

1990 Daniel Johnston plane crash

On March 17, 1990, American musician [Daniel Johnston](#), while experiencing a [psychotic episode](#), caused a two-seater private aircraft owned by his father, William "Bill" Johnston—a former [World War II](#) pilot—to crash near [Little Rock](#), [Arkansas](#), United States. Daniel was being flown home from [Austin, Texas](#), following performances at the [Austin Music Awards](#) and the [South by Southwest](#) festival.

Mid-flight, Daniel removed the plane's ignition key and threw it out the window. The aircraft entered a [tailspin](#), and both men struggled for the controls, before Bill leveled out and crash-landed in a wooded area. The plane was destroyed, though both survived with only minor injuries.

Daniel suffered from [schizophrenia](#) and [bipolar disorder](#), and had, unbeknownst to his father, stopped taking his prescribed medication. Following the crash, he was [involuntarily committed](#) to a psychiatric hospital in West Virginia, and his father took charge of his medication. The crash is recounted in the 2005 documentary *[The Devil and Daniel Johnston](#)*, directed by [Jeff Feuerzeig](#).

Background

Daniel Johnston was an American musician and visual artist who grew up in [New Cumberland](#), [West Virginia](#), and began [self-releasing](#) homemade [cassette tape](#) albums while living with his family.^[2] After relocating to [Austin, Texas](#), in the early 1980s, Johnston gained popularity in Austin's [underground music](#) scene and earned national attention following a 1985 appearance on the [MTV](#) program *[The Cutting Edge](#)*; however, he began exhibiting symptoms of [mental illness](#), and was eventually diagnosed with [schizophrenia](#) and [bipolar disorder](#).^{[3][4]}

Throughout the late 1980s, Johnston was repeatedly committed to [psychiatric hospitals](#) following [psychotic episodes](#).^[5] This included attacking and hospitalizing his then-manager Randy Kemper with a lead pipe, believing Kemper was possessed by the devil;^{[2][6]} being found by police singing [hymns](#) in a creek near the [University of Texas at Austin](#) after taking [LSD](#), leading to his commitment at the [Austin State Hospital](#);^[6] and forcing his way into an elderly woman's apartment to perform an [exorcism](#), causing her to jump from a second-story window and break several bones, prompting Johnston's court-ordered commitment.^{[5][7]}

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Accident	
Date	March 17, 1990 ^[1]
Summary	Forced landing following ignition shutdown by passenger during psychotic episode
Site	Wooded area near Fordyce , Arkansas , United States
Aircraft	
Aircraft type	Beech A23 Musketeer
Registration	N3520R
Flight origin	Abilene, Texas , United States
Destination	Holly Springs, North Carolina , United States
Occupants	2
Passengers	1
Crew	1
Fatalities	0
Injuries	2
Survivors	2

William "Bill" Johnston, Daniel's father and a former World War II pilot, had previously flown his son back from Austin to West Virginia after Daniel's release from Austin State Hospital.^{[6][7]} Daniel returned to Austin in March 1990 to perform at the Austin Music Awards and the South by Southwest festival, with Bill flying him there in his plane.^{[2][6][8]} Unbeknownst to Bill, Daniel had once again stopped taking the medication prescribed for his bipolar disorder, having previously done so during an April 1988 trip to New York City.^{[2][6]}

Crash

Following Daniel's performances in Austin, he and Bill departed in the two-seater plane, a Beech A23 Musketeer with registration N3520R,^[1] for their return to West Virginia.^{[2][8]} South of Little Rock, Arkansas, at an altitude of approximately 6,500 feet, Daniel told his father he was going to be sick and reached over to turn off the engine; Bill turned the key back on. Daniel then threw a soda can out the window and demanded that Bill land on a nearby lake, with Bill responding that the plane could not land on water.^[6] Daniel, who had been reading a comic depicting Casper the Friendly Ghost and Spooky in parachutes, believed he himself was Casper, and yelled "Let's bail out!" before turning off the ignition a second time and throwing the keys out the window.^{[6][7][9][10]}

With the engine now dead, Daniel grabbed the controls, as he and Bill wrestled for them while the plane entered a tailspin.^{[6][10]} Bill called out, "You'll kill us!" and Daniel replied, "I can't die!"^[6] At the last moment, Daniel released the controls, allowing Bill to level out above the trees and aim for a clearing. The aircraft came up about 100 yards short, crashing into the treetops, where it lodged roughly 60 feet above the ground before falling straight down.^[6] Both men survived with only minor injuries.^{[2][8]}

The aircraft was destroyed following the crash.^[11] After they climbed out of the wreckage, a farmer ran up to help them; Daniel threatened him, prompting Bill to say, "Leave him alone. He's out of his mind."^[6] Walking out of the forest, the pair passed a rural church whose billboard read, "God promises a safe landing, but not a calm voyage."^[7] Convinced that he had saved his father from Satan, Daniel took their survival as proof that God was winning a battle with Satan over his soul.^{[7][11]}

Aftermath and legacy

Following the crash, Johnston was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital in West Virginia.^{[12][13]} Bill, having discovered that Daniel had stopped taking his medication, took charge of it himself.^[9] Daniel's mother, Mabel, recalled that Bill at first resolved they would no longer have Daniel live with them, but later arranged to bring his son home; in 1991 the family moved to Waller, Texas, where Daniel lived when he was not hospitalized.^{[2][6]}

Director Jeff Feuerzeig had been drawn to Daniel after the musician performed a one-hour radio special by telephone around the time of his 1990 hospitalization; Feuerzeig was among those who called in,



Daniel Johnston with his father Bill, the pilot of the aircraft, in 2005

and he resolved to make a documentary about Daniel afterwards.^[7] He later featured the crash as director of the 2005 documentary *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, in which Bill recounts the events of the crash.^{[7][10]}

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