

Widespread Panic Street Dogs

BY DEAN BUDNICK

"YOU PLAN ON GOING FOR A hike, but then you kind of go wherever inspiration takes you. You know what I mean?" Widespread Panic vocalist/guitarist John Bell offers as he describes recording his band's 12th studio album, *Street Dogs*. "We tried to move forward on a recording and songwriting adventure—really keep our ears and eyes open and immerse ourselves in a creative environment."

Street Dogs is a tale of two Januaries. At the start of 2014—during some downtime in the Southeast between their New Year's Eve shows and a Gregg Allman tribute in Atlanta—the group first assembled at Echo Mountain Recording Studio in Asheville, N.C., to develop material. But they wouldn't actually record the album until a year later.

"I first heard about the studio from friends here in Nashville," keyboardist/singer JoJo Hermann recalls. "Jon Randall went up there and recorded with Dierks Bentley and he told me about it. He said, 'You gotta check out it—it's in an old church and it's got the stained glass and everything.' And the great thing about the studio is that it's got one giant central room, which made it easy to record as a band, as opposed to everybody being in isolation booths."

Bassist Dave Schools adds: "The idea was for us to get in there with all the bleed and just kind of go old-school, without letting the studio itself run the process. We would not overdecorate these songs—obviously do more than record them live—but we weren't going to get ultra-microscopic with Pro Tools and create something in the studio that might be difficult to recreate onstage. The irony is that—in the year 2015—what was commonly accepted as a way of recording music now seems like an experimental project."



Widespread Panic: John Bell, JoJo Hermann, Dave Schools, Jimmy Herring, Todd Nance, Sunny Ortiz (l-r)

Widespread Panic's longtime collaborator John Keane produced *Street Dogs* and even contributed a song ("Welcome to My World"), while Duane Trucks sat behind the drum kit alongside percussionist Sunny Ortiz. (Founding member Todd Nance has been on hiatus since late 2014.)

SELL SELL

JOJO HERMANN: "Sell Sell" came up a few years ago when we were preparing for the acoustic Wood Tour. We were going to play Aspen, Colo., and I said: "Wouldn't it be fun to do a song called 'Poor People' by Alan Price?" It's on the *O Lucky Man!* soundtrack, which is a Malcolm McDowell movie from way back [in 1973]. So I played everybody "Poor People" and it cued up to "Sell Sell," which is the song before "Poor People." We were all listening to it and realized, "Wow, this is something we could really work with."

DAVE SCHOOLS: I was familiar with it because Alan

Price was the keyboardist for *The Animals*. I really enjoyed *O Lucky Man!* even though it's probably not the greatest movie, although it's definitely a document of the time. It's a little long but it's interesting, and as with Jonathan Richman in *There's Something About Mary*, Alan Price appears in between scenes with an original song—kind of describing what's going on in the protagonist's journey. Of course, at the end, they're playing the wrap party because that's the end of the movie.

It's a cool song and we added it into the live catalog. We realized it was a cool jam vehicle, and with this version in the studio, we decided to chug it down a notch or two and really just throw some swamp-ass on it. We also gave Jimmy Herring a wah-wah pedal. Jimmy doesn't use anything but reverb—he makes every sound with his fingers, volume and feedback. So for him to actually use what we call a "Tonka Toy" is quite rare, but he used it to marvelous effect. That track

was maybe one or two takes, and it just ripped. And it became apparent that it was probably a really good album opener for any number of reasons. Philosophically—here we are selling our music 30 years into our career. Looking back, it works lyrically because it's about selling out, but obviously we've never sold out. [Laughs.]

STEVEN'S CAT

JOHN BELL: We share songwriting credits equally because we've been together so long that you really don't know if an idea was all yours or not. We influence each other so heavily. But, that being said, Jimmy was sitting on the couch and was playing around with some movements on this little recorder-sized traveling guitar that Duane had, and I asked, "Is that new, or are you just messing around or is that something?" And he said, "No, it's a couple of parts I've been playing with."

I liked the movements and I thought it sounded very Cat Stevens-esque. I had a little recording situation in the hotel to knock about ideas before getting into the studio and, the next day, I started playing with some lyrics. It got a little playful and, all of a sudden, the idea was this wandering soul cat that takes the form of a furry cat, but as an analogy to Cat Stevens and his appearance and then disappearance from the rock-and-roll world. [Laughs.] And there are obvious homages to some of his lyrics, "Moonshadow" and "Where Do the Children Play" and stuff like that. If you are at all familiar with Cat Stevens, then maybe you will think it's kind of funny—and hopefully, he doesn't take it personally. [Laughs.] It was a playful moment and some of the stuff you cherish in the studio is when something comes up spontaneously and, the next thing you know, the record company gets together because they want to try that as

the single. So you never know where your gifts are going to come from.

