



Meanwhile back at the rancho with Jason Boland & The Stragglers



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The music industry has gone through a mind-blowing evolution over the last forty years. The recording roll call has ranged from the prehistoric to the revolutionary: records (“vinyls” to anyone under 30), eight-track tapes (do these still exist?), cassette tapes, compact discs, digital downloads – anyone for cerebral implants of your favorite artists?

While it’s clear that technology has continued its inevitable melodic march, what is less certain is whether or not the “advances” have improved the *music*. Sure, songs sound cleaner, vocals are *always* on key, and no one ever “clangs” a single note.

But with perfection as the goal, it won’t be long until computers are handling *all* of the singing. And once that happens, music will become soulless.

As long as we’re discussing the vanishing essence of popular song, it hasn’t helped that the boundaries between genres have blurred to the point of non-recognition – just think of the grey, soupy mess that you loved to make as a kid with three different kinds of ice cream.

And uh, a soupy mess is just exactly what purists like **Jason Boland** think today’s country music has become, thanks to the never ending genre-ational crossover. Boland is a country traditionalist who believes that true country music is still vital and relevant, if you can find it.

Boland and his band **The Stragglers** make country music for people who love *real* country music – soulful, blue-collar, defiant, truthful and real. This week the Texas/Red Dirt veterans released their latest studio effort, *Rancho Alto*. The new album was produced by Grammy winner **Lloyd Maines** (**Dixie Chicks**, **Flatlanders**, **Robert Earl Keen**) and features 11 new songs, 8 written or co-written by Boland.

Rancho Alto is the anticipated follow-up to their 2008 release, *Comal County Blue*. The album was the band's first debut on the *Billboard* Top 200 and one of the year's most successful independent country releases, debuting at #2 on the *Billboard* National Heatseekers chart, #30 on the *Billboard* Country Albums chart, and #1 on the iTunes country albums chart.

Boland spent some time with Examiner.com recently to chat about the outstanding new record. As with any of the band's recordings, this one celebrates the straightforwardness of fundamental country.

"Yeah, with our album and our approach to it, we've always tried to make that statement, you know. Down to the name of our band, The Stragglers, you know."

"When country music keeps trying to emulate pop and rock more and more and more, it's gonna get farther and farther away from what you and I call country music, so. I think we try to make a statement in first, the production of the record. That's really a lot of it."

"The music is played by the band. That's where a lot of guys on our level make the first sound differences. These are the dudes that you go down the road and sweat with and play night after night."

"So it starts there and we're not big on twisting down the technological screws. We still try to get in there and cut in a room with the drums and the bass player in the same room. I think those are two of our biggest deviations from the pack right now."

Ah, those technological screws – tighten 'em down *too* much and you strip a song of its humanity. Boland agreed.

"You amputate it. I mean here's the problem. You got musicians, you got engineers, you got producers, you got whatever. Everybody's in there doing a good job, right?"

"If you're a guitar player, that means play your good sounding guitar and play to the best of your ability and have your strings on it and you know, you go down your list. If you missed a note, back it up, that wasn't my take or whatever."

"But when engineers do it with the technology provided them now, they can do a good job so many times to fix all those little 'imperfections' that the human element just gets wiped off of it. You're listening to a computer play back what some dudes kinda did."

Boland attributes many of the changes in country music to the infernal quest for the all-mighty dollar.

“Money. Yeah, money. It’s emulating rock. Because rockers come out there and you turn around and you say, ‘Oh my God, they made a bazillion dollars in five minutes doing that?’ All they had to do was shake it once and do a twelve bar blues rock song and really shake it up, just like rock and roll. We’ll put a steel guitar and kind of a banjo on it and we’ll say y’all at the end.”

“So many times, we’ll get ambushed by a pop – a Broadway – a show tune, if you will. You put enough steel guitar on it and call it country? It’s still a show tune.”

“That’s never been our purpose because it’s really not about money for any of us. So the next thing you can get us with is fame and ego. And that’s just not enough of a driving force for us to get us on that.”

