Until then, all I had heard was hillbilly music."

Penn came to Muscle Shoals armed with the song "Is a Bluebird Blue?" that in 1960 became a hit for Conway Twitty. Besides songwriting, from 1958-65 Penn was lead singer in a rhythm and blues cover band called the Pallbearers.

Penn returned to Muscle Shoals to record "Do Right Man," with the help of George Drakoulis of Black Crowes fame. It is still a vital recording community. "The biggest difference recording there as opposed to New York or L.A. is that they get to hold on to some sort of innocence," Penn said. "They have an edge by being isolated."

"Do Right Man" features five Penn hits, presented in the stripped-down form in which they were written. Particularly poignant is Penn's cover of "I'm Your Puppet." The best of five new songs is "Zero Willpower," a slow, gospel-tinged confessional

that Penn, Oldham and Donnie Fritts wrote in 1979 for "The Rose" soundtrack. Bette Midler sang the original version.

"Do Right Man" was three years in the making. The catalyst for the project came in May, 1991, after Penn appeared with Oldham and Al Kooper at a songwriters night in New York City.

"Joe McEwen (of Sire Records) asked me to do a record even before the show," Penn said. "He had just done a similar deal with Charlie Rich." So Penn spent the last few years writing 20-25 songs for the album and producing rhythm and blues piano player Hal Neuman at Brent Maher's (of Judds fame) old studio here.

Penn is unsure whether he'll do a U.S. tour to support "Do Right Man." He admitted having a "pretty good nucleus" ready to go that includes Oldham and drummer Gary Nicholson. You can be sure it would be down to earth.

"You know, I started writing as a kid because I worked on a farm," he said. "My dad grew corn, watermelon and peanuts. He had a truck, and I'd come along with a mule and plow and cultivate it. You needed things to do, but I couldn't remember words to songs. So I made up my own words. Looking back, it was great. . . ."  
Penn's eyes shuffled off to a simpler time.

". . . I wish I had a farm like that now."