DS: One important thing about “Steven’s Cat” was the use of the Mellotron. JoJo had come to me before we started the sessions and said, “I would really love to get a little further away from my patent sounds of B3, Wurlitzer and piano.” And I asked one of the studio guys if anyone had one of these new digital Mellotrons. They brought one in, and I dumped a bunch of Tonka—crazy, circuit-breaking pedals—all over JoJo’s keyboard world. And he came up with the sounds and I helped him dial in some craziness so it didn’t sound strictly like Pink Floyd or The Moody Blues. Then, he applied his thing to it and you’ll hear that on “Steven’s Cat.” There’s a choir and some strings that are warped beyond all compare.

What’s also important is Jimmy’s guitar solo at the end. He recorded about six or seven takes. Each one was entirely different—each one of those solos had something that was inherently Jimmy Herring about it—and they were all amazing. In the end, the one we went with, to me, is one of the best guitar solos Jimmy Herring has ever done. There’s just something about where it finely walks the line between over-the-top technique and something that hits the listener right in the gut. It almost sounds like a cat yowling a couple of times, which, to me, is just wonderful. And I’m not the only one who thinks that—I played it for Neal Casal, and he sat there dumbfounded and said, “I think that’s the best guitar solo I’ve ever heard Jimmy Herring play.” And Jimmy will say, “Oh, there’s an incomplete pull-off, and clams, bricks, blah, blah, blah...” But those of us who stand outside of the realm of that kind of thought, we know that Jimmy Herring’s worst night—in his own opinion—is better than 99 out of 100 other guitar players’ best night.

CEASE FIRE

JB: “Cease Fire” was 15 minutes long when we first tracked it. We just played it forever. I think we got it down to seven-something minutes in the end.

The notion behind it was that whether there’s a conflict on the streets, during wartime or in your own head, you can hear cease fire as a solution, option or a plea. You can only go so in depth with three verses, but mostly, it’s the idea that conflict begins on an individual level and then leaks out into other parts of your life—on small scales like arguments or huge scales like war. And usually, in my opinion, it’s all based on misunderstandings and internal conflict.

Unless we screwed up on the liner notes, we gave Mike Houser credit on that one too because I remember walking into the back lounge on the bus, years and years ago, and Mikey would say “Cease fire!” to anything you asked him a question about. [*Laughs.*] It was just him being funny—*Family Guy* humor. It kept repeating and repeating.

DS: There’s something about the feel of this one that just grabs me, which is why, if you get the vinyl version, “Cease Fire” and “Jamais Vu” are the one-two punch taking up all of side one. Obviously “Sell Sell” is a great opener, too, and I had no disagreements with that, but then I thought, “We can do it one way with CD and one way with vinyl.” It’s funny because a lot of people think the vinyl is mislabeled, but it’s not. We would never let that happen.

JAMAIS VU (THE WORLD HAS CHANGED)

JB: That is a nod to our great friend [and longtime equipment manager] Garrie Vereen, who passed away. It’s a somber tune with a lot of minor chords in it. Basically “Jamais Vu”—it’s a French phrase—is the opposite of déjà vu. Jamais vu means something that’s just so odd you’ve never seen it before. That’s how it felt when we found out that Garrie was no longer with us. Beyond being my best friend and a lot of people’s best friend, he was with the band—I’d say in an unofficial-official capacity—from just about the very day we played our first gig. So he’s one of the longest-running crew members that we’ve ever had,

working as stage manager for many years.

DS: If you listen to the end of “Cease Fire,” when it goes into that kind of almost Pink Floyd-y melancholy, beautiful breakdown, we end it on a D chord. Then, we fade it in and cross-fade “Jamais Vu.” “Jamais Vu” was a song that JB brought for the 2014 demo and it was sort of a 3/4 waltz. The words were great, but we wanted to make the music a little different. That’s when I thought about “Blight,” which was a Brute song we did with Vic Chesnutt that still exists in our setlists. So I said, “What if we add this sort of weird, dubby bassline feel, and we slow it way down and we make it not a waltz anymore?” So that’s what happened, and it took on this whole new spooky, melancholy thing.

