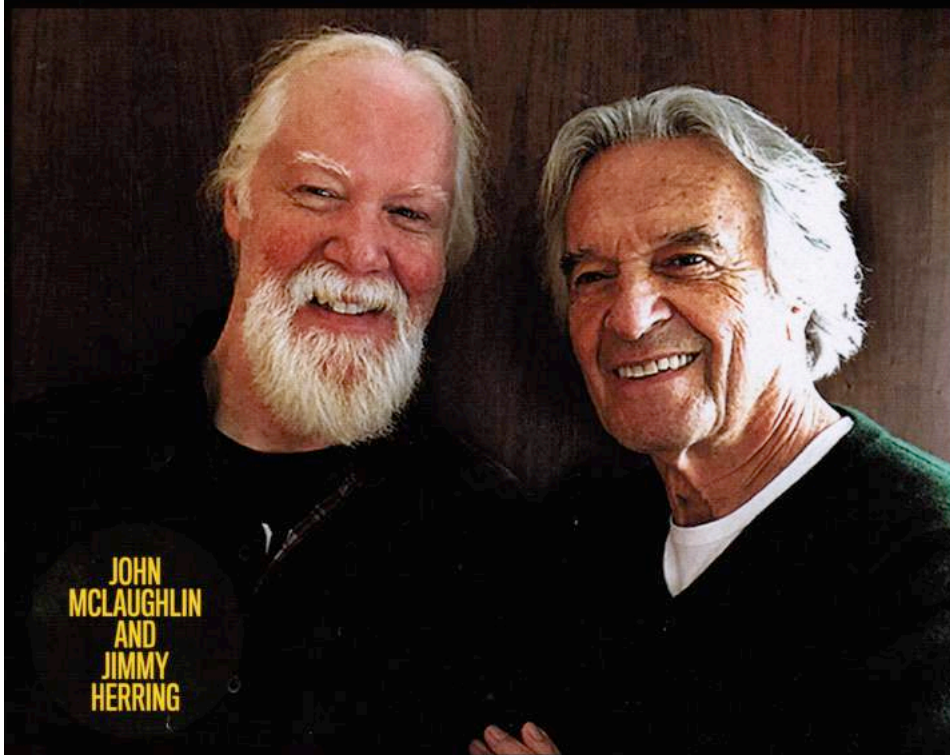


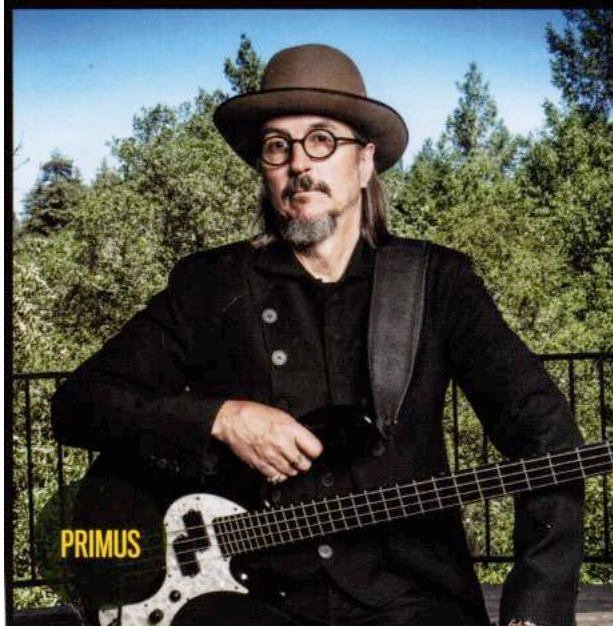
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Laura Pertain

Older, wiser, better dressed:
Ian O'Neil, Dennis Ryan, John McCauley,
Christopher Ryan (l-r)

A DOUBLE SHOT OF

DEER TICK

The quartet once known as Rhode Island's rowdiest Americana act returns with two volumes in two volumes: acoustic and electric. **By JEWELY HIGHT**



IT'S SAFE TO SAY that Deer Tick has never been accused of slickness. If anything, the band's reputation has run in the opposite direction. There was a time when the members projected an indie-rock-style disregard for polish and professionalism and received as much attention for their benders and exploits as they did for their music making. "Deer Tick is pretty much a band about alcohol," declared a 2012 *Vice* story, in which the author spent the interview shotgunning beers with frontman John McCauley.

