



## THE STEEL WOODS

**Wes Bayliss:** vocals, electric/acoustic/baritone guitars, piano, dobro, keys, harmonica

**Jason "Rowdy" Cope:** electric and acoustic guitars, bass guitar, piano, percussion

**Jay Tooke,** drums and percussion

**Johnny Stanton:** bass

*"The stories told in all these songs / Don't sound the same to everyone / Some you hear, and some you see / And all that means is whatever it means to me / Not all are real, but all are true / Cause all that means is whatever they mean to you"*

**"Whatever It Means To You"**

Like their name, The Steel Woods are a hybrid musical force, part hard-edged, part Americana roots country folk, man-made, yet organic, rock but also bluegrass, R&B, blues, gospel, soul and heavy metal, "the materials which America is built on" according to co-founder Wes Bayliss. The Nashville-based band is also steeped in the ethos of Southern rock, with the music on its debut Woods Music/Thirty Tigers release, *Straw in the Wind*, both timeless and indefinable, sounding like it could've been recorded at any point during the past half-century. "That's kinda the idea," nods Bayliss.

The Steel Woods trace an unbroken line from Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams through Willie and Waylon, then the Allmans, Blackfoot, The Band and Tom Petty up through contemporaries like Kings of Leon and the Avett Brothers.

"I grew up on Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Led Zeppelin," says Jason "Rowdy" Cope, who was born in Asheville, NC, in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he heard some pretty impressive pickers, which inspired him as a kid. "Our music is like good bluegrass, with the electric guitars turned up to 11," he says.

There is a biblical, hellfire-and-brimstone morality at work on songs like the good-and-evil parable, "Axe", the first song they ever wrote together -- which takes off on co-founder Rowdy's ominous, rumbling bluegrass guitar line -- or the galloping country rhythms of "Della Jane's Heart", a murder ballad about a spurned woman taking her revenge on a fickle lover, and immediately regrets her actions. "The Secret" goes back to the Garden and Adam's original heartbreak, equating the duplicitous Eve with the Devil himself. The musical melting pot ranges from the stark acoustic strumming of "Whatever It Means to You" and the thunderstruck drone of their speeded-up Black Sabbath cover, "Hole in the Sky".

The band's founders are two native sons of the south who both hail from small-town, Bible Belt backgrounds. The Alabama-born Bayliss played harmonica from the age of eight in his family's gospel band, eventually teaching himself piano, bass and drums. Rowdy turned his love of Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix into a career as a session guitarist/songwriter and producer, moving to Los Angeles then playing in Jamey Johnson's band for nine years. The two met in Nashville during a one-off gig, and immediately felt a connection. "We decided we were pretty much on the same page and wanted to do our own thing," says Wes. "We had an idea and a vision."

The pair spent a month fishing together, eventually bringing guitars along with their poles to the tiny hole and discovered an affinity. It was then they began to make music together. "It just worked, his voice and me doing my thing on guitar," says Rowdy.

The result was an EP, which, because they hadn't written anything together except for "Axe", included covers by hot Nashville writers like Rowdy's frequent collaborator singer/songwriter Brent Cobb ("Better in the Fall," "The Well," "If We Never Go", "Let the Rain Come Down") and revered artist Darrell Scott ("Uncle Lloyd").

With originals such as the acoustic ballad, "I'm Gonna Love You", the narrative title track, the philosophical "Whatever It Means to You" and the cathartic closer, "Let the Rain Come Down", the songwriting/production team of Bayliss and Cope is proving quite a formidable duo. The two, who co-produced their debut album, are committed to doing things their way.

"We're not murderers, we're just the messengers," says Bayliss about some of the songs' more gruesome scenarios. "We don't preach. We just want to play good songs with good stories. As long as they come back to hear us again, I'm happy."

"We're into this to heal people's hearts," explains Rowdy. "If you're given a talent that can shake plates in the earth, that can really change the world, you have a responsibility to use that for good. Music is the most powerful, emotion-driven art form in the universe because it transcends language. It's like a sharp blade. It can be used to kill, or in the hands of a surgeon, to heal someone."

The Steel Woods aren't in this for the money, the fame or the awards. For them, music is a matter of life and death, right and wrong, bad and good, with the sinners punished for their transgressions, and the noble achieving the kind of transcendence the man dying of thirst in "Let the Rain Come Down" receives.

"Everything has its price," says Rowdy. "You reap what you sow...We've poured so much into this band. I know how little sleep we've had, how many bad meals we've eaten. I just hope these songs can help people get things off their chest."

"We want to get good songs out to a bunch of people who need them," adds Wes. "We just want to make a living making music because it's the greatest job in the world. I don't mind working, but I prefer loving what I do."

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