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A LIFETIME TO FIND

Modern string band Trampled by Turtles settle into Wilco's famed studio to channel their road-tested live energy into a set of future concert staples under the guidance of Jeff Tweedy.

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IT'S EARLY FALL IN MINNESOTA, and Dave Simonett can feel the seasons shifting. Not just in the weather, but in his own wandering musical spirit.

In the past few years, the frontman of modern roots-music heroes Trampled by Turtles says that he has “settled into a seasonal cycle where I write music in fall, winter and spring.”

But, he adds, “In the summertime, I don’t write shit. It used to frustrate the hell out of me, but I’ve learned to embrace it. When fall starts, one morning I just wake up, and I start playing guitar again. And I feel it coming.”

Simonett’s approach to creating music has always been, throughout the band’s two-decade run, to listen—to himself and his intuition, to his bandmates, to his family, to whatever it is the universe is trying to tell him—in order to lean into what feels right, true and honest, and tune everything else out. That approach has helped the members of Trampled by Turtles navigate their long, not-always-smooth-sailing career, during which they’ve released nine albums, toured enough for nine lifetimes and cultivated an adoring fanbase.

So it should come as no surprise that

the band’s 10th album, *Alpenglow*, finds the sextet at its freest and most organic—at ease, playing a new collection of songs with a looseness and joy that’s born from trust, love and time. The set was produced by Jeff Tweedy, who also contributed an original tune to the sessions. The Wilco frontman invited the group to record at his Chicago studio, The Loft and even sat in on a few tracks. Capturing the ensemble’s concert energy, they also elected to record *Alpenglow* live in a single room.

Calling from his Minneapolis home, where he and his partner are raising three kids, Simonett mentions his new puppy Maxon, a German Wirehaired Pointer named after his grandmother. This summer, Maxon helped Simonett go bird hunting, a hobby he picked up a few years back.

“To see her point out a bird, it’s amazing. It’s like it’s in her blood,” Simonett says, a sense of genuine awe apparent in his voice.

He sometimes goes out hunting for dinner with Maxon, sparking a number of tough conversations with his children about death, respect and the cyclical way the world works.

As Simonett offers a dive deep into the making of *Alpenglow*—his decision to

scrap their original plans and start fresh, to record uncompromisingly live, to keep Trampled by Turtles going after all these years—his love for Maxon quickly comes back into focus.

“It’s kind of beautiful, you know?” he says. “These dogs just lock onto something, point their nose at it and there it is.”

IN A GENRE WHERE KINGS ARE MADE by lightning speed picking, Trampled by Turtles has always danced outside the castle walls. Sure, these six dudes—singer/guitarist Simonett, banjoist Dave Carroll, cellist Eamonn McLain, mandolinist Erik Berry, fiddle player Ryan Young and bassist Tim Saxhaug—can storm through a stringband throwdown with the best of them. But that’s not the only thing that has attracted fans over the last 20 years.

Trampled by Turtles is anchored by Simonett’s songwriting, which can be alternatively direct and emotional, and poetic and abstract. Yet, it is always deeply melodic and authentic, delivered with his earnest, vulnerable vocals.

The band coalesced in Duluth, Minn., in the early 2000s from fragments of the various jambands that populated the city’s small scene. And when they began to take off before their 2004 debut, *Songs from a Ghost Town*, the members were faced with a decision. Saxhaug, calling from his home in Minnesota, still clearly remembers why he chose to stick with Simonett.

“There came a time when I had to really choose between multiple bands—I was in this other band with friends I grew up with,” he says. “But it was Dave’s songwriting that provided the gut feeling I needed to make that decision. And, well, that proved to be the correct choice.”

Trampled by Turtles’ 2010 album *Palomino* topped the US Bluegrass charts—in the midst of a run that included seven records and a live album during their first decade together. The band played festivals and toured frequently, slowly but surely becoming favorites on the improv and roots-leaning circuits. But that’s not the full story.

“Playing music has always been more about the emotional part than the technical part for me. Insane playing is something I love to witness, but it’s never been top of mind,” Simonett says. “So when we make music, I want to capture the feeling of us all playing together, the sound of us being on the same wavelength.”

The band’s emotional openness—you could assemble a whole playlist of Trampled by Turtles songs for a

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DAVE SIMONETT

heartbroken midnight drive—eventually helped them win over record-collecting Americana fans as well live-music aficionados. But following 2014’s expansive *Wild Animals*, Simonett started to feel burnt out both musically and personally. He was weathering a divorce and had begun to feel “like touring was going to kill me at some point or another.”

