

Steelworkers' Sons

Grammy Award Winner Finds Musical Muse in Working Men and Women

Dave Alvin is a Grammy Award winning songwriter, singer and gut-wrenching guitarist. He's also the son of a USW organizer and publicist who has not forgotten his labor roots.

His late father, Cass Alvin, had a colorful 40-year career with the Steelworkers on the West Coast starting in 1945. Cass worked as a union organizer in steel and mining and was the Western Bureau Chief for *Steellabor*, the forerunner to *USW@Work*, as well as a publicist for the union's non-ferrous labor negotiations.

Working-class start

Dave, who was born in 1955, and his older brother Phil spent their childhood in a working-class neighborhood in suburban Los Angeles.

Their father's work took him to steel mill communities in California and to copper and coal mines in Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming. Sometimes the brothers would tag along to union events and travel with him on organizing drives during their school vacations.

Dave vividly remembers the

nervousness and anticipation he felt while driving down a one-lane dirt road at night in a back country mining community in Colorado to attend a union rally. It was a clandestine meeting kept quiet because it was a company town.

"The community feeling inside that hall and to see my dad up there exhorting the workers had a profound impression on me," he said. "Most kids don't see that unless they live it every day."

Lessons from dad

The musician said he "learned a lot of lessons from dad"

during those trips. "One of the big ones was there is more than one side of a story," he said.

Another was that black, Latino, Asian and white workers all had the same issues.

"There are differences between everybody," he told one interviewer. "But ... what are the connections? On a working class level, you're connected by that. You're all working men and women."

His search for that other side of the story has extended into his music. "That's what I'm going for," he said. "What's the side that you're not hearing?"

The Alvin brothers learned to love the rock n' roll music they would listen to on those car trips with their father. The R&B, soul, honky-tonk and rockabilly they heard on AM radio were early exposures to music that would shape their professional lives.

Their childhood love for music led them to form The Blasters, an 80s band big in the Los Angeles club scene that combined blues, rock n' roll, and rhythm and blues. Despite critical acclaim and a devoted following, Dave left the band in 1986 for a solo career.

Brothers on the line

Dave's first solo record was "*Romeo Escape*," which features the compelling, blue-collar roots inspired song "*Brother on the Line*." An excerpt follows:

"Brother, I'm fighting for you as well as me. I gave them my sweat, they want my dignity. When the boss man shakes your hand and says, 'Son, you'll do just fine,' and you walk into the factory to a job that once was mine, please don't forget your brother who's still standing on the line."

This poignant ballad is just one example of Dave's ability to tell stories through his music. His songs, intimate tales of working people's lives, address universal issues yet touch the hearts of listeners.

He finds a musical muse in his loyalty and respect for everyday people. He said he is quite aware that "working people rarely get their stories told." Besides, he said, he was "brought up with a certain kind of morality of the underdog."

Dave believes, as his father did, that working people are underdogs who need to stand up against greedy corporate powers and make their voices heard. His father strongly advocated the labor cause and the necessity of unions.

"Get the message out there," he said. "Unions, though not perfect, are the best way for working people to have a voice, to have clout and to have power against the powerful."

Though he acknowledges "things are hard now" he remains optimistic and feels that the labor movement is still alive and kicking, just like rock n' roll.

Back on track

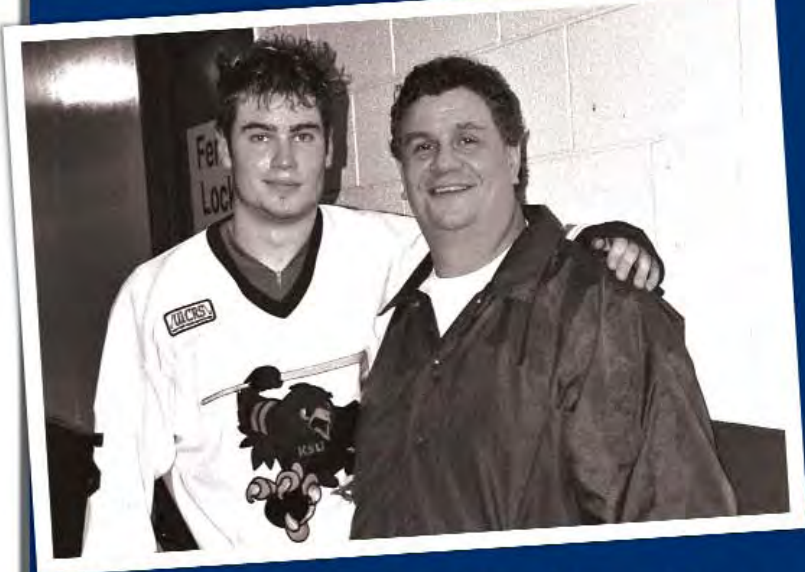
It just "takes people to see things outside the box," he said. As with musicians, "it is up to (union) members to correct the problems" and steer America back on the right track.

Americans will soon realize that "the things people take for granted are the things the union got for them," he said.

Workers' benefits were gained through our forefather's "toil and struggle," not corporate America's CEOs who "do not give employees benefits out of the kindness of their hearts," he said.

"My dad believed in the Steelworkers union," Dave said in ending the interview, the pride obvious in his voice.

One can only believe that his father would also be proud — proud that his son carries on his mission to promote and protect the values and rights of the nation's working class.



Kent State Hockey Star Hopes to Turn Pro

Credits his Steelworker Dad

Ron O'Bannon, a member of Local 979 at the Mittal Steel USA plant in Cleveland, tenderly jokes about his son Jason, a National Hockey League prospect, but he can't hide his pride.

"Jason's a handsome kid, still has all of his teeth, polite; not like a hockey player at all," says Ron, a No. 2 Steel Producing MTM, or maintenance technician.

The senior forward from Kent State University has raised eyebrows in the hockey community this season, racking up numerous awards for his efforts.

The Collegiate Hockey Association named Jason to the Division I All-American, making him the third rising senior in Kent State history to be so honored.

The younger O'Bannon led his Golden Flashes team to a school record 26 wins, which qualified Kent State for its fourth ever National Tournament appearance.

His head coach, Jarret Whidden, had nothing but praise for his star player, who is no slouch in the classroom even though being a Division I athlete can qualify as a full-time job.

"Jason is a leader both on and off the ice," Whidden said. "He looks after his fellow teammates, which is always a sign of a good leader. He sets the bar high."

Jason has hopes of playing in the National Hockey League. His effort this season has drawn the attention of league scouts, giving him a shot at making that dream come true.

A criminal justice major who started playing hockey at age 4, Jason remains modest about his achievements. He gives his father credit for being a good example.

"He works hard every day just to provide for his family," Jason said of his dad. "He showed me the importance of hard work. You have to put in the time to get results."



Cass Alvin and Dave Alvin
Photos courtesy of Dave Alvin

*I'm the man I've always been
I'm the kid who rode the rails through
the Great Depression
I fought in the big war and marched for the Union
I'm the man I've always been.*

Dave Alvin,
'The Man in the Bed'