



National Park Radio *The Great Divide*

National Park Radio singer/songwriter/acoustic guitarist Stefan Szabo is an old soul, 30 going on 60. He got married on his 18th birthday, had two daughters by the time he was 21, and didn't even start to write songs until he was 27. From the first note of his band's debut album, *The Great Divide*, it is apparent his music is timeless – it could well have been recorded at any point over the last 100 years, and its subjects are just as eternal – the urge to discover and explore the great wilderness, while remaining true to family, community and an open-minded belief system. It's about surviving hard times ("I Will Go On," "Rise Above"), the ups and downs of relationships ("Monochrome," "The Ground and the Knee"), questioning religious dogma ("Ghost," "Once Upon a Time") and sometimes just plain old fun (the old-time voice-through-a-megaphone and kazoo of "The Walking Song"). As for the banjo-and-strings-driven acoustic sound – call it Americana, roots, indie-folk or simply music to get up and dance to – think The Band by way of neo-revivalists Mumford & Sons and the Avett Brothers, even if Szabo claims not to have really heard any one of them.

"I never listened to this kind of music until I started playing it. I've just always had a dream that this was something I could do," says Szabo, who grew up in the shadow of the Ozark Mountains, in the tiny town of Harrison, Arkansas, and adjacent to the Buffalo National River, dubbed "America's First National River," its National Park designation a major factor in his group's name. Raised by a single mother after his father left home when he was nine months old, Stefan was the second youngest of five brothers growing up pretty much poverty-stricken in a "laid-back, low-income" area. "It was a struggle, but at the same time, a lot of fun, because I had four brothers around me," he recalls, and that survival quality pervades his music.

That spirit of persistence comes from that humble upbringing, but the only music Szabo listened to was top 40 radio and alternative Christian rock, while beginning to learn to play guitar when he joined a contemporary worship band while attending youth group.

"No one in my family played music, nor was there a strong music scene in the area. There was no one close by I could learn from," he says.

In fact, it wasn't until years later, when he traded in his Fender Stratocaster for a six-string banjo tuned like a guitar that he began playing the kind of music he is playing now with National Park Radio. Working an IT job after putting himself through college, Szabo was a 27-year-old husband and father of two, but it wasn't enough. He had to cross "The Great Divide" – a song inspired by his trip to the mountains of Colorado -- and get to the other side by fulfilling his destiny, not just for his own sake, but for his family.

“There are two different kinds of people,” says Szabo. “There are those who want to climb mountains and see what’s on the other side, and others content with settling in the valley. I realize now I’m the person who wants to climb that mountain.”

Three years ago, six-string banjo in hand, Szabo solicited his brother and some local friends to help him perform some songs he’d written, gradually settling on five, which he recorded and released as an EP online.

Gratified by the response, he wrote more and more songs, eventually signing with Texas-based management and production company Edgewater Music Group. Collaborating with Edgewater’s producer Derek Hames and engineer John Shelton, Szabo and the band recorded their debut album *The Great Divide*.

“People just responded to it and here we are today,” he says in his aw-shucks humility. “It’s been a crazy few years.”

“I have no idea what genre it is. I just repeat what people tell me. It’s a blend of a bunch of different things.”

The Great Divide takes its cue from America’s outdoors. It’s about the pioneering spirit it took to explore and discover new land and a new way of life. It explores the problems that come with settling down and adopting a belief system, but also the beauty in joining together to create something more powerful than any one individual.

“Growing up next to the Buffalo National River, we all have a love for camping, canoeing, hiking and swimming,” he says, with the band’s name evoking an old WPA poster logo. Now that he’s put a touring band together – which features banjo player Heath Shatswell and multi-instrumentalist/fiddle player Jon Westover, drummer Eli Barrett, and bassist Mike Womack – Szabo can’t wait to get out there and perform *The Great Divide* for fans, old and new.

“That’s my de-stresser,” he insists of playing live, “after dealing with all the struggles of travel and business, I get to sing and make people happy, which feels so good.”

“Thank you.... I guess,” Stefan drawls, giggling, after I tell him he’s wise beyond his years. “I try to consider all angles in my songwriting, even if I’m not always successful. I believe that everybody is equal, everybody has their good reason why they do things. And just because I don’t understand something, that doesn’t mean it’s wrong. I try to keep that open mind in everything I write.”

“You see, my goal in this whole thing is to make a better life for my family by doing something I love to do,” he explains. “I want to teach my kids you don’t have to conform to what society says about going to college, getting a job, settling down, working for a company for 30 years and retiring. You can follow your passion. I want to make enough money to play music, pay my bills and travel with my family.”

The Great Divide could well lead National Park Radio and Stefan Szabo to that promised land.