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*"MARITAL  
SUICIDE"  
FUELED THE  
BEST ALBUM  
YET FROM  
TRAMPLED  
BY TURTLES  
LEADER  
DAVE  
SIMONETT*

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*The LONG  
WINTER*

# The LONG WINTER

By ERICA RIVERA

*Dave Simonett's "marital suicide" and hiatus from Trampled by Turtles fueled Furnace, his most powerfully raw album yet*



SHELLY MOSMAN

*THIS HOUSE IS ON FIRE  
AND I CAN'T ESCAPE /  
I'M LONELY AND TIRED,  
NO WILL LEFT  
TO FAKE IT*

— "THIS HOUSE IS ON FIRE"

**D**ave Simonett is nervous. Or so he says. But on this January evening, the 36-year-old musician best known as frontman of the globally loved bluegrass band Trampled by Turtles looks as casually cool as any other outdoorsy Minnesotan. His scruffy auburn hair is matted beneath a red wool cap. His beard is neatly trimmed. He wears a red plaid flannel shirt with big pockets on the chest, black jeans, and smoke-jumper boots. The scent of a recently smoked cigarette lingers on him.

Even before Simonett gets a Miller Lite down at Buster's in south Minneapolis, he is friendly and endearingly open. Aside from an interview for a press release, this is the first time he's discussed his divorce in-depth since he committed "marital suicide" in 2014. After ending his decade-long marriage to a woman he'd been with since he was 19 years old, he moved out of the Hopkins home where the couple was raising their two children. Since then, he's pinballed between various residences before settling in Minneapolis.

The divorce, which Simonett considers the most traumatic event of his life, is the basis of last month's *Furnace*, the new album from his rock project Dead Man Winter. Though he jokes it's a "cheesy breakup record," the LP is the most raw and revealing work of his career.

*I'M A DISASTER,  
I AM FADING FROM  
YOUR YOUNG LIFE /  
I'M GROWING PALE  
AND GHOST WHITE,  
WITH XS ON MY EYES*

— "DESTROYER"

**W**hile Simonett doesn't appear to be in shambles now, *Furnace* paints a portrait of immense struggle. His wounded, howling vocals chronicle the emotional wreckage of dismantling his family over 10 tracks.

"The guilt involved in that process [of divorce] was exponentially more than I expected. I'm normally not a very guilty person — I actually worried about that for a time, thought maybe I was a psychopath, a sociopath," Simonett explains. "I had to process all of this, a lot of polar-opposite emotions, and my remedy has always been



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writing about it. This was... almost like a vomit of lyrics that came out of that experience. It still makes me nervous, not having any kind of veil or a metaphor."

When someone discloses a divorce, it's natural to ask what happened. It's just as common to hear "It's complicated" or "We grew apart" in response. Simonett doesn't initially deviate from these pat responses, but with a little pushing, he assumes the blame:

"I was the one that was fucked up. I was the one that was looking to get out," he says. "It definitely came as a surprise to her, I think. For me, it just got to a point where I got into that feeling of wanting to be elsewhere. I was miserable with everything — not my kids, that's a different thing — but every part of my life started to suffer."

On the brink of a mental breakdown, "I just fucking left everything," he says. "It was a really shitty way to end a long, loving relationship."

Simonett, who considers himself the "luckiest asshole ever," admits to destructive tendencies.

"I know a lot of people that constantly screw themselves up," he says. "Why do we do that? I don't know an answer, but it is some kind of... I won't call it boredom, 'cause it's not boredom, but it's maybe a cousin to that."

Hence the tendency to bolt and the ensuing "shit-show whirlwind."

"Stability hasn't equaled happiness for me," he says. "I get kind of scared of it. Or threatened by it."

If he's hesitant to share additional details about what led to the divorce, it's because he doesn't want to cause his ex-wife any more pain. Shortly after the aforementioned press release was posted online last fall, she received an email from a co-worker asking, "Is this your ex-husband?" The news that Simonett was writing about their divorce on *Furnace* did not go over well.

"It's a fine line, you know?" he says. "The record needs a little bit of context.

Dead Man Winter rocking First Avenue in 2015

I have to talk about it. That's part of the process. But I don't want it to seem like I'm using somebody else's blood for my benefit."

For Simonett, using his divorce as creative kindling wasn't an opportunistic marketing ploy — it was a cathartic necessity.

