

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS BRIGHTER THAN CREATION'S DARK

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2007 was a year of transition and reinvention for our band, having been on the road almost constantly since the fall of 2001 a break was desperately needed. A little time at home to recharge and perhaps rethink some things.

The blurring of the lines between the personal and the musical has always been an integral part of what this band does and part of what sets it apart from the corporate music machines that dominate so much of pop-culture in the name of what used to be called Rock and Roll. That said, when things go wrong it can become an unbearable situation on levels both personal and artistic. Such is what led to the amicable and mutually desired parting of ways with Jason Isbell in the spring of 2007. He had been an integral part of our musical family for five years and three albums but personal and creative differences brought about the need for change.

Moving on after such a loss seemed at first a daunting challenge. Our band's survival instincts (much of what has kept mine and Mike Cooley's partnership alive and well for 22+ years) led us to strip everything down to the essential elements of song and rebuild it from scratch. This led to us booking and playing a semi-acoustic tour we named *The Dirt Underneath* where we would go out without all of the trappings and decorations of "The Big Rock Show" and put the emphasis on the songs and stories. It also gave us a chance to acquaint everyone with our dear friend **John Neff**. Neff was a founding member of our band who continued to play on our albums from time to time and he became a full-time part of the touring band a couple of years ago. He's an excellent guitar player but is best known for his amazing pedal steel abilities. His playing has graced acclaimed albums by Japancakes, The Star Room Boys, Barbara Cue and Lona among many others. During some troubled times, John's playing was one of the few things we could all agree on.

Around this same time we were asked to back up soul legend Bettye LaVette on the follow-up to her excellent breakthrough album *I've Got My Own Hell to Raise*. For that project we took her down to Muscle Shoals, AL and enlisted the help of another soul music legend, our dear friend **Spooner Oldham**. The resulting album *Scene of the Crime* (Anti Records) has furthered her comeback and showed off another side of our band's versatility (something often overlooked by folks who often label us as some kind of "Southern Rock" novelty act). Working with Spooner on that project also directly led to us asking him to participate in *The Dirt Underneath*.

When we all convened to work up *The Dirt Underneath* show, everyone came in with lots of new material and it became almost immediately apparent that the show's emphasis would be on working up our new album in front of a live audience over the course of the tour.

Cooley has always written my favorite songs in the band. Like so many other ways that we find ourselves as the polar opposites, I'll write dozens of songs searching for that good one, he'll skip the middle man and write one or two songs in a year but they might be "Zip City" and "Women Without Whiskey". This year he came in with seven songs, each one as good as any he's ever written.

I've been writing songs since I was eight years old and writer's block had never been anything more than a week or two dry-spell, however the past several years had seen me slow down to a trickle. This finally ended with a vengeance around the time we came off the road last fall, as I wrote about 50 songs in six months, giving me a lot of material to choose from for the new album.

We spent two days rehearsing and premiered *The Dirt Underneath* at The Georgia Theatre in Athens, GA on April 27 and 28 then loaded the trailer and headed west for a three week tour that went far above and beyond our best hopes. By the end of the tour (at the Fox Theatre in Boulder, CO.) we were averaging 8-9 of the new songs a night, many of which were getting our best responses. It was really surreal hearing people sing along with Cooley's "**A Ghost To Most**" considering we had yet to record it and had only worked it up three weeks earlier. We came home, slept for a couple of weeks and reconvened in the studio on June 11, 2007 (one day after our band's eleventh birthday).

Most of the songs were recorded live in the studio although we will admit to taking great care with getting really good vocal takes and with really taking our time working on harmonies. Some songs were well rehearsed when we went in to record them, having worked them out on the road the previous month. Others were improvised on the spot. Some of our favorite moments were total accidents and we intentionally allowed ample room and opportunity for the happy accident. Those happy accidents were recorded and captured on sixteen tracks of glorious 2" tape by our recording soul mate **David Barbe** at his Chase Park Transduction studio in Athens, GA. This is our sixth album with him and each time it gets better.

We spent most of July on the road doing a second leg of *The Dirt Underneath* before reconvening in August to finish recording and mix the album. This time David mixed it himself, keeping true to the homegrown and 'keep it in the family' spirit that pervades the whole album.

As the album took shape, the sequence came so easy it was as if it was written in that sequence. But as time ticked away on the recording session, one song seemed to be missing. With 18 songs in the can the notion of a missing piece was amusing to most, but with each listen and every possible arrangement of songs, one song just wasn't there. Finally, a couple of days before our last day of tracking I wrote "**The Righteous Path**". I went in the next night and played it through once for everybody and we rolled tape, nailing it in one take and finishing the puzzle.

In addition to having Spooner Oldham play on the album, this time also marked the first time we recorded songs by our bass player, Shonna Tucker. A more private person cast in the midst of a bunch of extroverts, I've known of her great skills as a writer for as long as I've known her. This time she showed up with two great songs she wrote the week before recording commenced. She then proceeded to write another at the studio. They make a great addition to our album.

Inter-connected themes explored by three different writers (with three very different points of view) has always been a hallmark of what sets our band apart. This album might even take all of that to the next level, as this is by far our most eclectic, yet cohesive album ever. Brad Morgan gets an extra kudos here for being the first-take king and the glue that holds all these crazy elements together.

In the end, we ended up with nineteen songs. Nine by me, three by Shonna, and seven by Cooley. Stylistically, they run the gamut from old-timey sounding country to a heavy R&B influence. Some songs that are quieter than any we've ever recorded and some that rock harder than anything we've ever done. In the end it's still all Rock and Roll (which is why that will always be the description of choice to us when describing our music in stylistic terms). Finished, sequenced, even mixed and we still had no title for the album.

As a band famous for our sometimes hard-fighting ways, we managed to make this album without so much as a single creative disagreement. They say that the best art is often born of adversity and there

was plenty leading up to the writing of the songs, but the actual recording process was a marvel of united purpose and inspiration. Then it came time to name the thing and we couldn't agree on anything. No heated battles, just a comedy of errors as each potential title would get 2-3 votes. Every decision had been unanimous and we wanted the title to be also but there was always a dissenting vote.

In the end we went with **BRIGHTER THAN CREATION'S DARK**, which came from a line in Cooley's song "**Checkout Time in Vegas**" and to me made an apt description of the music we had made. Don't think we ever got that unanimous vote, but ran out of time and had to name it something. It was also a title that greatly appealed to **Wes Freed**, who has done all of our album cover art since 2001 and would be designing this one also. He was so inspired by the title that he created the finest artwork of our history for this album.

This story ends here with the completion of our best album. It is also the beginning, as we will be spending most of the next year or two playing these songs all over the world for what should become our most ambitious seasons of touring yet.

It's a grower so play it loud and play it often.
Long Live Rock and Roll.

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