

**A Q&A with Dave Schools of
Hard Working Americans**

Written by **Caine O'Rear** December 17th, 2013



(Left to right: Duane Trucks, Chad Staehley, Neal Casal, Todd Snider, Dave Schools)

Look for our feature article on Hard Working Americans in the January/February 2013 issue.

Dave Schools is best known as the bassist for legendary Southern jam band Widespread Panic. But this wailer is no one-trick pony: the Richmond, Virginia, native is also an accomplished producer and a member of the new folk-hippy supergroup **Hard Working Americans**, which is helmed by

Todd Snider. We spoke with Schools recently about producing the group's debut album and playing bass for this wily group of miscreants.

What was your initial reaction to the project when you were first approached about it?

An emphatic yes, I said I'd love to do it. Anytime I can get a chance to work with Todd, I'll take it. He's such a great, positive, entertaining, and special person. Whether it's just playing bass behind his music or talking about stuff or a project like this, the answer is yes.

So this wasn't the first time you'd worked with him?

It's the first time in the studio, I think. Todd and his band The Nervous Wrecks opened a lot of shows for [Widespread] Panic sometime back in the mid-'90s, and that's how we kind of got to know each other. And then we reconnected in Nashville when Panic was touring with the Allman Brothers, celebrating their 40th anniversary.

I hadn't seen Todd in a while. He never fell off the radar or anything personally, but we reconnected and last fall he calls out of the blue and says, "I'm playing a gig at the Napa Opera House, do you want to play with me?" And I'm like "sure," so we did. We had a three piece. We hired a friend of mine, Paulo Baldi, who plays with the band Cake, to play drums. And we just did a Todd set as a trio and had a real good time.

Next thing I know, he's like "I got this sort of supergroup I'm going to put together. And I want you to produce a record and play bass." I said, "Can we do it out here at TRI [Studios]?" The answer was, from his part, an emphatic "yes." So really that's how it all got set in motion. Didn't really know too much about what ideas he and Chad had already conceived, but as we communicated, the material came through, [and I saw] that it was going to be a covers record and that the idea was for a sort of dream team band to basically deconstruct and reconstruct these cover songs in our own image.

As I listened to the original versions of the songs, it became quite obvious that these were friends of Todd's, fellow songwriters, people he looked up to and in some cases didn't necessarily know. Others he had known for decades. He had been collecting these tunes for quite some time. So it was

just a matter of nailing down the personnel in the band and getting in the studio. That came easy: it was just absolutely wonderful when Duane Trucks and Neal Casal signed on because they're spectacular players. As a producer, I knew that it was going to go one of two ways: it was either going to be *great* with all these great players who've never played together, or it was going to be a garbled mess, which could be fun anyway. So I knew we were going to have fun and of course it turned out to be great, as I think the record evidences.

The record has a really tight sound and a thematic vibe running through it.

The thematic vibe was part of Todd's idea, which was to sort of have it be like a soundtrack to a person's life, that each song represents a tipping point or watershed moment in this ordinary Joe kind of person, as they go through life. They fall in love, they make terrible mistakes, they get some redemption, they understand themselves, they commit crimes – all kinds of things. Really, it just worked out great.

And then the Gillian Welch tune, "Wrecking Ball," as an end-cap really just put a punctuation mark – put a real period – on the end of the whole thing, because so many times in life you go through periods where you think you've learned a lot and you sort of look back and you get this view, and that was such an emotional rendering of the song from Todd. He came in the studio, he was practically in tears by the end of the vocal track, and he's like "You had me repeat that first verse, which Gillian doesn't do. And when I started singing the first verse again, it's like every fucked up thing I ever did in my life hit me."

It was just one of those special moments in a studio where electricity is just filling the air and a great performance gets captured. And that's what we all live for. So to have that as the sort of end-cap of this journey through a person's life and realizing that the journey starts over – there's never any definitive decisions made based on what you've done in the past, or any redemption you may have gotten. You could lose it all at any second or you can do something wonderful with it. And hopefully people have many points in their lives like that, and I think a great song is always open to interpretation, no matter how you frame it, and I'm really proud of Todd's performance on "Wrecking Ball," I think it's gorgeous.

Well that song is so appropriate for the album and for the times that we live in. I think the sense of uncertainty that so many people feel will give this album resonance to a lot of listeners.

I think so, too. There was really nothing we could have followed that with. There's nothing left to say in this particular chapter of the Hard Working Americans after that and after all you've been through through the course of the record.

Did Todd come in with a bunch of songs and then you all whittled them down to eleven?

He sent around 20, 25 songs, sort of original versions. And we all listened to them a lot, but fully knowing that the intent was not to recreate the feeling of the original song, the intent was to make it our own. And like I said it was easy because it was a new band and everybody was excited to get to play together and know each other. And ideas came about easily.

And he came in with some interesting ideas at the end. He showed up with a Gill Scott-Heron tune called "The Military and the Monetary," which was more like a poem about peace and war — the business of war and the business of peace. And we wound up working it into the Will Kimbrough song "I Don't Have a Gun."

When I was talking to Todd earlier, he said he conceived of this project as a way to merge the poetics of a folkie with the more advanced musical sensibilities of people who are involved in the jam band scene. Did you see it as that kind of collaboration?

