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WIDESPREAD PANIC

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V 38 N O 5

I WAS A LITTLE LATER "GETTING" Widespread Panic than most jamband fans. Perhaps part of it had to do with growing up on the West Coast and staying there through college, which limited the number of shows in the area; perhaps part of it was I just didn't see the *right* show to have that transcendent "a-ha" moment; perhaps part of it was feeling like it was a very Southern group in the tradition of The Allman Brothers or Lynyrd Skynyrd in such a way that there was an emotional disconnect for a non-native like me.

After numerous attempts, the gears finally began clicking into place during the band's Bonnaroo performances—and Panic returned for the tenth installment of the festival this year, closing out the event Sunday night as it has more than any other band.

And while my appreciation was growing deeper for the band with each passing year and show, I didn't grasp the magnitude of Michael Houser's passing and the band's subsequent replacements and touring decisions.

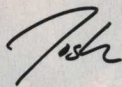
As singer/songwriter Jerry Joseph says in this issue's cover story in honor of Panic's 25th anniversary, "it was a Herculean

feat" for the group to recover from Houser's death "because *nobody* plays like that guy."

It's given me pause to think: Which of Panic's contemporaries could carry on the way it has? I can't think of any band—near or at its size—that could muster the loss of one of its founders and sonic architects. Moreover, as our story articulates, those first few years post-Houser were not easy for the band. It's only now—with the addition of lead guitarist Jimmy Herring in the fall of 2006 and the five subsequent years—that the band feels like it's finally back in top performance shape.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that there's a real sense of perseverance to Widespread Panic's story that I didn't necessarily feel a few years ago—that now, for the first time post-Houser, the band has reached unexpected heights. And to that, I tip my hat.

As bassist Dave Schools says, "We're not getting better at being like the band we were; we're getting better at what we are right now."



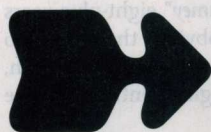
JOSH BARON



REAP & SOW

ON THE OCCASION OF ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY, **WIDESPREAD PANIC** LOOKS BACK ON ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, TURBULENT JOURNEY AND PROMISING FUTURE AS IT PREPARES TO TAKE TIME OFF THE ROAD

By AARON KAYCE
Photograph by ZACK SMITH



JOHN BELL IS WAVING A BOTTLE OF WINE UNDER HIS nose, pretending to smell the still-corked cabernet. It's the day after Bell's 49th birthday and the bottle of red is a gift, but we're meeting in this suite atop Birmingham, Ala.'s exclusive Wynfrey Hotel to discuss another passage of time—his band Widespread Panic's 25th anniversary.

JB, as friends and fans affectionately call him, is charming, engaging and slightly elusive—the same way he's been for every one of the many interviews I've done with him during the past decade. The lead singer and guitarist speaks slowly, almost cautiously, as he considers each word, but he's also candid and honest, just as willing to discuss his love of Van Morrison and dogs as he is the wellness center that he and his wife recently opened or the deaths of too many close friends. He's the kind of guy you can talk to for hours and it feels like minutes; and no matter how much you may study him onstage (and on tape) or hang around him offstage, you get the sense that you can never quite know him fully.

Bandmate Dave Schools calls him “spiritual,” some have used the word “enigma,” others have said he’s “a force of nature.” Bell would balk at these descriptions—perhaps save for the “spiritual”—and he’ll deny being the leader of Widespread Panic until the day he dies even though others close to him might disagree.

“I’ve told JB in the past that it doesn’t matter whether or not you think you’re the leader because everybody else thinks you’re the leader—you are the fucking leader,” says Schools. “I don’t think you’re a leader because you think you are or you’re wearing a placard that says, ‘Hello, I’m the leader.’ It’s, ‘Do all the people who work with you and who are around you think you’re the leader? Do they adhere to your philosophy, and, in their eyes, does the buck stop with you?’”

THE BAND'S SILVER ANNIVERSARY OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LOOK BACK, something that this group hasn't done often during its career. Bell sinks into an overstuffed chair and grows a bit nostalgic as he recalls when this whole trip began. It was 1981 at the University of Georgia

(UGA) in Athens when a friend suggested that he get together with another kid named Mike Houser who liked playing guitar.