While the live shows always felt spontaneous, they could occasionally be downright slovenly. "People may have thought their time was wasted, that we

were doing it on purpose and that we were trying to antagonize the audience," McCauley acknowledges now. "Our intentions were never malicious. Maybe somebody accidentally had too good of a time."

The good times that McCauley, guitarist Ian O'Neil, drummer Dennis Ryan and bassist Christopher Ryan shared were central to the chemistry between them. They all oozed youthful stamina, mischievous senses of humor and few inhibitions; but beneath all of the debauchery was an interest in musical forms that required greater finesse.

On Deer Tick's 2007 debut, *War Elephant*, McCauley covered "What Kind of Fool Am I?," a suave, self-scrutinizing pop standard that he'd picked up from the repertoire of Rat Pack member Sammy Davis Jr. McCauley's take on the tune had an

overripe quality. Sickly sweet strings billowed around his serrated vocal timbre over a cockeyed drum pattern. And he made a show of straining for the big finish.

Fans assumed that he must be making a mockery of Davis' crooning. "[F]reaking brilliant, hilarious, tragic, over-the-top, true-to-life rendition of this classic," crowed one YouTube commenter. "I would so clap in a cheesy way after they play[ed] this song at a show," another concurred.

The way McCauley played the song live reinforced the impression. In a bit of cell phone footage uploaded to the internet half a decade ago, he can be seen edgily pacing the stage, taking a huge gulp from a beer bottle, veering into a froggy caricature of a jazz singer and knocking himself in the forehead with his microphone. "I always felt like maybe any shortcomings I might have as a singer, I could always make up for it with antics or theatrics or something," he reflects.

There's no such hedging on Deer Tick's satisfying, new double album, simply titled *Deer Tick Vol. 1* and *Deer Tick Vol. 2*. This time, McCauley and his cohorts were ready to be more deliberate about their craft, refine wide-ranging impulses and start exploring the artistic possibilities of a more adult outlook.

MCCAULEY SIPS A PINT OF BEER in Dee's Country Cocktail Lounge, a dive bar just outside of East Nashville, the gentrifying, bohemian area where he lives with his wife, singer-songwriter Vanessa Carlton, and their toddler daughter Sidney. He's been here plenty of times, he says—clad in a Hawaiian-print button-down and jeans, hair neatly combed back—just "never before the sun goes down." He and Carlton may be parents now, but they still keep musicians' hours. "This has gotta be highly unusual," he wagers. "We have babysitters come in the morning instead of at night."

He glances over at the happy-hour entertainment, an acoustic duo ambling through a Guy Clark cover. In a low-key, neighborhood joint like this, McCauley could easily commandeer the mic for a song or two if he were so inclined—in Nashville, a city awash in brand-name musical talent, it's not that uncommon to see performers invite their artist buddies onstage—but he dismisses the idea offhand. "Uh, no. I truly believe that I do not have the chops to sit in with anybody—anytime I sit in with somebody, I embarrass myself," he says. Such self-deprecation is a reflex for McCauley. He neglects to mention the exclusive 2014 shindig where, at Dave Grohl's invitation, he sang a couple of songs with the surviving members of Nirvana, following their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

McCauley spent his teenage years absorbing Providence, R.I.'s noise-rock scene, so developing his instrumental and vocal chops wasn't his highest priority. Even after he discovered the heart-dragging honky-tonk of Hank Williams and nimble, nutty wit of country songwriter Roger Miller, McCauley valued personality over precision.

In the early days of Deer Tick, he recruited friends who could help him execute alt-country scruffiness and, when nobody was available to accompany him, he simply flew solo. But playing alone wasn't as fun. After covering many of the parts on *War Elephant* himself, he enlisted fresh-out-of-college Christopher Ryan and persuaded his half-brother Dennis Ryan to drop out and hit the road too. "I was really bad at going to class," Dennis clarifies on the phone.

