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How to Sing a Drinking Song Sober

By John Jurgensen



Jason Boland

As for most bands that get paid to play, New Year's Eve is a work night for Jason Boland and the Stragglers. The country act will tune up for 2012 on familiar turf, at the Tumbleweed Dancehall in Stillwater, Okla., the town where the Stragglers formed more than a decade ago at Oklahoma State University. In the years since, Boland relocated to Austin and expanded the audience for the Stragglers' style of regional red dirt music, carving out a circuit through the Midwest and into the South. The band hit hurdles along the way, however, including Boland's bout with alcoholism (he says he's been sober since 2005) and a rupture of his vocal cords in 2008 that forced

him to revise the way he sang.

In October, the Stragglers released the album "Rancho Alto," a collection of songs rooted in country traditionalism. One song, "False Accuser's Lament," offers a sort of epilogue to "Long Black Veil," a tune made famous by singers such as Lefty Frizzell and Johnny Cash. The original is about an innocent man who hangs because he refuses to reveal that he was dallying with a married woman at the time of a murder. Boland's song introduces a new character, a farmer who framed the accused murderer, and adds a plot twist through his motives. We spoke to Boland about the state of country music, singing drinking songs sober, and what a flayed vocal cord feels like.

What's the difference between red dirt music and straightforward honky tonk?

The spirit of the red dirt movement, or some people say Texas country, was to be contrary to what was going on elsewhere. A lot of people went back to [Oklahoma native] Woody Guthrie being the father of red dirt and the northern folk movement. It's a little bit of social conscience, seasoned with a bunch of good times and complaining about the bad.

From the stage, do you see much change in the audiences based on where you are in the country?

You can definitely pick up diversity around the country and feel that you have fans from different strata of society. You can even see that in one state, from town to town. If it's a university in the middle of nowhere, compared to a casino crowd. We get to see a wide swath of characters for sure.

When you damaged your voice, were you actively thinking about plan B?

By the time I got to Vanderbilt [University Medical Center] and got under their care, they really never made you feel that it wasn't going to work out. They said, this was an acute injury and we're going to get in there and fix it no problem. But plan B would have been an alternative to plan A—songwriting or whatever.

Is it painful to rupture a vocal cord, or do you just experience it as hoarseness?

Just hoarseness. Zero pain. But I knew the moment it happened. We were playing at a rodeo up in the rafters and there was a metal roof, and the sound was bouncing around so crazy. You get this tonal wash and it's kind of a panic feeling. I remember singing too loud, and I yelled a lyric just to get a frame of reference. I'm sure it wasn't that one rebel yell that did it. There was a lot leading up to it. But what it did was force the band to take some real time off for the first time in a decade of being together.

How connected are you to the country music industry? Do you watch the CMA Awards?

Only the way someone would to say, "Dude, turn it to this channel. You've got to see this." I can't stand any of it. It's embarrassing and I don't even want to say I'm a country musician. We're not God's gift to Telecasters and pedal steels, by any means. We were a bunch of guys in a garage, but we live up to our inspirations and our mentors who set the bar just high enough.

People love to fight the civil war over authenticity in country music.

Gives you something to be contrary to, right? It might as well be the mainstream. I love that Todd Snider line, "You didn't want to throw a fishing line in that old main stream."

The guy sitting at the top of the charts might say that's just sour grapes.

Yeah, that's why I never attack it anymore. A lot of people like to stand up their with their "Nashville sucks" signs. But there are good people out there.

How does writing and singing songs about drinking change after you've gone to rehab?

I guess you've got the experience to draw from, and the clarity too. We saw the productiveness drop through our party years. But we've come back around full circle to finding out what our vision was in the studio and what we could sound like and do the best doing it.

The lyrical content doesn't change?

Even when you go back and look at our party songs, like "Drinkin' Song," it's not a pro drinking song. "I grit my teeth and wish I could stand up and ram my fist." You put that lyric to a four-four shuffle, which is fun to dance to.

Anything you do—or don't do—now on stage compared to the old days?

The shows just run better, period. They all actually happen. That's a constant difference. I may not jump as high and I don't do as many toasts, but I like to think that in the end you get a heck of a lot better show. There were people back then who liked to watch the train wreck, but it's only fun for so long.