“I remember there was this big old Rebel flag on the wall over his amplifier,” recalls Bell of that first meeting. “I forget where we started playing—maybe at my dorm in the bathroom because the reverb was just right. There was a spark: it was the ability to play off of each other and the willingness to just let things flow and have fun together without any pressure.”

Later that year, Bell and Houser crossed paths again—this time on campus—and shared a simultaneous epiphany: they should be playing music together. With tens of thousands of students roaming the grounds, it was almost as if some greater force was drawing the two together.

“It had a real cosmic feeling to it,” notes Bell. They began writing songs and developing a rapport, slowly laying the foundation for what would become Widespread Panic.

Dave Schools was a couple of years behind Houser and Bell in college but in 1984, the bass player stumbled upon the duo and instantly something clicked. Well, maybe not instantly.

“I told them they were doing it wrong,” Schools laughs now. It took one night of experimenting with psychedelics and a long jam on the Panic original “Sleepy Monkey” for Schools to get how, perhaps, that the two were doing it right.

“That was one of the first or second times I ever played with those guys over at their house on King Avenue,” continues Schools. “I was like, ‘This is something unique. I’d like to be a part of this. I don’t know if it’s going to work—and I sure wish there was a drummer.’ But it was so unusual, I was drawn to it.”

After two years of searching in vain for a drummer, Houser called his childhood buddy Todd Nance. “[Houser] and I really learned how to play music together,” recalls Nance. “That was one of the reasons why it was easier for me to step into Panic—all the other drummers were just befuddled. Not that it was super complex; it just had its little personality that was kind of quirky.”

With Nance behind the drum kit, they were finally a band.



Clockwise from bottom left:
Jimmy Herring, Dave Schools,
Todd Nance, Domingo "Sunny"
Ortiz, John Bell, John "JoJo"
Hermann in Mobile, Ala. shortly
before their performance at The
Hangout Festival on May 20, 2011.

Inspired by Houser's nickname "Panic," which he'd acquired from the frequent anxiety attacks that he suffered from, the guys decided to call themselves Widespread Panic. On February 6, 1986, the quartet played its first official show at the now defunct Mad Hatter Ballroom in Athens. Soon Texan percussionist Domingo "Sunny" Ortiz joined the fold, and, in 1988, the band released its debut album *Space Wrangler* on Landslide Records.

Widespread Panic has gone on to release 10 more studio albums and has sold more than three million records worldwide, but it's on the road—where it's performed close to 3,000 concerts—that the band has built its kingdom. Using the Grateful Dead's psychedelic, two-set, never-repeat-a-show mentality—complete with its own "Drums" segment—and a grassroots business model that has been revered by *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, CNN and *Fortune* magazine, Widespread Panic has become one of the most successful touring acts

"It's going to be a healthy break, not a permanent break. At this point, there would never be a reason for Widespread Panic to call it quits. In my mind, the band will always continue on." JOHN BELL



JOHN BELL
VOCALS/RHYTHM GUITAR

Favorite Song

It's almost always one we've really truly raised from the ground up collectively. An old tune that reflects that is "Contentment Blues." We were all sitting around and wrote that thing in the kitchen together. "Papa's Home" was written the same way.

Favorite Show

The very first show! And the first show that we played at Tipitina's in New Orleans [7/31/90]—that definitely was a big deal.

Favorite Tour

It's kind of a blur, but when we did that spring tour semi-acoustically in the ski towns. [Sit-n-Ski, 1996]

Favorite Album

I really don't have one, so as a tie-breaker, I'll say *Til the Medicine Takes* because of the album cover.

of its generation. And, arguably, they may unwittingly be the architects of the jamband scene.

The band is generally found on *Pollstar's* annual Top 50 Tours list and it holds attendance records at some of the nation's finest venues, including Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheatre where the group boasts a record-setting 35 sell-outs. In 2008, *Billboard* magazine even created the "Road Warrior" award to honor Panic's remarkable touring accomplishments, and, that same year, the band was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame.

Driving it all, of course, was the music.

FROM THE START, THE BAND ADOPTED AN IMPROVISATIONAL STYLE AND PHILOSOPHY, which Bell had been developing for a few years as a solo/acoustic artist. He didn't use a setlist (though Panic does today due to the 300-plus songs at its disposal) because he believed it would limit the possibility of something truly great or interesting happening naturally. He has never played a song exactly the same way twice.

