



POLLSTAR

Building an Unbreakable Career
The Steel Woods

INSIDE

The First Super Bowl Music Fest
New Year's At The Boxoffice
Vans' Music Strategy Post-Warped
Q's With HARD's Meagan DesChenes
The Gov't Shutdown And The Arts

Hotstar: The Steel Woods Build A Career Show By Show

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Photo: Samuel Crabtree

Hey, do you like Lynyrd Skynyrd? Do you like Waylon Jennings? OK, then you might like this.”

In the early days of [The Steel Woods](#), without the support of a major label or management company, band members and manager Derek Stanley of Woods Music would drive to the many construction sites throughout Nashville and offer workers free copies of their demo. The visits became so frequent, many of the construction workers began to recognize Stanley and greeted him whenever he stopped by.

Carrying on the torch of the Allman Brothers Band and Skynyrd while standing alongside contemporaries like [Whiskey Myers](#) and [Blackberry Smoke](#), The Steel Woods started with the absolute leanest of crews several years ago, and along the way made believers out of listeners. It’s been a long journey to where they are at now, opening for the likes of [Skynyrd](#), [Miranda Lambert](#), [Cody Jinks](#), and [Blackberry Smoke](#), and selling out two nights at Nashville’s 3rd and Lindsley, but everyone seems to be in agreement that there is much more room for The Steel Woods’ star to grow.

The story of the band began with conversations between guitarist Jason “Rowdy” Cope and eventual manager Stanley, who was working for an Ohio-based steel company in 2015. The two were already close friends; Cope had been playing with Jamey Johnson’s band for 10 years and was ready to write and create his own music, and he wanted Stanley, who had worked at Sanctuary Artist Management under Carl Stubner, to head up the project’s business affairs. Stanley was receptive to the idea, but needed to hear some music first.

With that idea, one night Cope went to perform at a tribute show for the late Wayne Mills and was impressed by the vocals of another artist on the docket, Wes Bayliss. Appreciating Bayliss’s abilities, Cope invited him to join him at Guitarmageddon at The Wanted Saloon II in Nashville, where they tag-teamed a version of the Allman Brothers Band’s “Whipping Post.”

Before they started working together in earnest, Cope invited Bayliss out on fishing trips for several months and built a solid friendship, because, as he put it: “If you do something like this, you’re stuck with these people for however long. ... From my experience, being out with Jamey, you have to be family for the band to survive.” Cope did call Stanley though, saying, “I think I’ve found a singer; I think I’ve found someone I can make music with.” Their soon-to-be manager fronted them money for studio time, and the duo wrote and played the instruments for nine tracks, seven of which ended up making the cut on the band’s debut album, *Straw in the Wind*.

Once Stanley heard those songs, he decided to quit his job and move to Nashville to begin building the label/management company that is Woods Music.

The only financial resources really available at the beginning was what was in their bank account, so the first years were as grassroots as it gets: passing out music at construction sites and gun shows, inviting any and all to their shows, and hitting the road with no roadies or production teams.

Stanley acknowledged there were a lot of losses in the first year, but the guys trusted him completely to handle the business and he trusted them completely to handle the music. And doors continued to open. In 2016, the group secured an opening slot for Blackberry Smoke and was in the position to get some serious exposure.

Emblematic of those early days was the Ford E-450 “church runner” bus Stanley and the band purchased a week before the Blackberry Smoke gigs began.

“The bus, I think, was my idea,” Bayliss told *Pollstar*, laughing. “I don’t know why I say that now, because we all hate the bus. I thought we should get something big enough to convert and live in. We didn’t need a bathroom, we could just hire a driver and tour in this 26-foot church bus.

“In five days we gutted everything out, cleaned it up, put in hardwood floors, built bunks, ordered mattresses, built a lounge, added a corrugated metal ceiling, LED lights ... I was really pleased with how it turned out after five days of work [immediately before the tour].”

“My idea was to get a 7.4 diesel engine vehicle, because those are tanks that [I thought] are gonna run forever. That turned out to be false. It was not a tank and it did not run forever. It was always a problem.”

Everyone *Pollstar* spoke to laughed, reminiscing how the bus would frequently break down, forcing the band members to dive under the hood. And yet, the guys always did find a way, as they proudly proclaimed they had never missed a gig, albeit they sometimes showed up with virtually zero downtime between their setup and performance.

Those early performances saw the guys loading their gear, setting it up, sound checking it, performing, and then re-loading it, with Stanley playing the role of tour manager, merch guy, and whatever else they needed. The only other person on those initial tours was the driver.

“We’re a very blue-collar band,” Stanley explained to *Pollstar*. “We decided we’ll just figure it out. Whatever we needed to do, we were gonna do it. I think it takes that kind of blind faith if you’re gonna do your own thing.”

From quitting his job, to bankrolling the whole endeavor with his personal funds, to spending countless sleepless nights on the plethora of challenges aspiring bands face, the manner in which Stanley went completely all-in on the band has more than proven his commitment to the guys, and Cope cited the thousands and thousands of CD packets his manager manually assembled as an example of why “They’ll be writing books about him someday.”

