

Review: Trampled By Turtles is back with evocative new album

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Trampled By Turtles, “Life is Good on the Open Road” (Thirty Tigers)

One of the first questions you have to answer with Trampled By Turtles is what they are: A quirky bluegrass band with rock and punk influences? A rock band that shapes its anthems with fiddles and mandolins?

But let’s table that for a moment and start here: the sextet from Minnesota creates first-rate, heartfelt songcraft. They’re at it again on “Life is Good on the Open Road,” the band’s first album in four years.

Lead singer Dave Simonett sets the songwriting foundation. He’s back with the band after a detour for a wonderful 2016 solo project under the name Dead Man Winter. That led to an unabashed breakup album, and at times this sounds like a sequel.

Simonett is still processing on somber ballads like “We All Get Lonely” and “Thank You, John Steinbeck.” The band’s ability to make a fiddle, a mandolin or even a banjo sound mournful elevates the wistful effect.

The mood is interrupted briefly by a primal scream of a song called “Blood in the Water,” which seems more angry than cathartic. The thrashing seems misplaced on an otherwise thoughtful album, but soon it’s back to the more carefully considered work the band does best.

As for the labeling dilemma, sure, Trampled By Turtles works the turf between rock, bluegrass and other influences. But maybe the only pigeonholing they need is this: They are American originals, still exploring and still delivering moody, evocative music.