It was during this early period when Bell began to experiment with what would later be referred to as his "raps"—a process "that entailed going into the songs and daydreaming while you were playing, and learning how to pick up on new images that might pop in, and then incorporate those lyrically," he explains.

"[It's an] honest-to-goodness, over-the-top inspiration where you're simultaneously having your mind blown and you're able to report on it at the same time."

It's a direct look into Bell's subconscious and fans eat it up. When this happens at a show, it's one of the few sure signs that the evening's musical endeavors are going well.

Instrumentally, Panic operates much the same way—searching for something new each night, pushing for peak moments. "The big thing is still—and it's been the constant forever and ever—when there's an almost unnatural sense of being fully dialed in," says Bell leaning forward in his chair. "Everybody on the same page all at once, on the same wavelength, of the same mind. You almost feel like there's no difference between you and the other guys, there's a oneness being sensed intuitively through the music."

Ortiz compares Panic to the jazz music of John Coltrane and Miles Davis that he was so heavily influenced by growing up. "When you look at the definition of jazz, there's obviously a lot of free form movement, a lot of changes in time signature," he says. "It's sometimes erratic and it follows no true format. And I think [with] all of those things, that's what we tend to do—or that's what we follow if we follow anything."

Also heavily inspired by the Grateful Dead, Black Sabbath, Traffic and Led Zeppelin, the members weren't afraid to play without a net. "They were fearless," remembers Col. Bruce Hampton, a mentor to the band, whose group Aquarium Rescue Unit shared many shows with Panic in the old days. "They made up their own rules and they've stuck to 'em."

Panic delivered its self-titled major label debut on Capricorn Records in 1991 and grew to a six-piece with the addition of Dixie Dregs keyboardist T Lavitz later that year. In 1992, John "JoJo" Hermann who would prove to be a catalyst that galvanized the band, replaced Lavitz. And Hermann likes to joke that it's really Panic's 19th anniversary, commemorating the year he joined the group.

AS WE'RE LEAVING THE WYNFREY HOTEL, OMINOUS CLOUDS GATHER OVERHEAD and giant rain drops the size of bottle caps begin to fall. Soon, tornado sirens are echoing throughout Birmingham. The evening's show was supposed to mark Widespread Panic's triumphant return to Oak Mountain Amphitheatre in Pelham, often lovingly referred to as the "Redneck Red Rocks." Instead, the concert moves to the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex. A few minutes before show time, a tornado touches down one mile from Oak Mountain.

Regardless of what obstacles may pop up—or in this case, touch down—the show must go on, just as it has for 25 years. And in classic

Charlotte, N.C., 7/19/98



DAVE SCHOOLS
BASS/VOCALS

Favorite Song

"Pilgrims"—it's one I'll never, ever get tired of playing. And for me, I take it really personally if we drop the ball. I feel disappointed when that song doesn't have the emotional impact that I feel it should."

Favorite Show

Panic in the Streets. [4/18/98—100,000 people attended the free *Light Fuse Get Away* CD release party in streets of Athens.] The fact that all of the things that had gone on for months leading up to that appearance worked in tandem to leave a good taste in everyone's mouth sticks out as one of my favorite shows.

Favorite Tour

This sounds really self-serving and like it might even be bull-shit, but the most recent short little spring tour.

Favorite Album

Light Fuse Get Away. I think that's a really good starting point for people. If we just go studio: *Everyday*.

