

SKIN DEEP

The Steel Woods make (legit) Southern rock safe for Nashville

NOW THAT Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson have rendered outlaw country palatable for indie hipsters and CMT viewers alike, perhaps life will be a bit easier for an unwieldy upstart outfit like the Steel Woods. Gritty in their execution but not averse to a little studio refinement, the Nashville quartet may just be OC's most authentic answer to Lynyrd Skynyrd—Southern-rocking old souls with enough savvy to take what they need from Music City machinery and escape relatively unscathed.

"I feel at home in Nashville," says band co-founder Wes Bayliss. "There are all types of people and all types of music. It's become a real mixed bag."

The Steel Woods' strikingly accomplished debut, *Straw In The Wind* (Woods Music/Thirty Tigers), manages to sound utterly current

and defiantly retro at the same time. Credit the Alabama-born Bayliss and Asheville, N.C., native Jason "Rowdy" Cope's classic songwriting acclivities and salt-of-the-earth narratives, and the beefy, nuanced sound they concocted as co-producers. "We just started thinking about our heroes," says Cope. "I love AC/DC, but I also love Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. You want big guitars, but you want beautiful acoustic guitars, too—and John Bonham drums."

Bayliss was in grade school when he started playing harmonica in his family's gospel group. From there, he moved on to piano, bass and drums. Two years ago, he ran into Cope—an accomplished songwriter, producer and guitarist—at a gig in Nashville, and the two initially bonded over a shared love of fishing. "I wish there was a great, interesting

story, but we really just had a lot of mutual musician friends," says Bayliss.

Save for a few covers—including a taut rendition of Black Sabbath's "Hole In The Sky"—*Straw In The Wind* is an impressive collection of originals that documents the first gasp of a creative partnership with some serious staying power. Given the album's fixation on keeping the faith despite the reality that everything that can go wrong will go wrong, it's obvious that Bayliss and Cope's narrative sensibilities were shaped by their Bible Belt upbringings and a genuine empathy for those weathering the life-altering consequences of their own mistakes. "Forgiveness, redemption, justice—they're all the things you go through in life," says Cope. "It's stuff everyone can relate to." —Hobart Rowland



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

with **JASON "ROWDY" COPE**

01 THE FANS

"It's amazing to look out and see people singing along to our songs now. It's recharging to our sense of purpose and validation for us as musicians and songwriters."

02 MY GRANDFATHER

"He's 100 years old and has truly lived a happy life by finding blessings in small moments and simple things—and he always has a joke to tell."

03 CRUSADE IN EUROPE BY DWIGHT EISENHOWER

"My grandfather gave it to me. It's a powerful memoir of a man who truly, for a time, had the weight of the world on his shoulders."