



Jason Boland & The Stragglers *Squelch*

Music is having a moment. Listeners are crying out for something true—some meaty songs that'll give us some comfort, even as they cut closer to the bone.

Everyone is finally ready for the gritty, thundering country Jason Boland & The Stragglers have sharpened over almost 20 years' worth of selling out roomy venues, playing festivals and commanding stages across the nation. And new album *Squelch* provides the ideal vehicle.

"We're just trying to make something that we're proud of," lead songwriter and vocalist Boland says. "If any more people want to take notice of it, they're welcome."

Since coming together in Stillwater, Oklahoma, Boland and his tight-knit crew have sold more than half a million albums independently and earned a devoted following that's swelled far beyond the band's red dirt roots. At a Stragglers show, oil patch roughnecks, hippies, college kids, and intelligentsia all sway side-by-side like a traveling reincarnation of Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters in its cosmic cowboy, Willie Nelson heyday.

While The Stragglers draw from rock and folk, make no mistake: they traffic in unfiltered, unfettered honky-tonk, raw and lean. Equal parts subtle, meditative, and snarling, and often wickedly funny, *Squelch* is a deeply rooted exercise in exhuming beauty by trading smoke and mirrors for what's real.

"We pay homage, but we don't want to copy or be a throwback act," Boland says. "All you can do is try to take the music that inspires you and take it further. And make it personal." If he has felt any pressure to make his "personal" what others have in mind, it doesn't show. Boland has never constructed an identity or sound for mass or even niche consumption. He is who he is, and he's all in.

Recorded at Orb Recording Studios in Austin and mixed at Sonic Ranch in El Paso, *Squelch* was produced by Jim Ward (At the Drive-In, Sparta, Sleepercar) and marks the band's eighth time in the studio. Like two previous Stragglers' albums, debut *Pearl Snaps* and 2013's critically acclaimed *Dark and Dirty Mile*, *Squelch* was recorded and mixed directly to tape. "It's one thing when you can say, 'Okay, now, engineer, you do your magic,'" Boland says. "There is no magic when you record and mix to tape. It is what it is. I think it's a fuller, richer sound. And it's just more honest."

Opener "Break 19" thumps brazenly, reveling in bassist Grant Tracy's heart-pounding walks and punctuated by Nick Worley's whirling fiddle, Brad Rice's locomotive drumming, and newest Straggler Cody Angel's achy pedal steel. There's not a throwaway line to be found, as Boland's deep baritone rumbles through a sly takedown of modern media and absolute certainty after copping to trying it all the wrong way first and realizing "the more I see, the less I claim to know." It's a fitting introduction to the Stragglers' signature blend of social consciousness, self-awareness, and swing.

“I Guess It’s Alright” is classic Boland wordplay layered over a breakneck shot of adrenaline. A rollicking send-up of society’s uneven tolerance for bad behavior, the track roars that for those with power life is open season and consequences are nil. “I guess it’s alright to be an asshole if you’re good,” he pounds over growling guitar. “Fat and Merry” bristles with snark, taking aim at quintessential American hustle, from suburban flight and gentrification to waste and nonstop consumption. It’s got to be the only song ever to bemoan “coffee shops and escalades where escalades and cocaine could be found” with a world-weary fiddle echo. “Nobody wants to come off as judgmental, but you have to make judgments,” Boland says. “With your tongue in your cheek is a nice way to do it. None of us are above reproach. We’re all just having a good day or a bad day, same as everybody else.”

“First to Know” is a love song for adults. “If my voice sounds scared and frozen, it’s because I’m afraid and cold / And when I am you’ll always be the first to know,” Boland sings, both as an ode to the one who knows him best and a plea for understanding. It’s also a reminder that sometimes, what you see really is what you get, and while that may occasionally disappoint, ultimately, it’s cause for trust and hope.

Aversion to artifice permeates *Squelch* in just about every way, from the recording process to the album’s themes to Boland himself. “Lose Early” is a sauntering rendition of dust to dust and a skewering of the lie that you have to sell your soul to eat, while “Do You Love Me Any Less” questions whether or not absence hinders affection. Written by original Stragglers fiddler Dana Hazzard, haunting and heartbreaking “Christmas in Huntsville” is the only track Boland didn’t pen. Images of Christmas at home flood the imprisoned narrator’s mind as he heads to his holiday-timed execution for a murder he didn’t commit. Closer “Fuck, Fight, and Rodeo” kicks out the footlights in a two-minute, hell-in-a-hand-basket hoedown.

Asked why he feels so compelled to focus on lost causes and society’s ills, Boland explains, “Because we’ve talked about the rest of it. It’s almost out of obligation—and it’s an obligation that’s more intense because of the fact that nobody else is talking about it—some rock, rap, Americana, and folk does. But nobody is doing it the way we do it.”

Boland just exited his 30s, but he seems older, based on his experiences. He’s lived through alcoholism, a should-have-killed-him car crash, a ruptured vocal chord, and other trials. He wears his hard-won wisdom easily, without ceremony or conceit, and has evolved naturally as a writer, becoming more and more comfortable with his knack for recognizing the universally significant—even divine—in the ordinary. “Holy Relic Sale” is a stunning example, and one of the songs that makes Boland most proud. “My wife’s got a pair of lucky blue socks,” he says. “One day, we just had an awesome day—everything went right. We got home, and she pulled the socks out of the dresser and said, ‘I thought I had these on all day.’ It’s the classic story of ‘it’s not the things.’ The things are there to remind you to concentrate on the positive facts of life. The little relics that we have are going to wear out or get lost, but the light and the energy are within you.”

On stage, Boland leads a raucous party. Off stage, he’s mellow and warm, often wryly philosophical. But no matter where he is, he’s always grateful. “You play the dimly lit honky tonks of the world and take the music to the people, several at a time,” he says. “Some shows are huge, some shows aren’t. You take the good and the bad and you go down the road. And you think, ‘Isn’t that what everybody’s going for?’ Well no, it’s not. But that’s what we look back on and always smile about—the shaky ground that we’ve always been on. The uncertainty of it all.”

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