Goofing off for 1993's *Everyday*

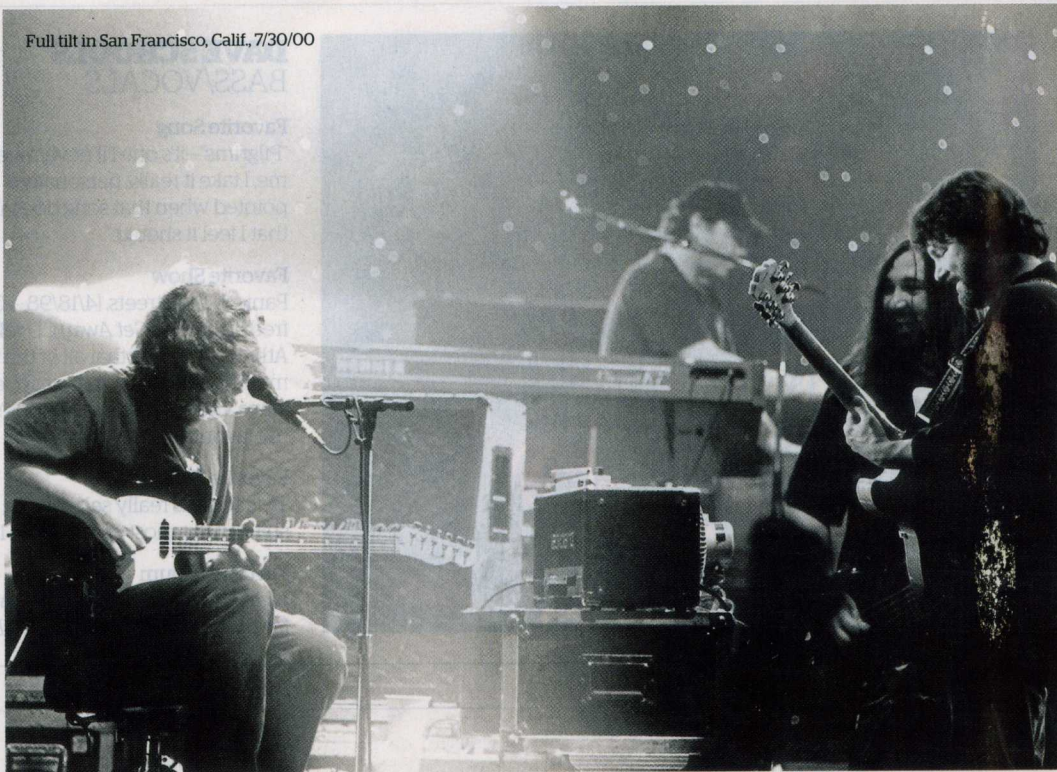


Alastair Thain (main), Tyler Phillips (Dave Schools)

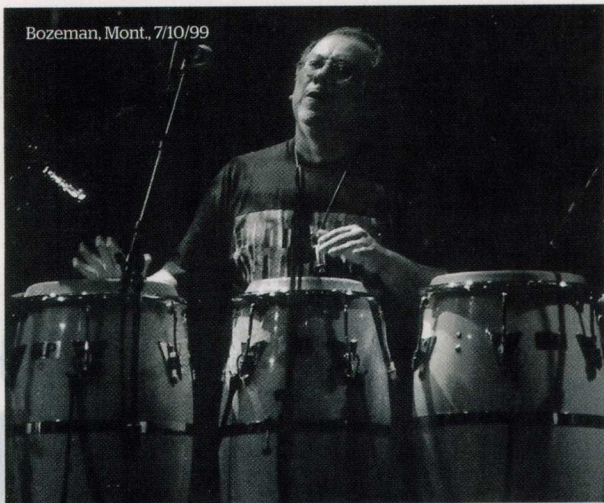
"I think the band saved the band—I think the fans saved the band. Did Jimmy bring a whole hell of a lot to the table that made it easier for us to keep going? Hell, yeah."

DAVE SCHOOLS

Full tilt in San Francisco, Calif., 7/30/00



Bozeman, Mont., 7/10/99



DOMINGO "SUNNY" ORTIZ PERCUSSION

Favorite Song

I would have to say "Space Wrangler." Also: "Don't Tell the Band," "Dyin' Man," "One Arm Steve," "Her Dance Needs No Body," "Saint Ex," "Thin Air (Smells Like Mississippi)," "Fishing" and "May Your Glass Be Filled"—just to name a few.

Favorite Show

Madison Square Garden [10/31-11/01/03] and being onstage with Carlos Santana at the Greek Theatre [10/14/01].

Favorite Tour

HORDE. [1992]

Favorite Album

Til the Medicine Takes

Panic fashion, the band rose to the occasion, putting on what Schools called, "probably one of the best fucking rock shows the band has done in a long fucking time."

Storms aren't anything new for the members of Widespread Panic as they've seemingly made a career of hurdling hardships. So it's only fitting that returning to Oak Mountain would be tumultuous.

The last time the band was here was April 28, 2002, the final night of a short spring tour, and, as far as anyone knew, it was supposed to be Michael Houser's last show. Heroically battling pancreatic cancer to the bitter end, Houser wound up playing seven more shows during the following summer tour, eventually succumbing to the disease on August 10, 2002. He was 40 years old.

