

Darrick Hurst's band Man Born Blind wins two first-place awards in New Mexico Music Festival

New Mexico 'Grammy' awards may boost Sandia student aide's music career

By Neal Singer

As I drove into Colorado almost a year ago with two women of disparate ages, I played a CD titled Man Born Blind. My wife said, "Wow, who is that? They're very good." My son's girlfriend said, "They seem very well structured."

I thought they were good too, but because the disk was given to me by Darrick Hurst — a student aide in my office who's a member of the band — I didn't totally trust my judgment. I like listening to people whom I know, play. But when two women with divergent tastes both liked the disk, for the first time I thought maybe it was really as good as I felt it was.

It's Sunday night in late May. Darrick Hurst (3651), 23, is waiting in line at the Marriott-Pyramid for his ticket to enter the equivalent of the New Mexico Grammy Awards — formally, the New Mexico Music Awards. He's a finalist, but things aren't looking good. Just behind Darrick is a musician who is not only a finalist but has been pre-chosen by management to be part of the night's entertainment. With him in line, providing visual glow, is a beautiful blonde in a red dress.

Darrick's band members are too busy or too broke to make the ceremony. They weren't invited to perform anyway. For visual glow, Darrick has only his parents. They stand patiently in line with him.

Some might claim that Mike and Joan Hurst lack band panache. Unlike, for example, the young guitarist in front of them, whose flowing blond hair is arranged in a pony tail and who wears wraparound sunglasses in the dimly lit meeting room, Darrick's parents do not look like they may stay up all night defining a certain beat. They do not resemble the Indians from Jemez Pueblo in colorful dance costumes, country western singers in embroidered shirts and silver-inlaid belts, young rap groups in jeans, and people "of the Tradition" who sing movingly in Spanish.

'As long as he gets his education'

Mike Hurst (5353) wears a dark blue suit and dark blue tie. He looks like a Sandia engineer attending his son's graduation.

"Music is good as a hobby," says Mike. "As long as he gets his education."

Darrick's charming mother — a professional embroiderer — stands loyally by.

Some young people would prefer their parents not attend, so that the new generation can assert its independence. Darrick feels differently.

"I thought, after all they've put up with, they deserve to be taken out to dinner," Darrick tells the *Lab News* as the trio wait in line.

It may be that Darrick's experience with music groups since junior high has taught him wisdom not generally associated with rock bands.

"A lot of being in a band comes down to compromise," he says. "Playing an instrument in a band isn't just a collision of sound — you have to stop and listen to each other. It's something I had to learn."

It also requires determination and patience. Lead singer Nate Jackson, who plays acoustic guitar and writes almost all of the band's lyrics, is married and works weekends as an ambulance paramedic. Weekends, of course, are when a start-up band seeks exposure in local bars. He's trying to switch his hours.

Drummer John Romano works for Big J Con-



Photo by Randy Montoya

struction Co. in the machine shop; he shares an apartment with bassist Jon Shores (1762). Darrick sometimes crashes there when band practice stretches too late to go home to his room in his parents' home. Darrick — who is also a fifth-year double-major UNM student with a high GPA — has a busy life.

Dropping the destructive things

This doesn't stop him from thinking about the band's musical aims, which are less about individualism than one might think.

"We try to drop things destructive to the end goal of the music, and do that without hurting anyone's feelings," he says.

Destructive actions include "instrumental self-indulgent solos that are more distraction than edifying in a piece of music."

Positive results come from working together. "When we write a song, it'll sound entirely different a few months later. We change the rhythm, the words."

With all this community feeling, how do songs actually get written? "[Lead singer] Nate has an interesting ability to look at humanity and condense down what he sees into stories, which he turns into songs," Darrick says. "He comes in and plays a set of chords [at band rehearsals], or maybe he just has lyrics and we try to find music. If the development of a song seems to be moving away from the feeling of the lyrics, we attempt to be sensitive to that."