I understood what he was going for. I didn't have any preconceived notions about how this material was going to sound, it was an interesting way to approach a project as a producer, because I'm going into an expensive studio with people who are away from home, which is pretty precious time to traveling musicians. So I want to know what's happening, I want to have a really good idea of how we're going to approach getting at the end goal. But the end goal of this was really up in the air ... it was like we really didn't know what we were going to sound like. So to think that having a jam band interpreting traditional songwriting would have been a mistake. However, the grand old tradition of jam bands of throwing the cards in the air and letting them fall where they may was definitely in place.

Well he said y'all put him in front of the microphone and he'd do his little dance and you would kind of play off that.

Yeah, well, that's basically it. Sometimes he wouldn't be playing the guitar, he'd be stomping his feet in a rhythm and sort of singing the melody. And that's what we'd base it on. That's where it all comes from. People clapping and stomping and singing along – that's songwriting. Whether it was cave people banging rocks together and grunting, if they were able to do it together, then why can't we add some guitars and bass and keyboards to it and have it be a song?

Did you have any trepidation about covering Drivin N Cryin's "Straight to Hell," which is such an iconic song for anyone who grew up in the South during the '80s?

No, I've known [Drivin N Cryin frontman] Kevn [Kinney] forever. He's sat in with Widespread Panic, and he's always been a fixture at Warren Hayes' Christmas jam. "Straight to Hell" is one of those songs. But to tell you the truth I had no trepidation. I just knew that I did not want it to be a big fast country two-step sing-a-long. In fact, that was the first song we cut in the studio. We attacked "Straight to Hell," it was the first thing we did and it was sort of the bold experiment in deconstruction that gave us a thumbs-up for what we were going to try to do with the rest of the material. It's like, you know, why can't we do this song as a mournful ballad or a gospel song?

So we changed the key because it fit Todd's voice better, he could hit the high note, and then Chad started playing the intervals on the organ and immediately put it into this sort of church dirge kind of thing. And I'm like, well there's some real power here, and if the song isn't a happy crazy sing-a-long then the power comes more from how you interpret the words. Which is another thing about a great song that I will always bring up: if you write the words properly, if you write them from your heart and soul and don't get too specific about things, then anyone who hears it can always attach their own meaning to it. And that's when people grab hold of a song and put it in their hearts.

So any trepidation I might have had about doing a song like "Straight to Hell" was immediately washed away when I heard our version of it. And Kevn dropped by the studio in Athens when we were mixing it. He sat there and he was just blown away because he had never heard anyone cover his

song. And he had certainly never envisioned it being done quite like that. So that was another thumbs-up for Todd and I because these songs aren't our children. They are children that belong to other people and we sort of babysat those kids and returned them to their parents dressed in a different set of clothes and possibly even armed.

So there's always a little of bit of – gosh, what's Hayes Carll going to think when he hears what we did to “Stomp and Holler”? But I think our intent was pure and hopefully they'll have the same sort of reaction that Kevn had, which was positive and surprising. Certainly we want to surprise them because anyone can take these beautiful melodies and just go, “Hey, you know, we recreated your song exactly how you played it on that record you recorded.” I'd be like “Great, thanks.”

Well, the folk tradition is all about borrowing and adapting. And in rock music, people are a little touchier about covering songs and about pride of authorship. But it's cool that y'all did a covers album, especially when it's one of the best songwriters around, singing lead, it gives it a whole new kind of twist.

It does. I think every single person in this band grew up listening to Led Zeppelin and hearing “Whole Lotta Love” and then paying attention to all the legal mess that Zeppelin go into. They really did straddle that line of – are we reinterpreting or are we plagiarizing? Should we give credit to the people who we lifted this from?

They've had to make some reparations. But certainly in the blues tradition, outright theft is an acceptable tradition, but most blues artists weren't selling 10 million records like Led Zeppelin was. So they got in a little trouble. Their profile was high. The way we've approached it is that we're all about making sure that when people hear these songs, they know who wrote it, they know where we got the inspiration to do what we did with the song. That's one of the great things that jam bands do, they're notorious interpreters.

When I was talking to Todd earlier he said he considered you to be one of the moral and ethical leaders of his musical generation. Do you see yourself as that?

You know, I really don't, but I'm glad that Todd does because I think he's one of the greatest songwriting talents out there and I count him as a friend. So for someone to say something like that about me – I'm smiling inside right now. But I think it's a mutual respect that means we work well together. I would never try to make him do something he's not comfortable with as an artist, and he would never try to make me play a bass line that he doesn't think I'd play. We had a really easy time working together in the studio and making this record together. What's exciting is the fact that we know we have 45 minutes of material and we're not going to stretch the songs out to 10 minutes, that would be doing them a disservice – although believe me, this band can jam. I know we're going to have to do some of Todd's songs to fill up our time, and I'm really looking forward to him being willing to reinterpret his music with this band and let us attack his songs with the same sort of fervor that we attacked his friends song's with.

[Hopefully], we can do "Play A Train Song" in a Hard Working American's way where he can get up there and front it as Todd Snider the frontman of the Hard Working Americans as opposed to Todd Snider the peace-loving, porn-watching hippie. He's unashamed and thank God, we need more people like him. That's the role of an artist, to remind people to say the things we're thinking. Sometimes it makes people uncomfortable. It might not be the most popular opinion, but he ain't afraid to say it and that's important. Love the guy. I love *all* these guys, it's just wonderful. I can't wait to put the band onstage and see what happens next. That's the exciting part now.