“I really don’t think we’ve ever come close to what our fans would say ‘selling out’ because it was so much in our mission statement to not go that route to begin with. Now, you can get caught in the catch-22. We still want to play to big crowds. We want to get in credible publications. We want to get on radio stations.”

“Now, in doing that, you engage in commerce, even selling yourself. So I don’t think that we’ve done much that we ever have to duck our head for as far as that goes.”

The last decade of Boland’s life plays like a tragic country song. Between a near-fatal car accident, a polyp on his vocal chords, a divorce and a bout with alcoholism, the group’s momentum hit a “few” speed bumps.

But, destiny works in strange ways. Boland looks at everything before 2011 as the first half of his career. If he hadn’t gone to hell and back, he wouldn’t have had the perspective to make his finest album yet, using his incredibly raw experiences to force listeners to face life’s unpleasantness head on.

“Yeah. I try not to be the Eeyore. You know, the ‘Oh, everybody’s having a good time? Well, it’s only ‘cause you don’t know about *this*.’ But that’s just getting older and striving for a social conscience.”

“So many people look at us and they think, ‘Oh, that’s the Stragglers? Isn’t he supposed to be a good songwriter? Well, I’m here to see whiskey songs and stuff.”

“Well yeah, there were a few songs when I was twenty-one. And they were always B-sides to those that the people that saw that I could write a song would listen to anyway. They always saw where it was going and they saw the bumps in the road.”

“And the people that have been there through the decade have seen it all. And

then they saw us get back on our feet and claiming the stakes that we should've claimed – that alcohol and drugs and just touring took us out of focus for a little while, you know?"

It would be easy for Boland to wish for a replay of his life, but he is making the most of his second chances.

"Uhh, that old sayin' if you could go back and keep your mind and do it differently? If you'd asked me that earlier, then probably. But now, I think I wouldn't. 'Cause now, I know I'm truly happy and I enjoy our direction and vision."

"I could have done so many things so much worse probably. I'm thankful for the lessons I've learned and – I don't know. There would definitely be some things that now, with just knowledge and just the hindsight of fixing it, sure."

"There's a few screws I woulda tweaked differently. But the way it all came out and the way we all lived through it and how much we all learned, I guess I couldn't. I couldn't because if we did it again, somebody would die."

Boland has no doubts that the experiences have made him a better songwriter.

"Where I come from, you see a lot guys that – well, they didn't come from bad times. And it's 'What's he singing about the blues stuff?' We *had* to have put ourselves through it to have that perspective. And the life me and the guys have lived has sure provided an ample amount of material. I'll be writing on it for the rest of my life."

Boland certainly drew on the ample material for *Rancho Alto*. The album's lead track, "Down Here In The Hole," tells of a miner who is trapped in a cave-in, maintaining hope despite his predicament ("I'm finding out when I'm troubled, the spirit can glow"), but also ruminating on the limited options that put him in the hole to begin with ("Some say I fell between the cracks and some say I was shoved").

The protagonist of "Pushing Luck" is a man who has been living outside the law in order to take care of his family. He sees little difference between his "hustle" and the government's, where the government has taken money to perpetuate its existence.

Given some of the things that the country has been going through, the tunes have a particular importance right now.

"Yeah, yeah. 'Down Here in the Hole' I feel is relevant, again because you know, people want to know what's wrong with country music. And when I hear country, I always go back to just rural in my head."

“Well, what’s going in rural communities? And what’s happening and nobody’s talking about it? My point in writing that song was to say, ‘Miners still get trapped in holes.’ I mean, we still watch that on CNN. That’s some of the country’s rural or blue-collar news we see.”

“So, there’s still all the ammunition to make country music or whatever we want to call it and it’s not being done. And within songs like that, the whole metaphor for just being here on earth or in a troubled time.”

“And on ‘Pushing Luck,’ it’s uh – I don’t know how much more authority we need in this country. How many more agencies can we have before we say, ‘Okay, *now* we feel safe.’ You’re never gonna feel safe.”

“I mean, you wanna tell these people, ‘So many things are gonna happen the way they’re gonna happen, whether or not there was a million law enforcement agencies put in place.’”

And with those few words, Jason Boland has given us all the answer to life’s riddles – things are gonna happen the way they’re gonna happen.