Reconciling this tender approach with the reality of rock stardom as it exists — the big stage, thousands of

fans, bizarre behavior — is not easy, he recognizes.

Countering celebrity-ization

"Communication with the audience [today] takes a back seat to the celebrity-ization of music. It sabotages the intent of your music, which is to effectively communicate with people. That's a disparity in the way the world works. As a musician, you have a little sliver of an opportunity to communicate, just a chance to push the world a little bit in the direction for positive change, but there are difficulties."

The star treatment is one. "You lose touch with reality," he theorizes. "Just because you have a platform doesn't mean you should be put on a pedestal. If you're writing stuff relevant to people,

you have to stay in touch with what keeps you rooted in your inspiration."

Darrick has had fun experimenting with flashing lights and smoke machines but, he says, "it doesn't leave you with anything lasting. We want something where people are drawn to the performance, but not overpowered from the core goal, which is to pay attention to the music itself and whatever story it's trying to tell."

The group's story wins first place in two categories: best album design and best alternative rock song, "Safety Net."

The cover, designed by Darrick (see graphic at left), begins on the left with a baby holding a blind man's cane. In a series of images, the cane gets shorter and finally disappears as the baby enlarges into an adult. The design, he says, "is a hopeful message depicting that we can become more clear-sighted as we get older."

"Safety Net," written by Nate, is a lengthy, emotionally moving piece in which Darrick plays a catchy guitar backup.

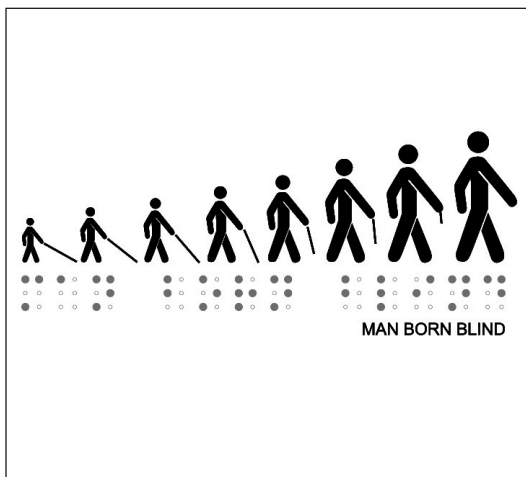
Impossible not to like him

While other winners had groups of followers who cheered and whistled their arrival at the podium, young Darrick in his simple jeans and T-shirt was greeted mostly by silence and curiosity. His composure was unbroken, however. "Quite a night," he said pleasantly over the microphone to several hundred attendees when he was called up for a second award. He also had the presence of mind to mention he'd consider signing up for guitar lessons from a particularly dynamic guitarist who stunned the audience with his expertise just prior to Darrick's award announcement.

It was impossible not to like him and he was cheered as he left the podium. "It doesn't hurt that he looks like Brad Pitt," quietly commented Doug Geist of Santa Fe Center sound studios, which recorded the group's CD.

"Not bad work, for a hobby," says his dad as Darrick rejoins his parents with his second award.

*However. Ever since listening to the Man Born Blind CD, whenever I see Darrick walk some errand through our building in his self-effacing way — in his old jeans, T-shirt, soft shoes, and stand-up hair that looks like he just got up except that's the style — I see another Darrick walking behind him. This Darrick is translucent, I can see through him, but he has in fact a limousine at his beckoning, asks caterers for only the brown M&Ms, and has his hotel room furniture put out by poolside. In short, in some alternative universe, Darrick Hurst has been discovered. He's a rock star, worth millions of dollars. It just so happens that in this universe, for now, he faxes and copies and sometimes writes for the *Lab News*. But the transition could happen any time. Be ready for a call from Rolling Stone Magazine. Be ready.*



DARRICK HURST won a New Mexico "Grammy" award for his design of the *Man Born Blind* album cover. Darrick's group, Man Born Blind, also won an award for best alternative rock song, "Safety Net."