

The Mother Hips / Cass McCombs / Moon Taxi / Sarah Lee & Johnny



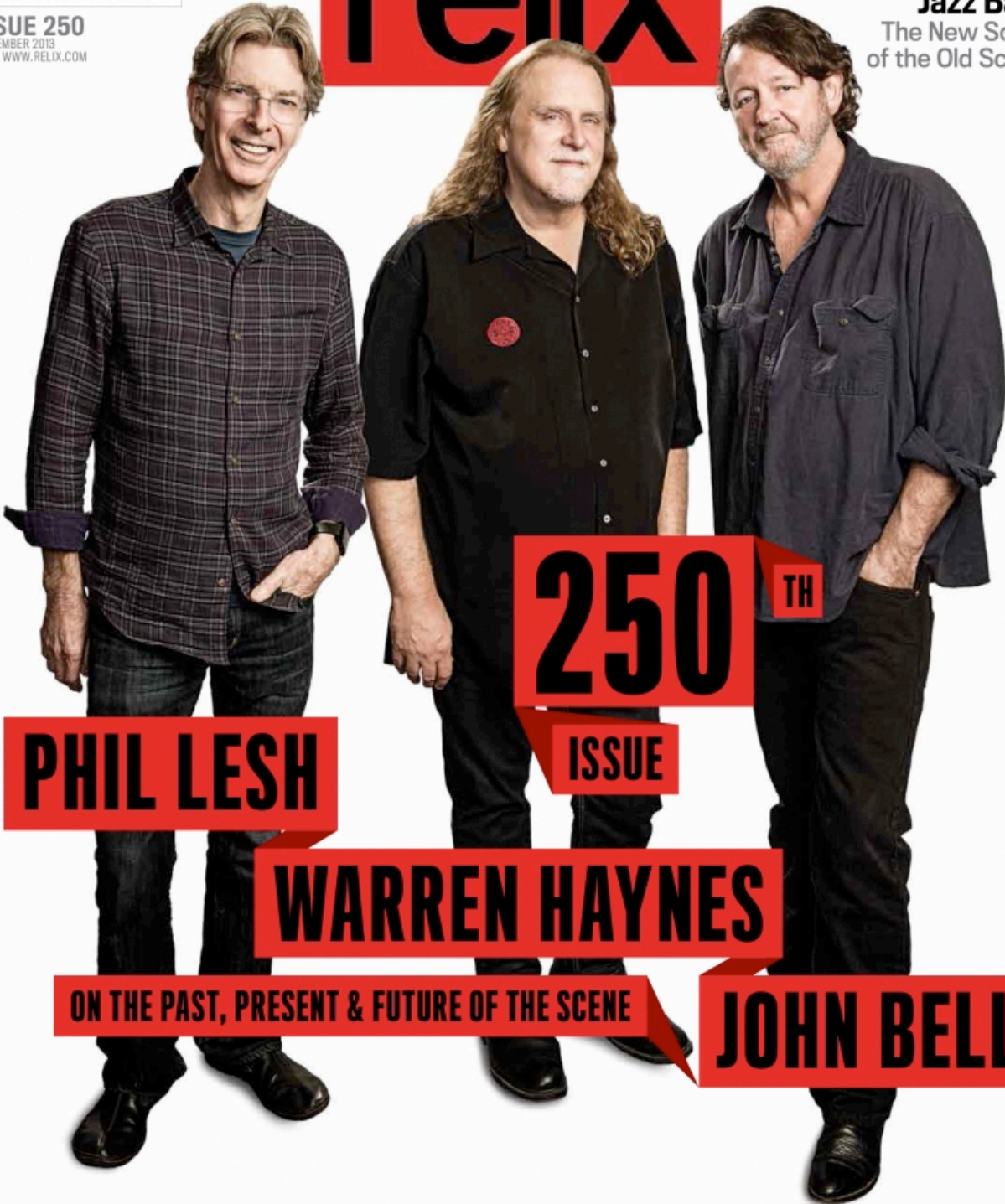
ISSUE 250
SEPTEMBER 2013
\$6.99 WWW.RELIX.COM

