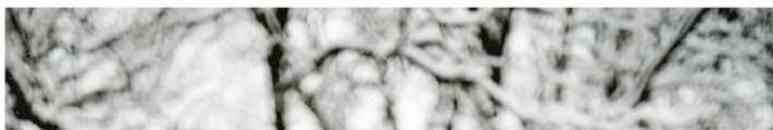


# VARIETY



## WINTER BREAK



Trampled by Turtles frontman Dave Simonett tried to write a happier solo record. It didn't work out.

Story by CHRIS RIEMENSCHNEIDER • Photo by JEFF WHEELER • Star Tribune

**I**t didn't seem possible for Dave Simonett to find humor anywhere amid the scorched and wasted landscape that is his captivating new record. Like any good Minnesotan, though, he at least managed to laugh at himself.

Specifically, he ridiculed how badly he wanted *not* to make this album.

"I tried writing other songs for a long time, but I don't think I even finished one," he said. "It was a disaster."

Like any good songwriter, the Trampled by Turtles frontman can trust only the stuff that comes from the heart, even if it feels like a punch in the gut. The songs he finally unleashed for "Furnace," his second record under the solo moniker Dead Man Winter, hurt like a wrecking ball.

Issued a week ago, and on tap for a release party Friday

at First Avenue in Minneapolis, "Furnace" can be easily summed up in two words: divorce record. The fact that it's such a familiar theme for an album — going back to his hero Bob Dylan's seminal 1975 LP "Blood on the Tracks" — is the chief reason Simonett at first tried to avoid it.

"It seemed too obvious," he said, "and I just didn't want to cry all over everybody."

Despite always writing from a personal, confessional standpoint, Simonett usually managed to add a veil of universality and ambiguity to his songs before now. Especially in Trampled by Turtles, his lyrics rarely sounded uniquely about him, and the five-man harmonies and camaraderie within the all-acoustic Americana band made it sound like he was never alone, even with a song as overtly foreboding as "Alone."

See **SIMONETT** on E12 ►

Watch Dave Simonett perform songs from his new solo record at [startribune.com/variety](http://startribune.com/variety).



Dave Simonett in the woods surrounding Pachyderm Studios in Cannon Falls, Minn. "Furnace," his new album with Dead Man Winter, was recorded there.

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# Simonett takes a winter break

◀ SIMONETT from E1

Even though "Furnace" is loaded with the electric guitars, drums and organ hardly ever heard on a TBT record, there's no hiding behind a band here, and no doubting the meaning of the songs.

"I'm lonely and tired/No will left to fake it," he sings in "This House Is on Fire," the album's stark opening track. "You know it makes no sense/Where all the good times went/This house is on fire/And I'm not getting out."

Sitting near the unlit fireplace inside the house at the legendary Pachyderm Studio in Cannon Falls two weeks ago — a place that became a home away from home over the past year — Simonett, 36, appeared way more upbeat than he sounds on the record, which he made at Pachyderm.

He regaled listeners with a story about fishing for trout in Pine Creek, which cuts through the refurbished 7-acre property where Nirvana and many other alt-rock bands recorded in the early '90s. He also proudly discussed the work he has been doing at the studio of late, serving as producer for Wisconsin's most happening string band, Horseshoes & Hand Grenades, a job he hopes to do more often.

"I love being in the studio environment — especially this studio," he said.

Brightest of all, he talked about leaving early that day to go sledding in the fresh snow with his kids, Lucy and Jack, ages 3 and 5.

Referenced a few times on the record ("more beautiful than heaven"), the children are the main reason Simonett moved back to Minneapolis a few months ago. He spent the previous year living 45 minutes away in Red Wing, an exile covered in the songs "The Same Town" and "Red Wing Blue Wing."

"I just wanted to move somewhere I could walk out my front door and not have to answer, 'How is everything?'" he explained. "But that got to be too hard logistically. And honestly, I kind of got too lonely — which is what I thought I wanted, but it wasn't."

## Tamping down Trampled

Born in Germany while his dad served in the U.S. Army, Simonett said he and his sister had "a pretty terrific childhood" in Mankato despite their parents splitting up. He



Simonett performed with Dead Man Winter at First Ave in January 2015.