Within a couple of years, O'Neil had joined them, having left behind his gig with the adrenalized punk outfit Titus Andronicus. In those days, O'Neil reflects on the phone, Deer Tick seemed to swerve between extremes. Anyone who'd heard *The Black Dirt Sessions*, his first album with the more permanent group,

"expected [us] to just be a folk band," he explains. But they barely drew from its track list at all when they toured to promote it. "We just kind of threw ourselves into a very rock-and-roll period in our music, and our lives," he says.

The result was 2011's *Divine Providence*, a ruckus of an album, featuring newly added keyboardist Rob Crowell, further enlarging the band's audience.

It was mildly shocking to hear the members give interviews describing the modest pop aspirations that shaped *Negativity*, the full-length that followed. They spoke, rather sheepishly, of their decision to bring in a producer, Los Lobos' Steve Berlin, who put them through their paces, pushing them to tighten their song structures and insert bridges here and there.

People interpreted that slight uptick in seriousness as a sign that McCauley and his cohorts were dialing back the debauchery, but he's quick to point out that he was still "partying like an asshole."

AT THE END OF 2014, DEER

Tick marked their 10th anniversary with six shows at New York's Brooklyn Bowl, covering different classic albums—including Lou Reed's *Transformer*, Elvis Costello's *My Aim Is True* and their own *War Elephant*—as well as an array of cross-genre favorites. Stevie Nicks, who officiated McCauley's wedding, even sat in on New Year's Eve. Though the band's definitive lineup wasn't yet a decade old, it had been intact long enough for the members to arrive at an identity crisis of sorts. They tried to record an album that isolated the folky and rowdy sides of their sound—the template they'd eventually follow on *Vols. 1* and *2*—but grew frustrated and shelved the effort.

McCauley's doubt about the band's future weighed heavily on him. "There was a period of time," he confesses, "when I thought about picking up the

phone every day and calling everybody and being like, 'Yeah, I don't want to do this anymore.'"

His bandmates contented themselves with tinkering on side projects. Dennis Ryan teamed with Two Gallants' Tyson Vogel in the deliberately misspelled La Mazz; partnered with Crowell and producer Adam Landry in a trio called Vincent Van Gold; and worked with Christopher Ryan, O'Neil and Ravi Shavi frontman Rafay Rashid in the band Happiness. Dennis and O'Neil basically became studio rats, perfecting their techniques in the process. "Ian and I were getting together basically every day and recording something and writing something," recalls Dennis.

As McCauley adjusted to new domestic realities, sometimes playing stay-at-home-dad to Sidney while Carlton toured, he also casually added to his toolkit. He fooled around with different guitar tunings. His keyboard skills improved drastically once his piano teacher mother-in-law taught him proper hand placement. And after scouring his record collection for music that he and his daughter could both enjoy, he landed on The Pogues. "One thing leads to another," he says. "I have an Irish bouzouki and a mandolin in the house, and an accordion, and I'm trying to learn all of them at once."

Upon reconvening for one of Deer Tick's famous Newport Folk Fest after-parties and an acoustic tour, the members, who'd settled into more stable relationships and temperate patterns during their time apart, experienced a renewed sense of camaraderie. "It took John being able to handle being out and playing, and not ruining our bodies or anything like we used to in our early twenties," O'Neil offers. "When he saw that everyone was onboard with making it a sustainable lifestyle, it probably invigorated him to write new music, too."

The band booked Memphis's Ardent Studios, partly because of the array of



Deer Tick interpret
Lou Reed's *Transformer*,
Brooklyn Bowl, Brooklyn,
NY 12/27/14

gear advertised on its website and partly because it was where The Replacements recorded their canonical LP *Pleased to Meet Me*. The facility happened to be running a half-off special in honor of its 50th anniversary, which came in handy considering that Deer Tick was recording two albums at once.

McCauley, O'Neil, the Ryan bothers and Crowell, who's since departed the band, agreed to abide by certain guidelines throughout the proceedings. Neither O'Neil nor McCauley would play a lick of electric guitar on the acoustic album, *Vol. 1*, and their bandmates would adjust accordingly, utilizing upright and hollow-body bass and coaxing softened textures from the drum kit with brushes and mallets. They would fashion the electrified *Vol. 2* into an outlet for their jagged intensity.

With their history of unruliness, the idea of imposing rules on themselves held real appeal. "I don't know if it's a getting older thing," Dennis muses, "but you start to really be like, 'Man, rules are awesome.' I feel like parameters can make things interesting because then you're not left to this world of endless choices."