*THERE'S NOTHING I WANT,  
JUST LEAVE ME ALONE /  
IF I NEED YOU, I'VE GOT  
YOUR NUMBER / IN THE  
WINTER I LEFT MY HAPPY  
HOME / DON'T THINK I'LL  
BE BACK ANY LONGER*

— "CARDINAL" 2

After Simonett left his marital home, he called fellow musician and long-time friend Erik Koskinen to ask if he could crash on the couch in Koskinen's Minneapolis studio. Though Koskinen didn't know what events precipitated the request, he wasn't shocked, either.

"With friends, you'd rather have them call you and ask you for help than not," he says. "Everybody has their own shit. We're buddies for a reason; we help each other out."

While staying at Real Phonic Studios, Simonett says he was "writing like crazy. All of these songs came out." Over several months, he recorded what he thought would be the follow-up to Dead Man Winter's 2011 debut album, *Bright Lights*. He relied on heavy electric guitar, a lot of reverb, and a rotating cast of backing musicians on his first attempt at the new album.

"I was really scattered and the record was really scattered," he says. Feeling



SHELLY POSMAN

lost, Simonett backed off the project. He decided to escape the Twin Cities for a while.

"I didn't want to see anybody I knew," he says. "I didn't want people to say, 'I'm sorry, man.' Everybody that I know pretty much knew I was going through a divorce. But I didn't want to fucking talk about it."

While he says the Boundary Waters would have been the perfect place to get lost, he needed to be within commuting distance of Minneapolis so he could see his kids. He relocated to Red Wing in August 2014, a move that confounded the locals.

"The first question I'd get for the first five months I lived there was, 'Why'd you move to Red Wing?' Nobody could comprehend somebody coming there."

It took time for residents of the southeast Minnesota river town to warm to him, but by the end of his year-long tenure there, he knew people by name and had made new friends in nearby Winona.

In early 2016, Simonett decided to take another stab at a Dead Man Winter album. He retreated to a cabin in Finland, Minnesota — about an hour up Highway 61 from Duluth.

"My solace has always been the woods, generally, but specifically the North Shore," he says. "It's where I've gone to reset or work or whatever."

For five frigid days, he woke, snowshoed, took saunas, and recorded demos on a tape recorder, finding much-needed clarity and calm.

"Once in a while, you write songs about stuff that's uncomfortable, but it's like a pressure-release valve," he says. "It's got to come out."

For the second attempt at recording the album in the spring of 2016, Simonett booked Pachyderm Studios in Cannon Falls, the storied and freshly renovated space where Nirvana recorded their final studio album, 1993's *In Utero*. Simonett recruited guitarist Koskinen, drummer J.T. Bates, keyboardist Bryan Nichols, and

Dave Simonett says he feels most at home in the North Woods.

bassist Tim Saxhaug to play on the album.

"I know some people that don't like to work with friends, but I do, especially in that kind of situation," Simonett says. "We stayed at the studio. We were in this thing. I love them all dearly; they really helped me through a lot, personally and musically."

"He was deep in [the divorce] in the time we were recording," Saxhaug says. "Just listening to the lyrics, you could tell it was very much influenced by what was going on in his life. There was a lot about things ending, lives changing, things not being how they were. His whole life just drastically changed."

The arrangement of the album was a group effort; it was recorded live to tape, sans producer. Koskinen, who played with Simonett on both versions of the album, says playing live made all the difference the second time around.

"We couldn't go in and just re-record what we had already done," he says. "We kind of had to start over again."

Lyrics, tempos, and keys were all reworked. Acoustic guitar was added. Entire songs got switched out.

"It was honestly one of the fastest moving, most cooperative, creative arranging experiences that I've had," says Saxhaug, who's also a member of TBT. "We'd take a break for dinner and then go down and listen to what we had done, and we'd all be super pumped."

"That whole process felt so much healthier to me," Simonett concurs. "I went to a good place when I wrote music and I went to a beautiful studio and played the songs and that was like, 'Yeah, OK. That's an album. Sounds like an album. Feels like an album.' There was a lot less of the chaos and just a feeling of forcing something that shouldn't be happening."

"If there's a difference between the two



JEFF WHEELER/STAR TRIBUNE

versions, the second one is better because it's not over-done or over-thought," Koskinen adds. "We did good."

Simonett's goal was to make a record with a cohesive sonic landscape, a story with chapters. *Furnace* is certainly that. It's an album that grows on you, revealing another layer of depth with every listen. It's a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll, sometimes twangy, sometimes sparse. Though the lyrics are anguished throughout, and several songs are funeral-dirge somber, there are a few tunes that border, instrumentally, on boisterous.