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The National
Ohio Players

Preservation Hall
Jazz Band

The New Sound
of the Old School



250TH

ISSUE

PHIL LESH

WARREN HAYNES

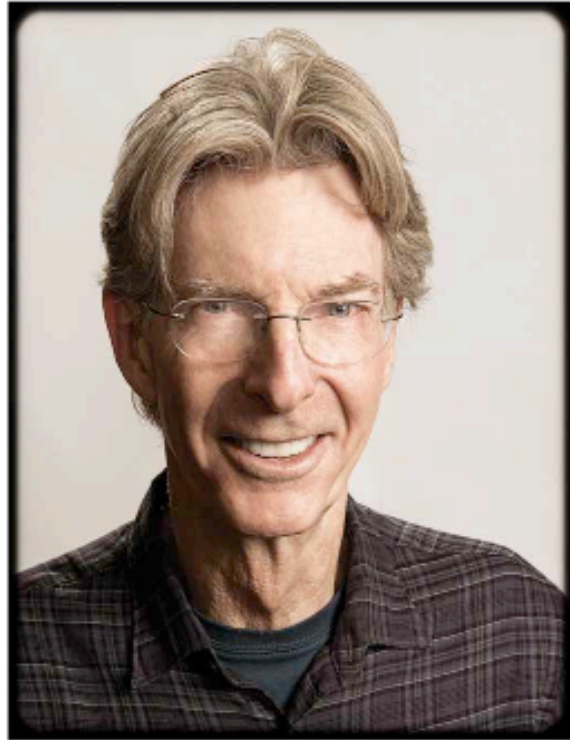
ON THE PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE OF THE SCENE

JOHN BELL

WE THREE KINGS

**PHIL LESH, WARREN HAYNES
AND JOHN BELL DISCUSS THE
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF
THE SCENE**

By THE EDITORS
Photography by JAY BLAKESBERG



IN HONOR OF OUR 250TH ISSUE, we moderated a discussion among three of our scene's leading lights to discuss the past, present and future of the musical environment that *Relix* emerged from some 40 years ago. While that environment is constantly changing—as new bands explode onto the scene and older bands fade away—Phil Lesh, Warren Haynes and John Bell continue to push creative and improvisational envelopes.

A quick glance at their respective touring schedules this summer is a good indicator of how tenacious these artists remain in their desire to play—and, most important, to improvise—in front of large audiences. For fans able to attend festivals such as Mountain Jam or Interlocken, it was possible to see all three of these musicians during one weekend. And music lovers lucky enough to attend shows at Red Rocks Amphitheatre had the opportunity to catch Bell during four nights of Widespread Panic, Haynes for the Jerry Garcia Symphonic Celebration in July and Lesh over the course of Furthur's four shows in September.

Here, they provide insight into the artistic process both onstage and offstage while also reflecting on their own journeys. In addition to our Q&A, you'll also find separate features on each artist following to update *Relix* readers on what they're up to.

JOHN BELL

Golf, holistic wellness and Michael Houser

BY AMY JACQUES

John Bell is deep into Widespread Panic's 24-date summer tour. During some rare downtime in Boise, Idaho in July, he reflects on this western leg so far and, like everyone else this season, is quick to mention the weather. "There have been plenty of gigs and a lot of rain—with a lot of extreme weather temperatures," he says in his trademark growl.

Though touring is part of his day-to-day grind, he says that just a night earlier, at Missoula, Mont.'s Big Sky Brewing Company, he felt musically challenged. He finds similarities between sound checking for his live shows and taking practice rounds on the golf course—you need to practice for everything to align correctly, he says.

Bell does bring his clubs on the bus with him, too, but has only played once on this tour so far. "Golf's a full-day affair and if you just played three shows and you've got one day off and you're about to play four more, it's fun and it's something different—but you don't necessarily get to recharge for a stretch like that, so I pick and choose wisely where it will add to the experience. Sometimes it's fun to sit around and play with your

recorder and read books."

When he's not on tour, you can often find him in the energy room at the Cedar Heights Center in Clarkesville, Ga., where his wife Laura is a holistic wellness counselor. The couple was looking for a small house with an office and space where he could work in the garden. "And then, we found something that was a little bigger and, when we finished it, there was a large room upstairs we could use to entertain or hold lectures, meditation or yoga classes," he says.

The center contains an "energy room" filled with 16 computers and their screens, called the EESystem (Energy Enhancement System), programmed to create a bioactive feel that "detoxes the body and vibrates you on a cellular level,"



Bell leading Panic at Mountain Jam, 6/7/13

he says. "You hang out in there for a couple of hours, and the benefits are long-lasting, so I usually go in there for at least a couple of hours a day. It's easy to sit in there and read or listen to music or a New Age album—or write. People that are working on books or plays have come in because it's a different atmosphere to be creative."

On his own creative level, Bell says Widespread Panic has discussed going back into the studio at the end of this year or the beginning of next year. "We've been pulling things out, we just gotta put our schedules together," he says, adding that they haven't made any specific plans. "But, yep, there's another album in us."

Though the band hasn't released a studio album since 2010's *Dirty Side Down*, he still enjoys the studio experience—which he likens to creating a work of art—as well as the singularity of the live experience. "I see the value in both and that they kind of support each other," he says.