Houser was one of the most unique guitar players in recent rock and roll history. For starters, he sat down while he played, which allowed him to use both his effects and volume pedals at the same time—something that no guitarist standing on their feet could ever do. But he also had distinct artistic sensibilities. He worked like a painter, shading lingering guitar passages with swells of sound that could make you feel a little seasick on their best nights.

"I have not heard anybody approach their instrument the way Mike did," says Bell. "It was totally self-taught."

Schools says much the same: "He would write chords in a certain mode and start soloing over them. He innately learned how to leave out the notes that didn't really work and how to bend the notes that kind of didn't work into something that was the proper color."

Although Houser's body was growing weaker with each passing show, Bell remembers how strong his final musical performances were. "Mike was playing with a focus of intention that was as good as he had ever played," says Bell. "And he said—when we were onstage—that all the worry, all the anxiety and all the physical pain went away."

Houser's wife, Barbette, remembers how important it was for him to perform on that summer tour, even when his family was waiting to share his final days with him at home. "Michael was a very laid back person but he was very driven with his music and it gave him a goal," she says. "It gave him a goal putting out those CDs [2002's *Door Harp* and 2006's *Sandbox*, both released posthumously] on his own and also get-

Striking a more serious tone for 1998's *Light Fuse, Get Away*



ting onstage with Widespread Panic and playing for as long as he could. He felt like he had done something with his life, and playing those shows was still doing something with it.”

With the weather behind us, emotions are running high backstage the next night as the band finally returns to Oak Mountain. “We had some of our best gigs ever here with Mikey, so we were talking about him earlier today—a lot of memories,” says Hermann as he stares out the small window of the band’s trailer, catching a glimpse of the trees that spill into a dense forest.

“He’s definitely up there [onstage]. He just had a style that we definitely still pay homage to. Every night, we go up there, part of the ethic of what we’re doing—and what we’re trying to do—stems from Mikey. We haven’t lost that at all.”

But they almost did lose it.

When Houser could no longer take the stage (July 3, 2002), the band didn’t even take a night off. Instead, the members soldiered on with guitar player George McConnell, an old friend who had played with Hermann in the group Beanland before he joined Panic, and saxophonist Randall Bramblett. Though Bramblett would only stay with the group for the rest of the 2002 summer shows, McConnell became the official lead guitarist and the outfit toured for another year and a half leading up to Widespread Panic’s first extended break in more than 15 years.

“Recovering from something like Mikey Houser [’s death] was difficult because nobody fucking plays like that guy,” says singer/songwriter Jerry Joseph, longtime friend and composer of several Panic staples including “Climb to Safety” and “North.” “Just the fact that they were able to come around musically—and it took them a long time [as] Mikey’s been dead [nine years]—it was a Herculean feat for them to do that.”

Returning 14 months later, in March 2005, the emotional wounds were beginning to heal, but onstage it was another story. It became obvious that “it just wasn’t working musically,” says Schools of McConnell. “Personality-wise, he’s one of the nicest, most caring people I’ve met in my life and I love him dearly. It’s hard when you have to come to a parting of the ways. It’s really hard and it was a rough time for everyone. Those couple of years were a lot of hard work, and a lot of times being onstage wasn’t as much fun as it should have been.”

On July 30, 2006, in the midst of the band’s summer tour, the George McConnell-era of Widespread Panic that began four years earlier came to an abrupt end. Guitarist and Grammy-nominated producer John Keane—he received the nod for Panic’s most recent effort, 2010’s *Dirty Side Down* and has produced seven Widespread Panic albums (ten if you include live ones)—along with former Houser/Panic guitar tech Sam Holt, filled in for the remaining dates.

When the fall tour began several months later, so too did the Jimmy Herring-era of Widespread Panic.

WHEN THE BAND LEARNED THAT HOUSER WAS SICK, JIMMY HERRING WAS THE first guy on the list to fill in for him. Herring declined the offer as he was already committed to Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh—originally playing in Phil Lesh & Friends, then The Other Ones and eventually The Dead. Prior to his work with Lesh, Herring had engaged deeply with the Dead’s material in the instrumental Grateful Dead cover band *Jazz Is Dead* that he co-founded in 1998 with drummer Billy Cobham (Miles Davis, Mahavishnu Orchestra), bassist Alphonso Johnson (Weather Report) and T Lavitz. Adding to his impressive résumé, Herring also did a stint as the guitarist for The Allman Brothers Band in 2000.

