

The Dallas Morning News

Spotlight on Texas Artists: Jason Boland & the Stragglers keep it honky-tonk country even when it isn't cool

Written by Mario Tarradell April 15th, 2013

The classic Barbara Mandrell hit “I Was Country When Country Wasn’t Cool” popped into my head when I was thinking about Jason Boland & the Stragglers’ new album, *Dark & Dirty Mile*.

There are no nods to Mandrell’s music on the Austin-based Boland’s latest studio effort with his longtime band. But the Mandrell mantra certainly fits Boland, who continues to make unabashed honky-tonk music steeped in traditionalism. His sound is rugged, down-home, peanut-shells-on-the-floor genuine. And he makes no apologies.

In the Texas country and Oklahoma red-dirt styles — Boland is originally from Stillwater, Okla. — the desire to deviate from the farm-road dancehall is always tempting. It is music that aims to incorporate a variety of genres such as blues, folk and rock into its country foundation. But Boland keeps it frills-free.

“It wasn’t cool to be more country or more honky-tonk,” he says. “It was always cool to be a little more rock ’n’ roll. That’s always been that way. Country has always flirted with the pop face it put on. But it should always represent something rural. Country music by definition is already a throwback. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t have some rock ’n’ roll in it. Country should expand and move its boundaries. We choose what might not seem as cutting-edge as the rock band, but because so many went that way it made what we were doing viable.”

True to his artistic spirit, the 38-year-old Boland proudly admits that *Dark & Dirty Mile*, which is set for release May 14, was recorded as unencumbered as it sounds.

“This record never saw a computer,” he says of the CD he co-produced with Shooter Jennings. “It may have gone through some circuitry but it never got sampled or shifted, as digital music does. When you are on the road with these guys constantly as I am, you come up with exactly what you hear on tape.”

For the deep-voiced Boland, keeping it pure has been a careerlong goal. Boland and his Stragglers, now seven albums strong, aim for making music that he'd be honored to include in his personal vinyl collection filled with titles by Van Morrison, Alabama, Iron Maiden, Hank Williams Jr. and the late Townes Van Zandt.

"I can't find anybody that represents the people that I listen to in my vinyl collection that inspire me and that I want to emulate," he says. "I don't see people out there that I want to look up to."

And he's not fond of ditties — "going-to-the-lake songs, football songs, breakup songs, a bunch of guy songs," he says. Boland just wants to resonate. There are "always ways to push the material and reach people. Art should connect people to the world, not just distract them from it."

In doing so, music becomes simply music. There are no qualifiers, no parameters and no dividers. That certainly speaks to the parallels between the Texas country and Oklahoma red-dirt sounds. For those who don't hear any real artistic differences between the two, there's a good reason for that. Just ask Boland.

"They are the same. There is no line. The line is only the name. It was really a terminology thing. When we started out we called it alternative country, alt-country and no depression. None of us even see the line at all. The fans don't see any differences. They just hear music."