

TRYING
TO
MAKE
IT
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ENOUGH

JAY FARRAR'S LIFE IN MUSIC

BY ERIC R. DANTON

SON VOLT

LEADER JAY FARRAR has never been a rock star. There are no private jets whisking him around the world, no stages piled high with Marshall stacks and pyro jets. Sometimes there's not even a full band backing the singer and songwriter when he plays live.

Farrar is a working musician, a lifer. He's logged hundreds of thousands of miles in tour vans over the past 30 years and sold countless t-shirts bearing his bands' logos. He's played gigs in plush theaters and dingy basements, all for the glory—such as it is—of a life making music.

He's made the most of it. This February brought *Notes of Blue*, Son Volt's eighth album and first since *Honky Tonk* in 2013. Much of the 10-song collection bears the influence of ancient bluesmen like Skip James and Mississippi Fred McDowell. Yet *Notes of Blue*, perhaps more than anything else Farrar has released, encapsulates his entire career so far. He plays fingerstyle and slide guitar here, sometimes accompanied only by drummer Jacob Edwards, which are new twists that sit alongside songs evoking the open-road philosophizing of his work on Son Volt's 1995 debut *Trace*, the rough-edged blues sound of "Barstow" from his 2001 solo album *Sebastopol*, or the dusty folk of his 2012 *New Multitudes* project.

"I was really interested in that convergence of where folk and blues meet," Farrar says of the new songs. "There's a lot of commonality there, and some of these songs take on traditional themes like hell and damnation and the possibility of redemption, and those are themes that resonated, so those are themes that I explored."

Notes of Blue is part of a discography that also includes four LPs with the influential alt-country band Uncle Tupelo, a handful of solo releases and collaborations with musicians including Death Cab for Cutie's Ben Gibbard on the Jack Kerouac-inspired album *One Fast Move or I'm Gone*, and Jim James, Anders Parker and Will Johnson on *New Multitudes*, a collection of previously unrecorded Woody Guthrie songs. All told, Farrar has released 20-something albums, depending on how you count, dodging and weaving his way through an industry that bears little resemblance to the way it looked when he got his start. "It's a lot different than it was in the '90s, for sure," he says, with characteristic understatement.

His latest comes at an interesting time for Farrar. Son Volt will support *Notes of Blue* with a lengthy full-band tour, after several years of Farrar playing shows in stripped-down configurations as an acoustic duo or trio. Even concert dates marking the 20th-anniversary reissue of *Trace*—often considered a seminal alt-country album—were billed as "Jay Farrar Performs Songs of Trace," rather than as Son Volt shows. "There's a variety of reasons that doing duo and trio shows work," Farrar says. "One of them is that there's more of a sonic distribution of duty" among instrumentalists when there are no drums onstage.

Pared-down bands are also cheaper to keep on the road. When former Fountains of Wayne singer Chris Collingwood did a string of dates opening for Squeeze last year with his Look Park solo project, he could only afford to tour as a trio, he told a crowd in Northampton, Mass., where he played a hometown show with a full band in October. Collingwood's management declined to arrange an interview for this story, but Jesse Malin, another music lifer, was happy to talk about the economics of making things work. Artists who are able to tour solo or with a smaller combo can have an advantage, Malin says.

"Sometimes you can't bring the whole live show and the symphonic gong and the string section and horns, so we try to keep the band as tight as possible," says Malin, who has opened in stripped-down configurations for acts including Green Day and Cheap Trick, and even done solo tours between records.

That's an important consideration when it seems harder than ever to make a living as a musician. Album sales have been declining for years, and for most artists, compensation from streaming music services hasn't made up the difference. "We have definitely always relied more on touring income," says Sharon Agnello, Farrar's manager. "We tend to look to label deals as a way to get the music out there. These deals have never been a significant source of income on the front end as the money received is almost exclusively used for the making of the record."

Though albums sales and streaming royalties bring in some income, it's not as much as it used to be. That reduction can be tricky: "Back-end" money can help sustain a musician between albums or tour cycles. "We make it work," Agnello says. "We have learned not to count on a specific amount of back-end money. As you know, whether Jay is on the road with a band or duo, he is always on the road."

Musicians have begun to think differently about touring than they used to, which can mean a willingness to branch out. Like Malin, Farrar has played a few house concerts. "It's not something that was really part of the lexicon back in the '90s," he says. "Everything is evolving. It is what you make of it, but most people I talk to say it's good, it's better, they're happy."

In some ways, it's an update of the DIY mindset that fueled bands that got their start as part of the '80s indie underground. There was no existing infrastructure in place for those kinds of acts to book shows or make records or even get written about in press, so they arranged their own gigs, recorded their own music and wrote homemade zines to cover their scenes. "We found there's always a way," says Malin, who came up in the Queens, N.Y., hardcore band Heart Attack in the early '80s, before fronting glam-punk band D Generation in the '90s and launching a solo career in the 2000s that has yielded eight albums since his 2002 debut, *The Fine Art of Self Destruction*.

