

ROUGHSTOCK

Album Review: Jason Boland & The Stragglers - Rancho Alto

By: Stormy Lewis

Last Updated: October 25, 2011 1:10 PM



Jason Boland and the Stragglers are at the forefront of Red Dirt Music. With their homespun lyrics, rich, twangy vocals and steel laden melodies, they would have been at home on mainstream country radio two decades ago. Now, their whiskey drenched sound, they are a bit too rich for the lighter fare on mainstream radio. A decade ago, when it played *The Derailers*, before it fused with indie rock and became the soundtrack for hipsters and other music nerds, they would have fit nicely on Americana stations. Now they get airplay on the few stations in the Southwest that play Red Dirt music, mixed with the odd track from Waylon

Jennings or Johnny Cash. They are one of a handful of artists who have been granted an almost classic status without the decades of career ups and downs that normally proceed it. On their latest album, *Rancho Alto*, Jason Boland and the Stragglers make the case for why they, and their scene, deserve a wider audience.

The album opens with "Down Here in The Hole," a driving anthem about moving on, past hard times. "The sun never shines down here in the hole," Boland reminds us as he sings about being stuck in a place where only money matters. "Every Moment I'm Gone" sweeps along on a gentle, weepy two step. The pedal steel sings out the angst of man alone on the road, as he pleads with the woman he loves to be his rock. The album's most intriguing track is "False Accuser's Lament," a zydeco-laced tale of a witness regretting the testimony he to frame an innocent man. In a ballad that reads almost like a sequel to "The Long Black Veil," Boland sings about a poor farmer who saves his farm at the cost of his honor and winds up losing both. "11-2" follows two broken hearts as they drift through a bar, trying to find a cure. "He fills his dance card, but still never fails, to wind up alone at the rail," croons Boland.

"Pushing Luck" finds its groove between the guitar and the drums, playing with the melodies of old schools blues. Boland nearly growls out such lines as "some call it money, some call it crime, the kids are all fed and this land's all mine." "Fences" is a lush sweeping lament for small town life, which finds Boland mourning the people and objects destroyed in the clash between White and Native Americans. "The fiddler was short, though he played Cherokee, that's a warning to a white boy like me," he quips, before acknowledging "smallpox and whiskey were a mighty bad trade." This song segues nicely into "Mary Ellen's Greenhouse," a ballad about the titular house and the people who grew and were loved within its walls. "Obsessed" is a devastatingly honest damaged love song. Boland's voice break with longing as he sings, "Was she something I thought needed to be broken, was I something she thought needed to be healed, the flames continued on throughout the evening, obsessed with finding something we could feel." "Woody's Road" fuses the best of Michael Martin Murphey's Western ballads and Dolly's storytelling. "Woody's road went everywhere, I guess everywhere was where he felt at home," sings Boland, contemplating the Zen of his fellow traveler. "Forever Together Again," eschew the typical romantic nothings that generally accompany such a sentiment in favor of a familial camaraderie. The album closes with "A farmer's Luck," a blistering indictment of governmental policies that turn farmland into tourist attractions and the people who blithely vacation there. "They're gonna dam the Deep Fork River and damn the farmer's luck," Boland sings bluntly.

Rancho Alto is the sort of solidly, simply country album one might have encountered on country radio in the mid 1980's. This is a matter of substance as well as sound. Certainly the pedal steel and occasional fiddle mark Jason Boland and the Stragglers as a band out of step with their era. More than this, however, it is the subjects the sing about, and the way they choose to sing about them. Their small town folks possess neither the frat boy lifestyle of the mainstream nor the outlaw grit of Alternative. They are familiar to people who grew up with the farmers Johnny Cash and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band used to sing about. Its a voice and a life that is too often overlooked by too much of the entertainment industry. *Rancho Alto* is a delicious slice of everyday American life.