"I don't know why it's G, C, and D, or whatever. That's just how it fit," says Simonett, who will celebrate the release of *Furnace* this Friday at First Avenue. "Sometimes, if the music matches the lyrics too well, it becomes one thing instead of dimensional. There's a lot of shit going on in there. It's not all just doom and gloom. There's a new start, too."

**THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG IN MY HEAD / I AM SPINNING / I NEVER GET OUT OF BED AND I'M SITTING ON / A HUNDRED SONGS I WROTE FOR YOU**

— "THE SAME TOWN"

Simonett was born in 1980 in Germany, where his army father was stationed. His family moved around a lot until settling in Mankato before he entered kindergarten. Around age 12, he visited — and fell in love with — Duluth.

"I still remember the first time I came over the hill on I-35 and saw the lake and the town," he recalls. "I still consider Lake Superior where I feel most at home."

Simonett enrolled in the University of Minnesota-Duluth, more for the chance to move up north than for the education. He spent one year there taking mostly

Simonett clowning backstage with his Trampled by Turtles bandmates in 2014

philosophy classes before withdrawing and immersing himself in the music scene.

Instrumentally inclined since he was a child, Simonett bought his first guitar, a "shitty" Yamaha, at age 17 from a friend.

"I loved it to death," he says. "Once I held it, that's all I wanted to do, for a living and otherwise. I knew it right then. I couldn't even think of another job."

Open mics and casually playing with other musicians in Duluth led to the formation of a band called Simple Junction around 2000. Then Simonett met mandolin player Erik Berry, who asked him if he wanted to do an acoustic project on the side. Simonett had always stuck to rock 'n' roll, but soon he was listening to bluegrass and learning old folk songs with Berry. The duo started playing shows together, and after a set at Fitger's Brew-house, Dave Carroll approached them and asked if they wanted a banjo in the band.

"Nobody played the banjo in Duluth," Simonett says. "It's way different now. You go to Duluth and there's just banjos lying all over the place."

Fiddle player Ryan Young and bassist Saxhaug also joined the group. Trampled By Turtles became official in 2003, but its members still considered it a side project. Even the band's name wasn't meant to endure; it was created on the fly for a show.

"We thought it was the only time we were going to use it," Simonett says. "Everything was very short-term."

As the members' other bands began to break up, however, they dedicated themselves primarily to TBT, and the group discovered its niche.

"It was very much artistically based," Simonett says of the early-'00s Duluth music scene, which already included notables like indie-rock greats Low and blues-folk vet Charlie Parr.

"Nobody was making any money. If you could charge a \$5 cover, you were really successful and people already hated you," Simonett remembers. "Everybody was doing it just purely for playing music. To look back at it, I'm so thankful for that, to have an environment where all of your credit is based on if people think you're interesting."

Over 14 years, TBT recorded eight albums, three of which hit No. 1 on Billboard's Bluegrass chart. The quintet played festivals like Bonnaroo, Coachella, and Lollapalooza, and sold out Colorado's legendary Red Rocks Amphitheater three years in a row. Two appearances on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and one on *Conan* further bolstered the band's devoted fan base.

But in the spring of 2016, Simonett asked his bandmates for a favor: time off to work on *Dead Man Winter*.

"In order for him to fully realize his creative vision, he needed absolute space from Turtles," Saxhaug recalls. "We decided that, yeah, we should be able to give it to him because we've gotten so much from his songs over the years."

The band didn't officially announce a hiatus, but last October that infamous *Furnace* press release went live and rumors began swirling. Ten days later, TBT tweeted, "Going away for a little

wasn't until around 2010 that he was able to give music his full-time attention, and even then, he wasn't "financially ready." Ultimately, he says, "If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. If it does, bonus. But I would have regretted not making the record."

**I'M FULL OF CHARM AND I'M FULL OF WHISKEY / AND I'M FULL OF SHIT, MOST OF THE TIME / WHEN I GO HOME, WILL YOU GO WITH ME / AND WILL YOU HOLD ME UP WHEN YOU SAY GOODBYE**

— "RED WING BLUE WING"

Simonett's divorce was finalized in the summer of 2016. One would assume that, unattached for the first time in his adult life, the acclaimed musician with devilish magnetism and rugged good looks would take full advantage of his newfound bachelorhood. But when asked about his status, he's tight-lipped and evasive.