Four years after his first attempt, when Bell called again in 2006, Herring was free. As he had been spending most of his time riding a

**JOHN
"JOJO"
HERMANN**
KEYBOARDS/
VOCALS

Favorite Song
I never get tired of
"Chilly Water."

Favorite Show
New Year's in 2000
was really special.
Definitely one of the
highlights of my life
was October 30 [2010]
when Dr. John sang
"Dream Warrior" and
"Right Place Wrong
Time" with the band.

Favorite Tour
Sit-n-Ski [1996]

Favorite Album
Space Wrangler



With Merl Saunders, San Francisco, Calif., 11/28/97

motorcycle through the Georgia countryside and contemplating what to do next, he couldn't have been more excited to join Widespread Panic.

Herring and Panic go way back to the start of their respective careers. They both hung around Col. Bruce Hampton, with whom Herring co-founded the influential improvisational rock band Aquarium Rescue Unit in the late-'80s, were on the same record label (Capricorn); and had jammed together on numerous occasions. Herring had an academic approach, skill set and critical real-world experience that differentiated him from McConnell, instantly giving the band—and its fans—a sense of hope and a feeling of potential that had been greatly lacking in previous years.

"I never saw myself as this person who was gonna be in these situations where you're gonna have to stand where Jerry [Garcia] used to stand, you're gonna have to stand where Dickey Betts used to stand or you're gonna have to stand where Mike Houser used to stand," says Herring in his friendly Southern drawl.

"But I'm glad it went in the order that it went, because I learned so much. It totally prepared me for being in a position of having to learn a lot of music in a short amount of time; and not only that, but having to stand in the shadow of somebody who was irreplaceable."

Widespread Panic virtually ignored vast areas of its catalog with McConnell, and never even attempted some songs, like the classic track "Airplane". As part of Herring's learning process, he listened to concert bootlegs obsessively, often with Houser turned up in the mix courtesy

of soundman Chris Rabold, and he started asking if the band could play certain numbers that weren't in the live rotation.

When the guys explained that some of those songs hadn't been played in five years, Herring told them that it wasn't a problem—he'd already learned the material.

Just as Herring has helped Panic, in the words of Bell, "pull things out of the mud," Panic has granted Herring the opportunity to engage his guitar in ways that he'd never really had the chance to do—and certainly not with Lesh.

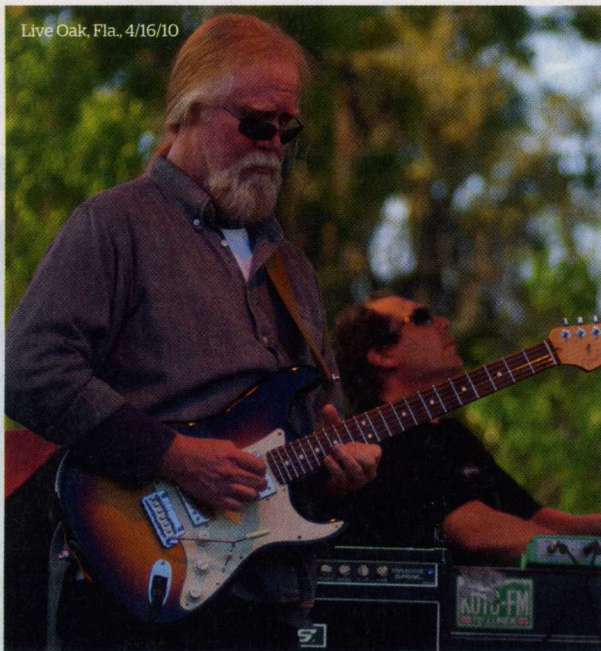
"The Dead's catalog is unbelievably diverse," says Herring. "From folk tunes and ragtime type tunes all the way to rocking, blues-oriented music. Which is kind of similar to Panic, only Panic's thing is more—they're a folk band for sure—but they also like to delve into hard rock," explains Herring. "Coming into this band, it was all about, 'Hey, can't you get any louder? Can't you get the guitar more distorted? We need to be kicking this in the chest!' So then a whole new place to go was born—for me anyway."

