



Jason Boland Taps Into Tradition for *Dark & Dirty Mile*

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There are certain topics that make [Jason Boland](#) jump on his soapbox, and the prospect of country music losing its connection to its roots is one of them. But it's hardly surprising that the singer, songwriter and leader of the Stragglers is quick to speak his mind about these things, considering he's spent his entire decade-and-a-half career in the feisty Red Dirt music scene.

Boland walked the talk on his new album, *Dark & Dirty Mile*, mining the rich songwriting traditions of working-class lament and ballads that take up for the down-and-out. Plus he got [Shooter Jennings](#), son of a certain Country Music Hall of Famer, to produce it.

CMT Edge: Writers have occasionally invoked [Waylon Jennings](#) to describe your music. Was that something you were thinking about when you teamed up with Shooter? I do hear a few four-on-the-floor, Waylon-esque grooves on the album.

Boland: I gravitated towards that naturally some. I can cite other influences, but of course I'm influenced by Waylon and the [Billy Joe Shaver](#) connection and [Johnny Cash](#) and things that just really hammered and drove. And I'm a baritone, so I gravitated to those guys, as well.

But when it came down to Shooter, really, ultimately you just want to go with what you think will really work. ... [That sound] just jumps out sometimes on "Spend All Your Time," on "Dark and Dirty Mile" and "Blue Diamond," the way that waltz came out.

There are songs on *Dark & Dirty Mile* that report on tragic, unjust historical events, like "Ludlow," about a massacre of striking coal miners almost a century ago. Did you record those assuming your audience would be familiar with those stories? Did you view it as a chance to educate people?

Being such a latecomer on the discussion of something like Ludlow, where [everyone from] Howard Zinn to Woody Guthrie's covered it, I don't know. As a songwriter, honestly, that one, I'll tell you, I thought I had a good chord progression and a good melody working, and I had to throw in a heavy song and ruin it. ... Everybody loves those tragic, old-sounding songs. And I guess we don't always have to make up an event. I made up my version of it.

There used to be a lot more of that tragic balladry in folk, old-time and country music. Those songs would get passed around through the folk process, then recorded over and over again. But it's definitely not a dominant trend now.

No. It is, "Just get it! Win, baby, win!"

Do you see yourself as tapping into older song traditions?

Oh, yeah. That's what we try to keep alive, and that's what we go for and that's what we still listen to. We all listen to all different kinds of music as a band, but our feet are still rooted pretty much in classic country, Western swing, bluegrass and traditional forms. We all grew up in rock 'n' roll, and you can hear that in everybody's music. What they used to think was rockin' country was just putting drums in it. You know what I mean?

It's not all tragic ballads on this album. There are a lot of songs that are attuned to the blue-collar struggle to survive.

This is our music. ... It's folk music. It's telling people stories, which is art's purpose, which is to relate the world to people, through our senses, ways that we can get it.

Your song "Electric Bill" dwells on reality.

Yeah, and there's ways of doing it without sounding like you're pandering and preaching. And when it comes to beer drinkin' and honky-tonkin' and songs like that, you're talkin' to the king of those songs. We have so many of 'em. But if you go back and listen to our records, they're not all that. Now, maybe "My Baby Loves Me When I'm Stoned" and "Pearl Snaps" and all that became popular because they're really accessible and they did talk about drinkin'. But there have always been songs about redemption and struggle, and we've always tried to talk about the country experience. And that was also from the perspective of a 21-year-old.

A lot of those wild and woolly drinking songs, including one literally called "Drinkin' Song," came a little earlier in your career. Do you feel like you've gravitated toward more sobering subject matter in the years since you got sober?

Well, the strange thing is that if you listen to the words of the "Drinkin' Song," it's a bit critical of my own drinking or whatever. Very few of the songs really revel in it, but there's a few in the early days.

As far as still dealing with the subject matter, I still have tons of experience of it in my head. [Stragglers member Roger Ray] and I wrote "The Party's Not Over." It was about the time we would've been doing "The Bourbon Legend," that came out on *Comal County Blue*, which is a great dancehall party song. I hadn't, at that point, drank in quite a while already. ... I don't really think songs that talk about it in a positive sense are ever glorifying it. It's just saying, "This is real, and this is what it is." Then again, that doesn't mean it should become every song you hear.

That's what we're missing is some diversity. We only have four types of songs out there. We've got the guy crying over the girl, the girl mad at the guy, and we've got the girl going crazy, getting drunk and we've got the guy going crazy, getting drunk.

Your fans must get enjoyment out of the party songs, too. I looked at the merch section on your website and saw the rolling papers that quote the lyrics of the song "When I'm Stoned." How long have you been selling those? Are they a big seller?

I've been selling 'em for several years, and they sell pretty well both as a novelty and a functioning item.

The title track of the new album captures the partying-on-Saturday-night/going-to-church-Sunday-morning tension that so many country singers have sung about, but it does it in a way that's unusually reflective. Where'd that come from?

Well, songs come from ... if I really knew where to press on that pedal, I'd stand on it all day. I have no idea what makes songs come out. ... It is one of those songs that talks about life as a whole, rather than an instance.

You're an Oklahoma native and now live in Austin. Both those places are ground zero for the Red Dirt scene, whose performers and audiences are famous for their defiantly independent streaks. When did you develop your own independent attitude toward music making? Is an Oklahoma musician just born looking at things that way?

Up in Stillwater, there was a place called the Farm. For the town's size, it had a good amount of counterculture, I'll say, and for being in Oklahoma, too. These guys around these campfires — Bob Childers, Tom Skinner, the Red Dirt Rangers, the Medicine Show, the Great Divide — they were the link to guys like me. They really said, "Don't be afraid to be yourself." ... So you start from there. All you're trying to do is just maintain that while everybody's dangling money in your face. I'm not saying that we've had a lot of money dangled in our faces. (laughs)

What keeps this whole scene alive is the fans, how they can go out night after night after night and support all these bands. Sometimes we look at 'em and just think, "How do you do it?" Instead of sitting at home and watching *Dancing With the Whoever*, they enjoy going out and just watching somebody play music. And that's what keeps this whole scene alive — the fans and their pride in their music. Because without that, there's not all these bars opening up all through Tornado Alley that we're all touring.