

MUSIC

Hard Working Americans is an ideal name for this no-frills, punch-the-clock crew. Singer/guitarist Todd Snider initiated the project, inviting a slew of veteran musicians to complete the lineup: Duane Trucks (Col. Bruce Hampton's School of Music), Dave Schools (Widespread Panic), Neal Casal (Chris Robinson Brotherhood), and Chad Staehly (Great American Taxi).

Despite the players' obvious jam-band pedigrees, songs here don't linger. Only a slow, searing take on Drivin' N' Cryin's "Straight to Hell" stretches beyond five minutes, and most tracks hover around

the three-to-four-minute mark. Instead, the band approaches the all-covers album, which finds it taking on songs by a host of Americana- and roots-leaning acts both celebrated (Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch) and overlooked (Hayes Carll, Bottle Rockets), with an endearingly workmanlike mentality. Indeed, it's a credit to all involved that songs are never overdressed. And it's clear the musicians came to the project with egos in check, determined to let the material speak for itself.



Hard Working Americans

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This blue-collar approach is further reflected in the track selection. A majority of tunes touch on harsh economic realities facing the working class, political ineptitude, and the ever-widening chasm between the haves and the have-nots. Considering all the songs were written in the last decade, it's fair to say these bleak modern times have in the very least inspired some beautiful music.

A handful of cuts hew close to the way the originals sound. The band slightly dials back on the stompin' and hollerin' of Hayes Carl's "Stomp and Holler," but the more straightforward rock reading doesn't stray far from the native Texan's twangier take. Other songs, however, are decked out in entirely new garb. The players transform Randy Newman's "Mr. President, Have Pity on the Working Man" into a bluesy, boozy sing-along and strip Gillian Welch's "Wrecking Ball" down to the studs

to better highlight the devastation in her words.

Elsewhere, Kieran Kane's "The Mountain Song" could pass for precisely that, with the band conjuring images of the West Virginia foothills by layering the track with lush vocal harmonies, windswept piano, and insistent banjo. A bluesy take on Will Kimbrough and Tommy Womack's "I Don't Have a Gun," in turn, shows the kind of restraint most hope to see in the staunchest Second Amendment defenders, simmering for a cool four minutes without once boiling over.

Then there's a harrowing take on Frankie Miller's "Blackland Farmer," a tune nearly as tough as its beaten-back narrator, a hardened farmer that still manages to find some glory in a hard day's work, much like the grizzled gang laying down these unfussy tunes. —**Andy Downing**