During the course of five years, more than 350 shows and two albums, Herring has masterfully navigated the "high-wire act," as he put it, of respecting and honoring signature Houser guitar parts while letting his own personality and highly-fluid, fusion-based style push the music into new terrain. Today, Widespread Panic roars once again, in a way that many fans—and perhaps the band itself—feared that it never would. There's no doubt that it's a different beast than it was with Houser, but that's a big part of the gig: Panic wasn't looking to become



Issue #1 of the *Moon Times*, Spring 1995

Live Oak, Fla., 4/16/10



JIMMY HERRING

LEAD GUITAR

Favorite Song

"Pilgrims" and I love JB's ballads.

Favorite Show

When Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi were playing with us at the All Good Music Festival up in West Virginia [7/12/08].

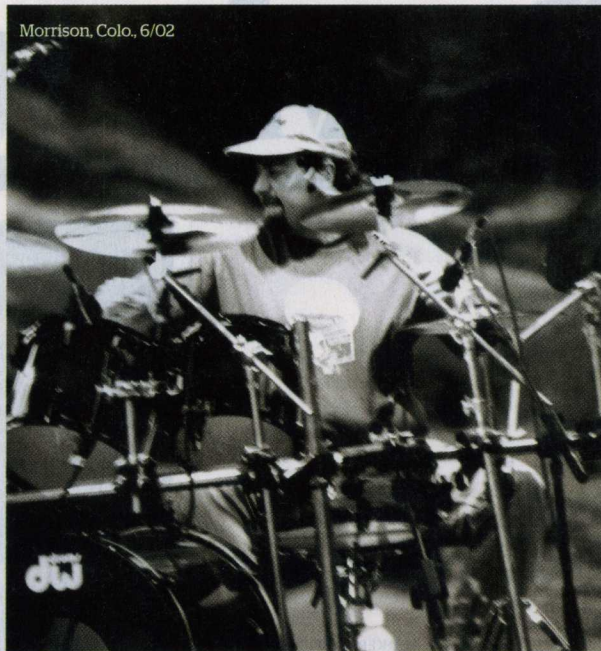
Favorite Tour

The last tour [Spring 2011].

Favorite Album

I love the John Keane records. It's a toss-up between *Til the Medicine Takes* and *Ain't Life Grand*.

Morrison, Colo., 6/02



TODD NANCE

DRUMS/VOCALS

Favorite Song

"Space Wrangler"

Favorite Show

The first one would have to be right up there. As of late, the 25th anniversary shows in Athens and Atlanta were really a lot of fun [2/10-11, 2/14/11].

Favorite Tour

The first HOR.DE. was a blast [in 1992].

Favorite Album

Everyday

a cover band of its former self.

As Panic cranks through its sound check at Oak Mountain, I'm sitting with the group's longtime manager Buck Williams backstage. "The band is really going through—in my opinion—a rebirth that is just starting," he says. "They're having more fun onstage than they've had in years. They're communicating better onstage than they have in years. They're opening up to each other more than they have in years."

Schools says that he's "encouraged by the signs of life I'm getting now. We're getting better at being ourselves. We're not getting better at being like the band we were [with Houser]; we're getting better at what we are right now."

To illustrate the point, he brings up some of the "spontaneous jamming" from the Friday night Birmingham show, the kind that he's "been hearing more and more over the last couple of tours with Jimmy," he says.

The guys in Panic love to use sports analogies to talk about how the band is operating. Hermann, in particular, likes baseball ones. "I feel like an athlete right now," he says, flashing a smile. "It's feeling good out there. I feel like I'm seeing the ball real good and like I'm hitting with the fat part of the bat."

"I kind of forgot about those special moments," admits Schools. "Hearing them happen again, I'm realizing that, 'Oh shit, I forgot that that's what we did!' That might be what makes Widespread Panic in the

minds of some of our fans: Is it mayhem? Is it controlled? What the hell is going on?"

For many, what's going on is: "We're getting our band back," as one fan proudly proclaimed at Oak Mountain. And that seems to be the prevailing notion, from old school "Spreadheads," to new converts who aren't even old enough to ever have seen Houser play, to the individual band members as well.

It would be easy to assume that all of this is because of Jimmy Herring. Such notions ignore the strength of what's always held Widespread Panic together. The band members truly see the band as a family and it's overcome tribulations of every stripe for two decades, long before Herring ever entered the picture.