When we wound up recording it at Echo Mountain in 2015, we were messing around with it, and for some reason, we did a really long intro and a really long outro, and it increased the mood of the thing. We thought it would be cool if we faded it in like the way “Low Spark” fades in on the Traffic record and then fades out again, like something that just passed you by in the fog—you saw it while you saw it, and then it disappeared into the mist again. And I thought, “These are two very unique, original songs—let’s make them into one long chunk.”

Even though I don’t smoke weed anymore, it just seemed like the right thing to throw on “Cease Fire” and hear those drums pounding and take that whole journey—with one of the most wickedly, winding, serpentine Jimmy guitar solos I’ve ever heard—and then, it just turns into this dream of “Jamais Vu.” It’s absolutely filled with John Bell imagery and this sort of dreamlike vibe. A lot of the material he brought to this record has this beautiful, dark, dreamy vibe to it.

ANGELS DON’T SING THE BLUES

JB: I can’t confirm whether angels do or not, but with poetic license you just take a stab at it. [*Laughs.*] That one

kind of just took shape on its own. It’s kind of a blues format, where the lines repeat and there’s some simplicity. It has some references to a restless head not being able to go to sleep but the comfort of the angels nearby—they’re present whether you know it or not—help smooth out those moments. The music is very insistent in the beginning and then moves to a shuffle, which has a little less intensity but a little more lightheartedness. Then it goes to a drifting back-and-forth waltz, swaying feeling and finishes out. It lends itself to that feeling of mayhem before chilling out.

JH: This is one of my favorites. It has a great rhythm track and I love the vocal melody, when it goes through to that suspended chord thing. That’s another one where I used the Mellotron, which I was really into. I didn’t want to only play these note-y jazz solos. On some of the parts, I wanted it to be more spacey and ethereal, and the Mellotron really served that. And Jimmy’s guitar line for his melodies—it’s beautiful stuff.

HONKY RED

DS: This is a song by a Canadian songwriter named Murray McLauchlan. It’s an old song, and the backstory is that my dad ran a publishing company in LA called Hollywood Allstar Music, and all the publishing houses would have conferences and songwriters would just parade through.

A few years ago, my dad got this group of two other older dudes from the scene and started performing. I got the chance to finally sit down and play with him and this was one of the songs he showed me. I said, “What’s the story on this song?” And he told me that a friend of his had reminded him about it and then he went and sort of reworked it. I went down to LA and recorded the three of them playing it—you can find it on YouTube.

So we copped his arrangement and started playing it a couple of years ago live, but we didn’t really know what to do with it. It didn’t seem to have a home yet. I knew that the words

would have some impact, and I knew they would resonate with John Bell. And I knew he would deliver them beautifully—it was a matter of intent, a shared group intent that would frame the song properly.

Once we started playing it with Duane, we slowed it down and made it guttural and grungy. What Duane brought [to the studio], beyond his enthusiasm, which is great and always welcomed, was he is really cool with sensing the vibe of something. And once we kicked it down a notch or two, tempo-wise, it opened up and the intent arrived. Duane likes that kind of stuff. He can play slow and build in dynamics so that it doesn't ever drag, but also so it doesn't race up against the front end of the beat, and that's what's required on a song like this.

I suggested updating the words from "Nam" to "Iraq" because the song is just about a guy that can't help but fuck up his life, and the Honky Red that he drinks adds a lot to it. I think it's an extraordinarily successful studio song for us, and Murray McLauchlan would say, "OK, I never envisioned my song being framed this way, but it works."

THE POORHOUSE OF POSITIVE THINKING

JH: That's about a fairly typical day on the club scene in Oxford, Miss., when I was playing in Oxford all the time and lived there. On Saturday, all the bars closed right at midnight. So at 11:59, everyone was downing their beers and the bells were ringing and the bartenders were shouting, "Get out! Get out!" because the doors had to be locked and every drink had to be out of sight—there wasn't to be one drink in view at the stroke of midnight. So, you would have this scene on the square in Oxford on Lamar Avenue, where everybody was just kind of walking around looking for a ride home. So it's kind of a silly song about the club scene in Oxford.

I like taking images from different places and ramming them together—kind of like a *Frankenstein* approach. So I'll take images from *The Wizard of*

Oz and *Birdman of Alcatraz* and *Casino* and just throw them all together in a pot.

