



The Band of Heathens – *Stranger*

Ed Jurdi: Vocals and Guitars

Gordy Quist: Vocals and Guitars

Trevor Nealon: Keys and Vocals

Richard Milsap: Drums and Vocals

Jesse Wilson: Bass and Vocals

“We’re here right now/Feels good to have each other/When it’s time to go/We’ll give the feeling to another” “Before the Day is Done”

When The Band of Heathens decided to dub their sixth studio album of original material *Stranger* (its first since 2017’s *Duende*), the veteran band, formed in Austin, TX nearly 15 years ago, had no idea how prophetic that title would turn out to be.

Although the name references the famed existential Albert Camus novel and Robert Heinlein’s sci-fi classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*, it also touches on the “strangers” who make up the band’s loyal fan base, who supported the band during this period with all touring canceled.

As co-founder Ed Jurdi acknowledges, it is certainly an unusual time to release a new album. “The strangest,” he says. “Maybe no time stranger. Since we started, there have been sweeping, revolutionary changes in the music business, but, in this global pandemic, we’re just a microcosm.”

“We’re really fortunate that we have been able to turn directly to our fan base during the pandemic,” adds fellow co-founder Gordy Quist. “The last few months we’ve spent four nights a week live-streaming personal private concerts to fans, and one night a week publicly live-streaming with the whole band Zooming in from their respective homes in California, Texas, North Carolina and Tennessee. At first it seemed very strange until these walls started coming down and we realized how connected we are by the fabric of music.”

Extending the metaphor of *Stranger* even further. The Band of Heathens traveled to another city, Portland, OR, with a brand-new producer, Tucker Martine [The Decemberists, My Morning Jacket, Modest Mouse, Camera Obscura], and the result is something different – a more airy, intimate atmosphere, with added emphasis on songcraft and intricate arrangements set in a spacious sonic landscape that reinvents the band’s sound. These are songs stripped of pretense, but teeming with the emotion borne of personal experience, as has been The Band of Heathens’ method from the very start. *Stranger* moves off into a new place, but still echoes the group’s artful songwriting and multi-layered narrative observations.

Songs like “Vietnorm,” inspired by bassist Jesse Wilson’s stoned viewing of *Cheers*, noting the arrival of George Wendt’s character Norm, and the rhythmic “Truth Left,” which takes on the politicization of information, enforce the social criticism the band has begun to increasingly tackle in its music, while still striving for inclusivity. The British Invasion-by-way-of the Everly Brothers sound of “Dare” examines the notion of “fake news” vs. “good” and “bad” news, while “Call Me Gilded” focuses on how language itself functions to define reality, concluding actions speak louder than words, in love and life.

“With how politically charged the atmosphere has been as of late,” says Gordy, “I’m interested in seeing what happens when you pull a politically-diverse bunch of people out of the social-media echo chamber, and make em sit down and have a beer together over a rock n roll show. Where words fall short, music can be a common point.”

“South by Somewhere” and “Asheville Nashville Austin” each deal in different ways with a favorite topic of The Band of Heathens – life on the road and the pull of home. The former is about reinventing yourself without selling out or chasing trends, while Jurdi describes the latter as dealing with “travel and mobility, but also individual identity.”

The thumping percussion and eerie organ in “Black Cat” takes a real-life podcast tale about the son of a seven-foot Portuguese immigrant to New York City at the turn of the century who helped build the Brooklyn Bridge and later killed a panther with his own hands in an underground cage match and sets it to an expansive, psychedelic tune that creates its own apocryphal universe.

Stranger turns out to be an apt metaphor on both a meta – it’s an apt description of the current world – and personal metaphor in our increased estrangement from one another in silos defined by economy, politics, race or religion.

The album closes with a yin-yang, one-two punch for the current zeitgeist. The Dylanesque “Today Is Our Last Tomorrow” is reminiscent of a woozy “Rainy Day Women #12 and 35,” a rousing rockabilly tune that is BOH’s version of R.E.M.’s “It’s The End of the World As We Know It,” feeling fine in the face of apocalypse now.

“I just remember watching a bunch of news stories, like the California wildfires and border immigration skirmishes,” says Ed. “It seemed like DEFCON 1, and I figured, if we’re going to go out, we might as well party at the same time.”

“Before the Day Is Done” ends *Stranger* on an elegiac hopeful note. “I was thinking of being present, trying to stay positive,” insists Gordy, who came up with the idea. “And while those two songs are sonically on opposite ends of the spectrum, I like experiencing them back to back there at the end.”

So, while *Stranger* hits the streets, The Band of Heathens are hoping they’re not far behind.

A 45 date nationwide tour in promotion of *Stranger* is booked for the fall, but uncertainty in the music industry and re-opening nationwide is a real concern.

“Gordy and I have been doing a lot of personal concerts via Zoom,” says Ed. “We’ve both got a really good audio and video set-up and we’re trying to present as much of a real concert experience as possible.

We’re also researching Drive-in Movie touring. Our nature is to be proactive, but there is a realization that a lot of this is out of our control.”

With their new album, The Band of Heathens have done their part. Now, it's up to the rest of us. *Stranger* things have happened.

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