



Jason Boland Album Review: Dark and Dirty Mile

Jason Boland's ninth CD overall, and seventh studio recording, is a throat punch to the tepid pseudo-soul of mainstream country music and its sycophants. A no holds barred, no subject too taboo, no bullshit record. Longtime Boland fans won't be a bit surprised. Newcomers spinning *Dark and Dirty Mile* will wonder why they didn't know sooner about this modern hybrid of Haggard and Coe who's willing to tell it like it is.

Jason Aldean, meanwhile, will try to convince himself that his bank account and Joe Diffie references make his music country.

Whatever.

For the record, there is no one in Nashville today doing honest country music better than Jason Boland. Yes, I remember Alan Jackson's still down on Music Row. Boland may not yet be able to match Alan song for song in terms of sheer quantity. But he can stake an even claim on quality. Maybe a superior one given the absence of goofy songs in his repertoire; we may all love Jackson but there's no denying he's recorded some head scratching stuff now and again. Boland's more consistently focused on substantive songs and far more willing on a given release to ask the tough questions which go far beyond the time-honored self assessments so foundational to country's roots. His is a brand of music forged in the fires of life's travails and tempered in the solace of hard won perseverance. Boland's personal struggles with the bottle seemed early on to be the way his career would be defined, but a successful rehab stint back in 2005 coupled with the required personal commitment to living have made that story old news. Then in 2008, there was the vocal cord polyp episode, the one where the docs told Jason his singing days were likely a memory fading fast. But that didn't stop him, either. And it didn't send him spiraling back into the bottle. There is a substance to Jason Boland that is material and profound. The two instances just noted demonstrate the proof. As does the work the Stragglers continue to produce.

Well this pornographic place told me

A body was to be feared and then wanted at the same time

Man if you could figure how

Feared because it was a pathway to a mortal sin

And then wanted 'cause we'll all be dust a few short years from now

It's a broken hearted world that we inherit

And all you're told to do it sin and bear it

For a little while

Those lines come from the title track of *Dark and Dirty Mile*. It's a beautifully rendered song, brought powerfully to life by Nick Worley's fiddle work. Yet as dark as you might think it is given the lyric above, there's a current of defiant optimism running throughout that will not be denied. Instead of the atavistic fatalism most often associated with the recognition that we're all screwed, Boland and the Stragglers here offer up a gimlet-eyed challenge to life's inherent hurdles. Yeah, we're here. Yeah, stuff sucks. No, we don't care. Got some living to do. And they deliver it with an understated conviction that makes it clear there's every chance in hell that we're all gonna be okay if we just keep on being smart in terms of what to give a damn about. Terrific stuff, and an auspicious, aspiring opener. One wonders if what's to follow can keep up.

Answer's yes.

The track list includes a love song for the bare knuckled and honest set ("Lucky I Guess") that's as beautiful and haunted as an open prairie under a Comanche moon. Rollicking good timers with a message like "Nine Times Out of Ten," as energizing a two-step number as you'll find yourself readily able to recall. But unlike the sawdust kicking shimmies coming out of Nashville, this one's got something to say. Boland understands, you see, that it's never enough just to move. You've got to live while you move, or else there's just no point. Terrific number top to bottom, but also a fine example of lessons learned from hard experience. To wit, there was a time in Jason's career – as is the case with many who've cut their teeth in the honky tonks – when a song like this was all about hollerin' and yellin'. The vocal cord polyp changed all that, of course, for Boland. In the time spent with fears and vocal coaches following the release of *Comal County Blue*, when there were no guarantees that the career could continue, Boland had to learn how to sing rather than settle for the yell. Because he had the discipline to learn, he and the band still have a burgeoning career. And on songs like this one, all of us out here on the dark side of the mic wind up treated to perfectly rendered dancehall gems that give us something to ponder while they help us move our tired and aching feet.

Nine times out of ten you know it all turns out the same

Dyin' on your feet

Livin' on your knee

s

And then, out of nowhere and absent even a hint of mercy, there's a gut punch of a cut like Randy Crouch's "They Took It Away." Family history including ancestors who went to Texas, but not to the Alamo, with Crockett – and an acknowledgment that the singer sure is lucky they chose the path they did. But the next lines question whether the dream of the settlers who fought for Texas independence was really ever realized, or whether the ones in power took it away. And then, in a land now called Oklahoma that used to be Texas, how the stroke of Jackson's pen carved out a Territory that spelled the end of a way of life for the unfortunates who walked the Trail of Tears. They took it away. Down through time, haven't they always taken it away, only to poison the lakes and poison the ground and harden our hearts and teach us to believe in the bastardization of dreams we can't even hardly remember? This track asks that question bluntly, brutally, honestly – yet without the rancor, anger, or bombast one might associate with, say, a Steve Earle screed. Boland pulls no punches, but the method and mechanism of delivery work to create space for thought instead of a pulpit for dogma. Just further evidence of the depth, range, quality, and intelligence of the music this band consistently unleashes.

Perhaps the genuinely amazing thing about *Dark and Dirty Mile* is that for all of its wisdom, its insight, its hard-won triumph, it remains an eminently enjoyable listen. It is possible to enjoy this record on a two-

lane blacktop with the windows rolled down simply for its beauty and sparkling musicianship. And equally possible to drink in every lyric on a back porch in the still of the night getting lost down all of the intellectual trails the stories ride. That combination is both effective and genius. Also increasingly rare in our buy a single and have a sound bite cyber world. Boland himself seems to recognize where he stands and why. As he says, "I've always thought it was important to keep one foot in tradition and the other pointed in the direction you want to go. I didn't invent the G chord, so I'm standing on the shoulders of the giants that did, and on the shoulders of some great songwriters that have come before me. I'm using an old stencil, but adding my own colors."

And there, in a nutshell, is perhaps the abiding reason for the Stragglers' sustained run of success. They know who they are, they like what they are, and they do their level best to just be real damn good at being, well, themselves.

In the weeks since George Jones passed, we've all heard a lot of folks asking the Possum's question – who's gonna fill their shoes? Much as that sentiment rings deep even in my own tattered and battered heart, records like *Dark and Dirty Mile* make me think we're asking the wrong question. Perhaps instead we should be looking at the world around us, at the kids who think Nicki Minaj is an artist and Kevin Fowler is country. And then ask ourselves, in blunt and brutal fashion, what should we be doing to help those folks understand that they have the opportunity right now to listen to the ones who actually are already filling those shoes.

Jason Boland's a pretty good spot to start.

~ Dave Pilot – May 13th, 2013