“He is as ‘in the band,’ as anyone can be without playing an instrument.”

While the story of The Steel Woods is largely one of commitment, relationships and hard work, the fruit of those endeavors is music that continues to draw more and more interest in Nashville and beyond. Now the band, which includes Jay Tooke and Johnny Stanton, is able to afford more crew to help with the tours, CAA is booking them and they can actually plan vacations. Existing markets are strengthening and new markets are opening, as some good-sized opening slots and possibly a solo European tour may be on the horizon.

“It’s a whole different ballgame now,” Stanley said. “We’ve got a real solid foundation. There was buzz before, but it’s a lot different when you’ve got 300 shows under your belt. ... We’ve got our publicist, CAA [Brad Bissell in North America, David Ball worldwide] is on board 100 percent. Everything is really starting to click for us. It’s only been three years that we’ve been hitting this thing this hard. I’m really excited with the progress and the life we’ve made.”

Reports submitted to *Pollstar* for The Steel Woods include

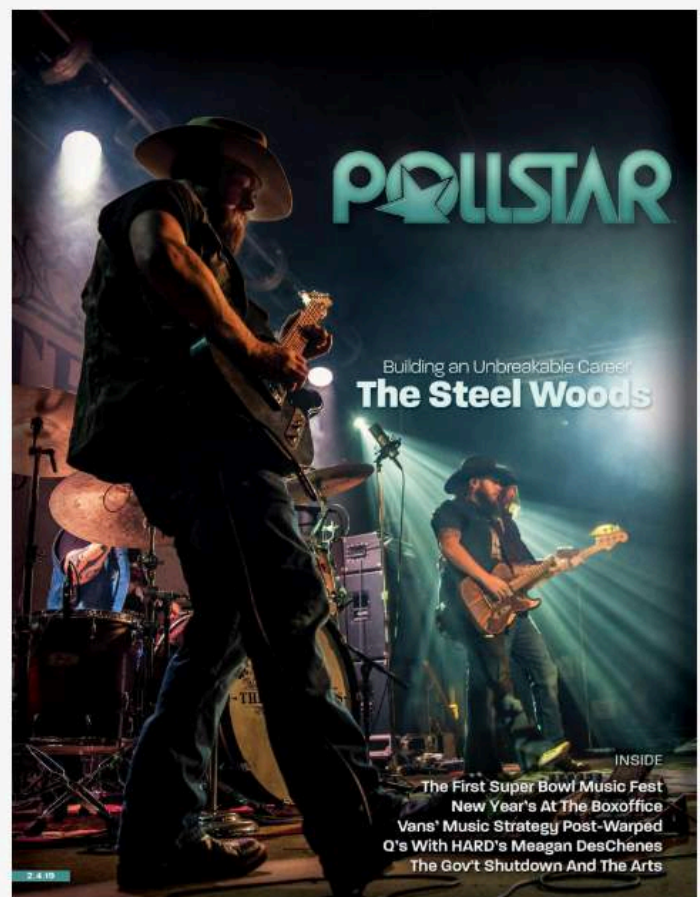


Photo:

The Steel Woods -

opening gigs for Cody Jinks, Miranda Lambert, Dwight Yoakam, Blackberry Smoke, and Hank Williams Jr., many of which have gotten them onstage in front of thousands.

"The feedback and the support we've gotten from everybody is somewhat overwhelming," Bayliss said. "[These artists] don't have to be nice to us or do any of this stuff. Anybody that has said 'Yeah, you should be support at these shows,' knows we're not backed by a big-time label and pushed out there like the artists that typically get these opening slots. They're running much bigger operations than what we've got. But to them it's all about the music."

And the music is what has people coming back. Without any pressure to market or refine their sound, The Steel Woods albums turn out exactly how the artists want you to hear it, and Cope described his vision for the albums as "pure, artistic statements. I see each album as a novel and each song as chapters in a novel. We're trying to create the greatest artistic statement we can."

The band's second studio album, *Old News*, came out Jan. 18 (with distribution via Thirty Tigers) and is organized around the theme of a newspaper, with different sections and themes. The album channels, at various points, many of the band's heroes in a myriad of styles, with covers of songs by Black Sabbath, Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, Merle Haggard, Allman Brothers Band and one song by Wayne Mills, to whom Cope and Bayliss were paying tribute on the night they met.

"[Wayne] was a dear friend of Jamey Johnson's. One of the first guys to pull Jamey onstage. He was murdered in 2013, but his family is very much like my family. I want to carry a torch for his music too, that song ['One Of These Days'] was wholly written by him."

"If not for Wayne Mills, I wouldn't have met Wes. I always owe a piece to Wayne Mills. I just love him; I love his family. That section of the album [with songs from deceased artists] was meant to be the obituaries section."

As for the bus, they eventually had to abandon it on the side of a highway after it caught fire, though they recovered it and intend to sell it off to fans. While they learned many lessons from the pains of that vehicle, they also learned gratitude, because, as Bayliss said, "As bad as the bus was, it was worse in the van."