BRE MCGEE • Special to the Star Tribune

left to attend the University of Minnesota Duluth but took to music there instead. "I had no business being in college," he admits now.

When his electric guitar and amp got stolen in 2003, he agreed to sit in with some friends for a couple of acoustic free-for-all gigs in Duluth. And Trampled by Turtles was born. Within a decade, the band was playing 100 shows a year at festivals from Bonnaroo to its own Palomino, and packed amphitheaters from Denver's Red Rocks to Duluth's own Bayfront Park. "We really never stopped," he said, "until now."

After a part-time break last year, TBT is on full hiatus this year. There will be no Festival Palomino in September, no Bayfront show in July (at least not for TBT), and nothing else is on the calendar except an informal plan to "maybe throw some songs around in the fall," Simonett said.

"In my mind, I had to completely turn the lights off for a while," he explained, pointing to professional reasons first. "It's like anyone who has a good job but wants to try something else for a while. I wanted to operate without a safety net to get fully behind this record."

There were personal reasons for sidelining Trampled by Turtles, too.

"Things got too chaotic in my life, and touring like we

do is no way to try to calm it down," he said. But he stopped short of blaming the end of his marriage on his band's never-ending tour cycle, except to say, "I'm sure it was more than just a small part of it."

Instead, most of the blame lands on himself. He spends much of "Furnace" looking in the mirror with a pointer finger raised on one hand and a middle finger on the other.

"I'm a disaster/I'm fading from your young life/I'm growing pale and ghostlike with X's on my eyes," he sings in "Destroyer," a fiery rocker picked as the first single. In the twangier "Red Wing Blue Wing," which RollingStone.com advised "finds Simonett taking stock of himself," he wearily bellows, "I'm full of charm/I'm full of whiskey/And I'm full of [crap] most of the time."

## Banding together

Simonett's troubles and self-doubt may have gotten the best of him when he first tried to record these songs with the full Dead Man Winter lineup.

The band formed in 2011 around the release of his first Dead Man Winter album, "Bright Lights," with Erik Koskinen on guitar, J.T. Bates on drums and Bryan Nichols on keyboards — can you say "A-team"? — plus his TBT bandmate and harmony partner Tim Saxhaug on bass.

"We're all good friends, but

we're dudes, you know — we didn't really talk about the songs or what all was behind them," Simonett recalled.

Initial recordings at Koskinen's studio in 2015 were thrown out. In the interim, Simonett holed up in a cabin last winter near Finland in northern Minnesota to refine the songs and write new ones.

Talking a day after the Pachyderm interview at an Electric Fetus in-store performance — presumably not the first time a flask has been passed around the break room at the Minneapolis record shop — the other band members recounted how well the songs on "Furnace" evolved during the cabin stay.

"Obviously, we all knew what Dave was going through, but we didn't quite know where he was going" with the songs, Saxhaug said.

Nichols explained further: "Before Pachyderm, the songs sounded very desperate, like he was still drowning in it. By the time we got to Pachyderm, though, it was more like he was getting on with life."

Said Bates, "That's when we were able to do our thing: give these songs more of an up-tempo groove. I think the juxtaposition between the subject matter and the music is great."

Simonett agreed. He described the final sessions at Pachyderm as "very therapeutic," "exactly what I needed"

## Dead Man Winter

**With:** The Pines, Erik Koskinen.

**When:** 8 p.m. Fri.

**Where:** First Avenue, 701 1st Av. N., Mpls.

**Tickets:** \$20, eTix.com.

and even "a lot of fun." Just as surprisingly, he said he has no qualms about playing these hard-fought songs live now, too.

"After you work on songs as long and as hard as I did — and it was longer than any album I've ever worked on — you kind of build up a tolerance to them, and the mechanics of playing them kicks in more," he said. "That's the fun part."

He and the Dead Man Winter crew are ready to have more fun. They have several different tour legs booked through April, and they plan to keep going all year. As excited as he is about the solo project, Simonett also admitted of Trampled by Turtles, "I definitely miss it more and more. Which is what was supposed to happen."

Playing music may have played a destructive role in Simonett's personal life, but in the end, "Furnace" reiterates an idea that's even more obvious than making a divorce record: Music saves, too.

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