"Did Jimmy save the band?" asks Schools, repeating my question. "I think the band saved the band—I think the fans saved the band. Did Jimmy bring a whole hell of a lot to the table that made it easier for us to keep going? Hell, yeah."

Bell says that the band is "blessed with the uniqueness of what Jimmy's bringing to it. I think the sky's the limit—there's a lot of stuff we can do. And I think that bears itself out when you look at the new songs with Jimmy. A lot of really neat passages, a lot of flavor and color to them—they lend themselves to lyrical embellishment."

Continued on page 78



Continued from page 59

It's almost like he's listening to the band in his head, Bell adds quickly, "I think what we've got really kicks ass."

THREE WEEKS AFTER SPEAKING WITH HIM BACK-stage in Alabama, Dave Schools is showing me his okra crop. Surrounded by rows of vegetable beds, fruit trees just starting to embrace spring and towering redwoods, we're standing in the bass player's yard that stretches for seven acres into the rolling backcountry of Sebastopol, one of Northern California's sleepy art communities where grapes, Gravenstein apples and marijuana stabilize the economy. Later that day, I leave with a grocery bag full of organic radishes, canned plums and pear preserves, all harvested and prepared by Schools himself.

Inside, past the wraparound porch where his dogs Fast Eddie and Rosie like to lie in the sun, through the open kitchen and down the dark wood slats that line the hallway floor, is Schools' music room. Illuminated by natural light and flanked by comfortable love seats, hundreds of albums are stacked neatly against one wall and there's an acoustic bass and an abstract portrait of him in concert leaning against another. It's easy to see why he says: "I'm happier than I've ever been."

Maybe it's his jovial mood, maybe it's the strong coffee he's brewed—either way, I find it to be the right time to acknowledge the giant elephant that's been sitting in the room during all my conversations with the band: the break.

Late last year, Hermann slipped up in an interview, telling the Vanderbilt University student newspaper that after the band celebrates its 25th anniversary, "we're probably going to call it [quits] for a while."

"They were fearless. They made up their own rules and they've stuck to 'em."

COL. BRUCE HAMPTON

And Bell was recently quoted in the June/July 2011 issue of *Garden & Gun* magazine as saying that the band might finish the year with a New Year's Eve gig and then "knock off for the next couple of years, maybe longer."

The news has sent fans into, well, a panic. "I can tell you that we are definitely not going to quit," says Schools. "You can put it in bold and put it in a box in the middle of the article."

"It's just a break," he says, inching up in his seat and locking his dark eyes on mine for emphasis. "We've been at this for a long time, we have families. You don't want to lose those parts—that's what makes life meaningful. Band members have kids, some of them are old enough to be driving and that means they're going off to college soon and the father wants to be around. I'm freshly married—I'd like to give it a chance."

Schools, like everyone in the group, abstains from giving definitive parameters for the break, but he does respond to Bell's "couple of years, maybe longer" quote, explaining that the interview for that piece happened months ago, before the band had really figured out a plan, and that Bell might have even been being a little sarcastic.

"It's not gonna be longer than a year," says Schools. "I would suspect [the break] will start sometime in early 2012, and if the Mayan calendar has been grossly misinterpreted, then we'll be back sometime in the next year."

Pushing just a little, I ask if the band plans to go into this break like it did the last one, with a big New Year's Eve blowout. Unwilling to go any deeper into specifics, Schools shifts the conversation slightly toward how the break may begin as opposed to when, hinting at some ambitious plans that the band has been cooking up behind closed doors. "There are a lot of things in discussion about what can we do leading up to it that will be different," he says with a grin.

This will likely include special performances and could even find Panic playing new stages and embracing innovative ways of recording or writing.

When I was with Bell in Birmingham, before my visit with Schools, he confirmed that the time off is just a sabbatical and nothing for fans to be concerned about.

"We are planning on taking a break," he says. "It's going to be a healthy break, not a permanent break. At this point, there would never be a reason for Widespread Panic to call it quits. In my mind, the band will always continue on. The Stones left the scene for years for various reasons but the band was still The Rolling Stones."

"It's analogous to being smart enough to know you don't eat all the grain because you gotta plant some so you have grain in the future. If you go ahead and just satisfy an immediate hunger and wipe out all your stash, then you got nothing to plant for the future." ●