Deer Tick being Deer Tick, the band packaged the contrasting musical modes in a way that feels impishly dumbered-down, slapping a

still life of a ketchup bottle and mustard jar—the world's most basic and complementary condiments—on the cover of each album. (One is surrounded by a red picture frame; the other, yellow.) "I mean, our press release says, like, 'quiet and loud,' which is kind of a joke," notes McCauley. "But yeah, there's definitely a little more to it."

"With all of our disparate influences, I feel like we can do anything," ventures Christopher. "We don't really have any limitations on how a song could turn out, beyond our own aesthetics, where one person would be like, 'No, I think that sounds stupid' or 'I think that sounds pretentious.'"

The precise arrangements on *Vol. 1* incorporate flavors and grooves that seldom appear in the rest of band's body of work: the springy calypso-style syncopation of "Doomed From the Start;" a drolly spare take on jazzy piano balladry in "Cocktail;" a pristine palette of fingerpicking and delicate piano accents that lands on the folky side of adult contemporary in "Limp Right Back."

Some of the rowdiest cuts on *Vol. 2* are also some of the most vigorously tuneful, like "Jumpstarting," a woolly alt-rock song written and sung by McCauley; the galloping power-pop number "Tiny Fortunes," penned and performed by O'Neil; and the

"There was a period of time when I thought about picking up the phone every day and calling everybody and being like, 'Yeah, I don't want to do this anymore.'"

JOHN MCCAULEY

blistering boogie "Mr. Nothing Gets Worse," a collaboration between the two of them and Dennis, the band's other songwriter.

The least expected inclusion is "Pulse," McCauley's instrumental response to the 2016 massacre at a queer nightclub in Orlando. It sounds like melancholy lounge jazz set to a lumbering beat. "I didn't feel up to the challenge of writing lyrics to it," says McCauley, "because I didn't want to risk screwing it up."

He was also more conscious of how he sang from track to track and album to album. Having sought treatment for a polyp on his vocal cord, he could whip out tricks for the acoustic material, "things like warm-ups and trying to make round shapes with my mouth," he says. The way he delivers "Cocktail," for instance, summoning exaggerated wistfulness and inserting affable nudges into his phrasing, is his version of crooning. But to give the other amped-up album the harsh, needling, attack vocal he's long been known for, McCauley's vocal exercises consisted of doing whiskey shots and puffing on cigarettes.

Lyrically, he and O'Neil tackle sobriety themes in the wryest of ways, digging at the media's insatiable appetite for recovery narratives. But McCauley, O'Neil and Dennis Ryan have also figured out how

to inject tentative optimism into their portraits of human untrustworthiness. Perhaps that's a side effect of the band members taking stock of how their musical output aligns with where they are in their lives.

The big question they had to confront, says Christopher Ryan—who recently became the last member of Deer Tick to get hitched—was, "How do we take our lives more seriously? How do we make this vocation that we've all chosen more sustainable for our bodies, for our lives and for our families?"

Their answer? "It's just being smarter about it, trying to be more professional about it, while still struggling as hard as you can to never sacrifice the spunk that is rock-and-roll."

Believe it or not, Deer Tick even made the showbiz move of adopting a dress code. "We thought, 'Hey, we've been around for a while,'" says McCauley. "Maybe it's time that we ban a few articles of clothing from the stage, now that we're all adults. How about no more pajamas, no more sweatpants or sweatshirt, no more T-shirts?"

They certainly looked put together when they played a storied bluegrass dive in downtown Nashville during AMERICANAFEST in mid-September. Dennis Ryan, who used to be quite a schlump on the fashion front, was dressed in a custom-made, iridescent tribal-print tunic and harem pants. "What do you think of Dennis' clothes?" O'Neil prompted the crowd.

The band playfully flaunted a mastery of dynamics, ending "Me and My Man," a goofy number that Dennis wrote from point of view of his dog, with a measured decrescendo. As the last note evaporated, McCauley bounced on the balls of his feet, toy guitar in hand, and flashed a gratified grin.

He has reason to feel good about Deer Tick 2.0. "Maybe we don't run around as much or get hurt as frequently onstage," he allows, "but we still put on a show." **D**