DS: I love John Hermann's uptempo pop ditties because they show so much about him, where he comes from and what he's made of. People like to paint him as a barroom, barrelhouse, stride piano blues guy, which is certainly a major part of his makeup. But at the same time, he grew up in New York in the '70s. He liked punk rock and we were all informed by certain things like Big Star and the power pop that you might've heard on AM radio at the time—*not to mention yacht rock.*

[Laughs.] This is one of his ultra-clever, complicated arrangements that sounds deceptively simple.

JB: We played around a little with us singing it together and me singing it alone and, in the end, it sounded most natural and most sincere with him singing it. But, in the process of wanting to understand what we're singing about, I asked him some questions. What I see in a lot of his lyrics is that's he's a both-side-of-the-coin kind of guy. He sees a lot of things happening simultaneously that might seemingly negate another idea, but it's like in that poem [Walt Whitman's "Song Of Myself"] "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

WELCOME TO MY WORLD

DS: Wow, what a shocking surprise. John Keane showed up with a song that had some words and some basic chords. We started working on it, and we're like, "This is sort of classic Southern rock." We're talking about working hard and shit going wrong and the wheels flying off and all these sort of lyrical themes that really aren't in our wheelhouse, but we are often perceived as a dirty, dark Southern rock band. And it wound up being a lot of fun to play, and we just kept ratcheting it up and up and up.

The path that I'm on right now, especially with [my other

project] the Hard Working Americans, and my sort of musical philosophy when it comes to making records is "Don't just suggest something. Don't do anything half-assed. If you're gonna go somewhere, let's go all the fuckin' way." So this song is what it is. It's a hard-rock theme song with a great riff, and it's different for us. It's like, "Let's not pussyfoot around. Let's do it." And we have some pretty good weaponry in our arsenal when it comes to being a hard rockin' Southern band, and so we did.

TAIL DRAGGER

JH: That's a Willie Dixon song that's been in our repertoire for a long time now. And that was one where I think we just cut it in one or two tracks live, and it got stuck on the album—great track, another dirty track. You know, there's some really dirty

songs on this—that and "Honky Red." And on that song, I borrowed R.E.M.'s Vox organ. I'm a big Ray Manzarek fan, so I kind of did a little nod to Ray Manzarek on that

track. We just laid it down and we went, "Oh, that sounds good." I don't think a whole lot of thought went into it, but we just kind of had it in our back pocket and decided to just lay it down and it made the album.

JB: It's a neat, old blues tune. I forget who suggested it initially—maybe Dave did—and then, we kind of did the same thing we did with Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues"—we just souped up the arrangement with more of our instrumentation so you catch the inspiration of the song and some of the movements, but then tried to leave it alone and let it grow a little bit more in the hands of the band that's working on it at the time.

The arrangements are a little different, but I'm pretty sure the lyrics are just about the same.

DS: Zeppelin was great at taking something from the American blues tradition that had been passed around a lot and just putting the nitro on it. So we

decided to come up with a riff that could be ours. We started playing it and, a lot of times when Panic goes in to make a studio record, we'll warm up with a cover song or two. Sometimes they wind up on the record and sometimes they don't. So we had this, and JoJo had this Vox organ—that Doors-y sounding organ that he used on this—and John Keane put JB's voice through the ol' Edison tin-can recording sound. It just got guttural and ugly and it was cool.

STREET DOGS FOR BREAKFAST

JB: "Street Dogs for Breakfast" is another JoJo inspiration, and I've experienced it, too, being in New York and spending time in New Orleans. The hot dog vendors on the street in both those cities are an institution. And JoJo throws some images out there—he bounces back and forth in my mind from jumping turnstiles, which would be more of a New York thing and the Chinese boarding house that might be more of a New Orleans thing. They are two cities where you know you've got to keep your guard up and fend for yourself. And I think those are the images he was working on, and then, the phrase "night of the living evangelicals" is just cool.

JH: It's about playing in the clubs down on Delancey Street in New York City, but I also took things from different places, so you can have a Lucky Dog vendor from New Orleans up in Greenwich Village and then, all of a sudden, he's going to a bar in Mississippi. I basically take all those places and unground them so that they're all just interchangeable parts, which is just kind of fun.

I was like, "Guys, should this song really be on a Panic album? Shouldn't I be doing this somewhere else, like in some little bar or something?" But they said, "No, no, it's good!" They were all very supportive—it's just a little different from stuff we normally do. It's more of a country-boogie kind of thing. It's a silly, fun drinking song. I guess it's "Blackout Blues," part two. **F**