Farrar's career began in the indie underground, too, when he formed Uncle Tupelo in 1986 with Jeff Tweedy and Mike Heidorn. After putting out three albums on a shoestring indie label, the Belleville, Illinois, group signed to a major, caught up in the wave of alt-rock enthusiasm that swept through the music industry in the early '90s. When the band broke up in 1994, Farrar formed Son Volt and continued on in a rootsy-rock vein shot through with nods to punk on three albums between 1995-98. He put Son Volt on hiatus to explore different shades of a folkier sound on a pair of solo albums before reviving the band with a new lineup in 2004.

Son Volt's albums since Farrar resurrected the group have been more sonically diverse than the first three. *Okeamah and the Melody of Riot* in 2005 was a full-throated rock record, for example, while *American Central Dust* in 2009 was a subdued, folky affair. Farrar explored the Bakersfield country sound of Buck Owens and Wynn Stewart on *Honky Tonk* in 2013, before turning to the blues for *Notes of Blue*. "I've done a few blues-inspired songs over the years, but this recording was a chance to expand on it," Farrar says. "In particular, I wanted to explore the tunings and guitar voicings of Skip James and Mississippi Fred McDowell, and it's a tribute to those guys and a chance to connect with icons and heroes."

The album grew out of two separate projects Farrar had been working on: a blues record, and also an album of Nick Drake-inspired folk songs. "I came to see there was a commonality with all of it," Farrar says. "Nick Drake, he was way into the blues, and that goes back to the impetus for this record: finding that commonality, finding bridges."

It's a telling description. Not only was Farrar looking for bridges between two styles of music he loves; he, like many veteran musicians, is searching for ways to connect the new



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music he’s proud of making with the older songs that draw fans to live shows. For him, that means making sure to play crowd favorites like “Windfall” or “Drown” from *Trace* while hoping the newer material wins over audiences, too.

“I’ve been to shows where you want to hear something, so as much as possible, I try to play those songs that people most want to hear, and I still ultimately get something out of it,” Farrar says. “If you went out as an artist and only did the songs you wanted to do, that’s great, that’s your artistic prerogative, but people might not show up.”

People will show up if they know you’re putting a lot of thought into what songs to perform, says Malin, who released a pair of solo albums in 2015 and reunited with D Generation for the 2016 LP *Nothing Is Anywhere*. A growing number of artists have found success in recent years doing full albums in concert, and even Bruce Springsteen spent part of last year performing his 1980 double-LP *The River* in its entirety on tour. “I’ve done my first record *The Fine Art of Self Destruction* in three or four cities, and that always sells out and we can charge more,” Malin says.

Farrar often throws in unexpected covers—reggae singer Willi Williams’ “Armageddon Time” featured on a Son Volt tour in 2005, for example—and sometimes dusts off deep cuts from the Uncle Tupelo catalog. “There’s a tendency to want to mix things up,” says Farrar, who will also be playing electric guitar again for the first time in years. “On this tour, we’ll be pulling out songs I haven’t played in years, because it’s the right context and right opportunity to do it.”

Whether taking a full band on the road will pay for itself is still an open question. “We’re about to find out,” Farrar says, laughing. “There’s no other way at this point but to try, to get out there and do it.”

That’s Malin’s philosophy, too. In addition to thinking carefully about the music he wants to play live, he tries to make sure the merch table is stocked with more than just T-shirts. Having vinyl helps, Malin says, especially anniversary editions of albums, and he’ll often press a limited-edition single or EP that’s available only at tour stops. “You have to be really creative with merch, from condoms to coffins to cannolis, whatever,” he says. “The Gene Simmons method.”

Farrar hasn’t gone quite that far with merchandise for *Notes of Blue*, but pre-orders for the album were available as part of bundles that included T-shirts, autographed CDs or vinyl, digital bonus tracks, tour posters and even autographed, mounted photos Farrar has shot while on tour. “It’s something that’s unique and unusual,” he says.

Even if touring with Son Volt doesn’t end up proving as financially remunerative as Farrar would like, he says that ultimately, going on the road to play songs for whoever wants to listen is simply what he does. “There’s an aspect where it’s also like your craft, your job, and you’re checking in, you’re doing it day in, day out, just like guys like Woody Guthrie used to do,” he says.

That’s not just a pose, either. Though fame and riches have proven elusive, that suits Farrar well enough. His work with Uncle Tupelo and early Son Volt have made him an influential, if retiring, figure in certain music circles. He’s not much interested in the trappings of rock stardom, preferring to travel in a van instead of a tour bus, for example. What’s perhaps most important to Farrar is having the freedom to follow his creative muse, and while he finds it gratifying when listeners embrace his music, he’s writing songs because it’s something he feels compelled to do.

“I know a lot of people approach it like they want to be really successful and make lots of money and everything,” he told me in 2007. “For me, I can almost see that being an impairment to the greater process, because there are a lot more expectations and distractions that go along with that. I’m happy just to have a creative outlet.” □