



Jason Boland & The Stragglers – *Hard Times are Relative*

Our favorite songs are like one-night stands: passionate or sad, capable of recalling moments with Proustian power. Our favorite artists are lifelong companions: fixtures we turn to for comfort and highs.

Over the last two decades, Jason Boland and the Stragglers have delivered and become both.

“We’ve always just wanted to entertain ourselves and put out music that would be a part of people’s lives, not just something passing to them,” says Boland. “We want to be something more monolithic.” He pauses and grins as he adds, “We’re just a social experiment at this point.”

Boland is talking about the deep body of work he’s created with his band of jangly honky-tonk aces, the Stragglers—Grant Tracy on bass; drummer and background vocalist Brad Rice; Nick Worley on fiddle, mandolin, and harmonies; and Cody Angel on guitar and pedal steel. Fronted and co-founded by Boland with Tracy and Rice, the band has featured only a handful of other members over the last 20 years, all of whom—whether they’re currently Stragglers or not—are like brothers. As they’ve independently sold more than half a million albums, the outfit has packed iconic dancehalls, theaters, and other big rooms across the country.

With their new record *Hard Times are Relative*, Boland and the Stragglers stack the smart, road-ready outlaw country longtime fans have come to expect alongside creative risks that flirt with punk and psychedelic sounds. The 10-song collection is a rare blend of instantly gratifying and rewarding of closer listens—a definitively Stragglers accomplishment. “It’s an upbeat album—a lot of fast songs, but it doesn’t try to be fast,” Boland says with characteristic insight. “It just sits in the pocket.”

No one has combined Woody Guthrie’s conscience with Waylon Jennings’s panache quite like Boland and the Stragglers. Since debuting in 1999 with the Lloyd Maines-produced *Pearl Snaps*, the band has matured without taming their refreshing irreverence. “We always joke that we try to take as much as we can from Lloyd and apply it to producing our own records,” Boland says. “We’ve worked with him so many times. The most obvious thing he taught us is: just be musical. Don’t hammer through the songs like a garage band all the time.”

That mix of subtle musical sophistication and unruly Oklahoma junkyard pedigree has resulted in some of the best independent honky tonk in recent memory. “You just have to be where you are—keep plugging away and doing the best you can at any moment,” Boland says, reflecting on their career thus far. “For a bunch of slackers [like us], that’s not too terribly tough.”

Co-produced by the Stragglers, David Percefull, and Adam Odor, *Hard Times are Relative* is the band’s ninth studio record. All songs were recorded live to tape and without the use of any computers—now a Stragglers’ hallmark. Upbeat steel guitar kicks off album opener “I Don’t Deserve You” before Boland’s signature baritone thunders in, smooth and stronger than ever. When fellow sly honky-tonk champ Sunny Sweeney joins him in out-front harmonies, the two become the rootsy dream team you never knew you always wanted.

The album's title track is a masterpiece: an epic story song about a young orphaned brother and sister depending on the land and one another. Rich details layered over strings paint a scene that's compelling and lush. The song has become one of Boland's favorites. "Folk music is hard to write. Country music is hard to write," he says, reflecting on the difficulty of spinning a long tale while keeping it simple and engaging. "When you hit your own little tuning fork in your head, that one is a hard sell, even to me. But I enjoy that song."

"Right Where I Began" sounds like vintage Stragglers: clever wordplay and muscly guitars ready for two-steppers. Fiddle and vocal showcase "Searching for You" shows off Rice's and Worley's harmonies that are downright divine. Crunchy guitars drive "Dee Dee OD'd" as Boland offers another round of wry observations. Easy gem "Going Going Gone" makes a solid argument for fiddle in rock-and-roll as Boland deftly turns a baseball metaphor into a classic leaving song.

Gorgeous waltz "Do You Remember When" bemoans some of modern life's emphasis on disposability and the dismissal of heritage. Rollicking "Tattoo of a Bruise" picks up the same idea, and is tongue-in-cheek country doo-wop, fueled by fiddle, steel, and drums. "I'm not judging anybody," Boland clarifies. "Our music has always called it like we see it, right or wrong, smarter or dumber."

Praise for the past but acknowledgement of nostalgia's limitations is a career-long theme for Boland, and one that this record continues to carry. "We don't want to lose the chili recipes and the Schroeder Halls because people are moving on to faster, louder, and newer," he says. "But instead of just hemming and hawing, remembering what's old and gone, we want to have new experiences within those frameworks—make memories with what's left of the good stuff."

With lines like "Empty pockets don't mean you need money / It's just another place to put your hands / And focus on that rock you've been kicking / One day it's going to be a grain of sand," "Predestined" challenges listeners as it soothes. The song is a lyrical victory for Boland, who's long-since become a master of distilling heady ideas into digestible nuggets.

Penned by Oklahoma music godfather Randy Crouch, "Grandfather's Theme" serves as the album's climactic closer. Attacked with psychedelic ferocity by the band, the song picks up the record's recurring concepts of the ground's insistence on shifting, inevitability, and our complex relationship with the past. Stripped down as Boland sings, the song soars off into a trippy, robust jam-band send-off—a serious triumph especially considering it's a defiantly analog recording. "We're fighting the digital world because they can make it so huge," Boland says, discussing the balancing act of filling out songs while letting them breathe. "I'm really proud if what we did."

As he mulls over where the Stragglers have been and where they're headed, Boland comes back to one idea over and over again: he and his band are who they are, and with that genuineness comes grit, beauty, and staying power. "We're fortunate that we're not trying to fool anybody," he says. "That's what it comes down to. We're all loners but somehow a team. Now that I can look at it all, I can see: it's been fun."

Here's to the next 20 years.

**For press information on Jason Boland & The Stragglers, please contact
Michelle Steele michelle@alleyesmedia.com or Jim Flammia
jim@alleyesmedia.com at All Eyes Media (615) 227-2770**