Bell's intrigued by the various recording mediums and download options available today. "The best way to get music out to folks for years was always buying an album or a cassette," he says, noting that he just gave most of his CDs away, "because everything's on computer now. Well, vinyl made a comeback. I've got a lot of stuff that you can't get on CD, and the ritual is fun—to get up and change that record every 20 minutes. And maybe that's a little more nostalgic than the kids would understand today."

Regarding the live setting, Bell says he enjoys seeing movement throughout the crowd. While he's seen a lot of great concerts, he thinks audience participation is generally a little more cerebral with less movement, like a Leonard Cohen show—maybe the best concert he's ever seen—or a Van Morrison concert. But it's different at Panic shows, where there's "that bodily participation that I see on those rare occasions I look out. Usually, my head's down," he laughs.

But Bell thinks that there's a reason why these particular kinds of fans continue to attend Widespread Panic concerts over and over. "Every generation has a certain type of person or a type of people that gravitate toward an adventurous lifestyle, whether it's the way they do things in their own lives—you know, mountain climbing, skiing, extreme sports. They like adventure; they like surprises," he says. "And some folks like to experience their music that way, too. Other folks want to come out and have more of a Vegas mentality, they want to come back to hear the same songs, and the same old jokes and get what they're expecting."

The band recently returned from a one-year hiatus—the second time they've done this—which allowed them time to perform with their various side projects and take a break from their grueling tour schedule.

"One of the main reasons you do it is to go and have different experiences so you don't get burned out on what you're doing or putting all your efforts into the Widespread Panic experiences," he says. "You go off on a little musical walkabout and come back with new ideas and the ability to step away from yourself."

After 27 years together, there's still a friendly rapport between all the band members, and despite founding member Michael Houser's untimely death in 2002, they're still Widespread Panic—albeit, with a few updates. "Yeah, it's wild. Michael still shows up in my dreams probably once every month or two, and he's ready to get on stage, he's got his guitar in his hand and I was like, 'Wow. First of all, I thought you were dead.' And then I was like, 'Well, you're here. And it's still your band, so come on. Let's go play.'"

Jimmy Herring—the band's newest member, who joined in 2006 to fill the role of lead guitarist—is "a different cat with different talents," he says, adding with a chuckle, "Oh hell, JoJo [Hermann] still feels like the new guy in the band."

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"[Jimmy] plays a little differently than Mike did—not on purpose or anything, but you can feel yourself playing with a certain approach that complements the way he plays the best you can," he continues, "because what Mike and I had together, that was formed in that relationship. As far as Jimmy's talents go, he has a vast lexicon of musical knowledge of different modes and scales, and so, until working with Jimmy, we didn't have conversations in those terms."

And they'll keep on trucking "as long as there's that sense of adventure and fun with the music and going right back to taking some time off and stepping away from yourself. Also when we are on tour, not playing the same shows all the time is crucial to keeping it interesting," Bell says of what keeps Widespread Panic ticking after all these years. "Because then, you're just going through the motions—that can get old. And we'd act for Broadway or something," he says with a laugh.

In addition to the Panic en la Playa destination concerts, most recently, the acoustic Wood tour was their attempt at doing something different and challenging themselves. "Before the first gig, we did not know if there'd be enough sound to fill the room," he says. "We had none of our usual volume or the distortion-type, rock-and-roll accoutrements that had been part of our communication system for all those years. But what we noticed was that

instead of volume, all of a sudden, dynamics started playing a bigger role. We found it naturally," with a "be gentle, then play quieter" mentality. "But that's more the intensity of how you're playing as opposed to volume, so we became more aware and that carried over into the electric thing."

Another development as of late is that the band members are now scattered across the country—from California to Tennessee to Georgia. Though Bell still lives in rural Georgia, he no longer exposes himself to the Athens music scene but recognizes there's a lot of talent and quality venues in the college town.

"It's a healthy atmosphere down there," he says, reflecting on where the band got their start at UGA in the '80s. "So the ecosystem is intact—the musical ecosystems for growth for all types of different species to thrive." (He also cites recent *On The Verge* subjects Futurebirds as a new band he's "digging" from the Classic City.)

As for September's inaugural Interlocken Music Festival in Virginia, Widespread Panic will be performing with John Fogerty. "That was one of those rare match-ups they were trying to facilitate as something different—putting folks together. Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi—I think they're playing with The Black Crowes," he says. "This one was suggested to us, but there was no resistance on our part to have a matchmaker involved. This is music that has been a part of our lives for most of our lives, and so we're looking forward to getting together."

The sit-in culture will always be an important part of Widespread Panic's live dynamic. "It's a lot of fun when you get new blood up there—sometimes, we take a horn section out. It's a lot of fun to play with other personalities," he says. "Yeah, the Fogerty thing—we'll get together, we'll have a rehearsal, and see how it all shakes out. But it's rock and roll, so here we go." ●