*Are you enjoying being single?*  
"I don't know."

while. We love you all. Thanks for an amazing first chapter."

"That band gets busy as hell. To try to fit something in between Trampled albums is very daunting. I just didn't have time," Simonett explains. "I get tired of touring constantly unless there's a point to it. It's a good job and I like doing it, but creatively, if there's not something new to propel that, then I get bummed out or stir-crazy."

Though the band doesn't have a set comeback date, Simonett insists TBT isn't breaking up. Saxhaug seems optimistic that the break is not only temporary but beneficial: "I can't speak for anybody else in the band, but this time hopefully opens up our lives more, and when Turtles returns we'll be all the richer for it."

Pivoting, even temporarily, to *Dead Man Winter* is a risk for Simonett, but it's one he feels compelled to take.

"The challenge of getting my dream job has been: Can I make a project or can I do something that my fans aren't really going to like or get?" he asks. "But if I'm being artistically true, then that's what I need to make."

If he can't make ends meet through music, Simonett says he isn't afraid to return to the workforce; his employment history includes stints cooking in restaurants, building log homes, and roofing. It

*Yes, you do.*  
"Sometimes, sometimes not, you know?"  
*Have you been dating?*  
"Not really."  
*Sleeping around?*  
"I've just been single. I'll put it that way."  
*You are being way too Minnesota Nice right now.*

"I'm not trying to be nice. I'm just trying not to say I'm sleeping around in an interview with the City Pages."

*OK. Fine.*  
When he tips his bottle up to drain the last drops of beer, Simonett's eyes — slightly asymmetrical and a faded blue hue — glint mischievously. His gaze is wily. Disarming.

Finally, he expounds: It's too soon. He isn't rushing into anything. He doesn't want to shape his life around another adult. He's given up on the idea of soul mates and finds the concept of one partner per lifetime unnatural. He can't even fathom getting married again.

"Commitment doesn't get me very excited," he says. "I've always fought against domestic life. All of that stuff has never fit with me. It never did."

*And yet, you got married.*  
"I did. 'Cause I loved that girl, you know? You can feel two things that are opposites at the same time," he says. "I'm not claiming that I'm not a selfish bastard, 'cause I

am, but when you care about somebody, you try to compromise parts of yourself.”

If the self-examination of the past few years has taught him anything, it’s that he’s always been the lone wolf he is now — he just didn’t give himself permission to accept it before. “My natural state is to be alone,” he says.

Simonett knows he had it good. He knows he married a “cool-ass woman who was beautiful,” a woman he says he didn’t deserve, and that their relationship, even at the end, wasn’t of the throwing-plates variety. Sometimes, he wonders if he should have tried harder to salvage the relationship.

“But it just didn’t feel right to have any of it. I kind of didn’t want any of it,” he says of his marriage. “I try not to dwell on it too much now because it’s gone. Figuring out what’s next... I don’t know. My whole life is a little bit upside down.”

## *I AM NOT OKAY, WHAT ELSE CAN I SAY*

— “YOU ARE OUT OF CONTROL”

As with *Furnace*, which ends with an extended, tortured jam session, it would be disingenuous to conclude Simonett’s story on an uplifting note. Divorce — especially when children are involved — doesn’t work that way.

For now, he’s taking it day by day. When he’s not spending time with his six-year-old daughter and three-year-old son, you might find him skiing or ice fishing. He’s also putting out other people’s music on GNDWIRE Records, a label he started two years ago with Twin Cities music manager Mark Gehring. Thus far, the label’s releases include 2015’s *I’m Not Afraid* by John Mark Nelson and 2016’s *Impossible Dream* by Haley Bonar, both high-profile Minnesota artists. *Furnace* is the label’s third release.

“Another way to lose money in the music business is to start a record label,” Simonett jokes. “But I love it. That’s still a smaller project, but hopefully it grows. My whole goal in that was to be able to find people with music I really loved and put it out in a way that I was proud of.”

He’s also not opposed to getting the TBT gang back together to make another album.

“Hopefully a breather is all it needs,” he says. “Like any relationship, you take some time apart and see what happens.”

It is a courageous, if excruciating, act to take ownership of one’s life, just as it is to make brutally honest art out of personal pain. With *Furnace*, Simonett has done both. What was broken will be rebuilt. Spring will come, even for Dead Man Winter. And when it does, he just might write about it. As he teases:

“I’m going to try to make a super bubbly record next time.” 🍻