He believed that he had no choice but to take a step back from the band to explore solo work and find some time to breathe. And that hiatus ended up lasting four years—a lifetime in the live-music world. When Trampled by Turtles did return, they unleashed 2018’s *Life is Good on the Open Road*, a sprawling, playful record that was also the sound of Simonett “crawling back to the band, being like, ‘Listen, I know I was an asshole, but I would love to make another album with you guys.’”

He continues, “And, honestly, the vibe in the studio was lighter than it had been for so many years. Like in any relationship, sometimes space is the cure. And ever since then, it’s really changed my whole point of view.”

WITH 2018’S *LIFE IS GOOD*, TRAMPLED by Turtles officially entered their second act—one marked by less stress, slower speeds and, like that record’s name implies, more pure joy. By 2019, when they finished touring behind the record, Simonett was already deep into writing tunes for their next album. However, COVID-19 had other plans and the outfit were ultimately forced to scrap the recording sessions they had booked at Tornillo, Texas’ Sonic Ranch studios while the band members hunkered down in their respective homes.

“I couldn’t write a word. Nobody I knew could write. It felt like the

collective unconscious was just calling off songwriting. So I just had to settle into that time. I’d never spent that much consecutive time at home in my entire adult life,” he says. “I spent most of my time with my kids and my girlfriend. We had some beautiful experiences just being at home. And I think that’s where this record begins, musically—turning around and looking at all the wonderful shit you’ve got going on. Once I was able to do that, the music started coming out again.”

Never one to leave a good song behind, Simonett recorded a solo EP comprised of the tunes he’d meant to lay down with the band in Texas—the sparse, beautiful 5-song *Orion* came out in early 2021—and quickly got to work on a new batch of originals. The band had initially intended to self-produce their next record, following their team effort on *Life is Good*, but a rescheduled run of Midwest shows opening for Wilco inspired them to ask Tweedy to sign on as their producer.

And to their pleasant surprise, the Wilco frontman said yes, “very graciously,” remembers Simonett.

In November 2021, Trampled by Turtles showed up in Chicago. The songs that would eventually end up on *Alpenglow* were new to Tweedy—and, for the most part, new to the band as well. Since *Wild Animals* in 2014, they’ve made a point not to rehearse their songs to death and to let their material come together naturally.

The musicians treated The Loft sessions like a jam—Simonett would introduce a song and start playing. When they were ready, the rest of the Turtles would join in. After a few takes, they settled into a groove, cutting tracks before anything felt stale.

“I fly by the seat of my pants in the studio. I’m a believer that magic happens when people sit to play a song they’ve never heard before—magic that can’t ever happen again,” Simonett says. “We’re not trying to replicate something, like we are taking an art exam. Our minds are in a completely open space.”

Simonett laughs, recalling that “we didn’t do any rehearsing before we got to the studio, which I’m sure Jeff was worried about. But I love that about our band—my favorite things that happen in the studio are made up on the spot. We’re loose like that; I like our band the best when we’re almost going to crash.”

Trampled by Turtles’ method of spontaneous creation means that all six players needed to hit the studio with their creative juices flowing—a challenge that Saxhaug says translates to a more human, authentic and even imperfect

style of playing. It's also a challenge that has higher stakes because the band recorded in one room, circled around each other's microphones.

"I think coming to the studio with all your songs ready to go can be a disadvantage—you're locked into that. But, for us, odds are we're going to get some sort of magic," he says. "There's an energy to it, too—stay relaxed but try not to mess it up—because if we got a damn good vocal take but I missed a note, then that's the instrumental part I'm going to have to live with. It makes you realize that there is no 'right' note. These songs are a spontaneous snapshot in time."

The band's loose, natural flow can be felt all over *Alpenglow*: you'll hear a band member talking under the intro to the soaring "On the Highway." The first few seconds of album opener "It's So Hard to Hold On" find the musicians waltzing on their own, before Simonett's vocals pull everyone together in one sweeping motion.

The band flew through Simonett's tunes, recording 11 tracks and actually wrapping their session a few days ahead

of schedule. In fact, those days in Tweedy's space felt easier than they could've imagined—each player seamlessly adding their touch to Simonett's melodies, as if his songs were a magnet drawing them in. Tweedy enjoyed the vibe so much that he asked to sit in on guitar on four of *Alpenglow's* tunes, and he sings background on another, "A Lifetime to Find," which he wrote and then offered up to the band.

A change of pace for an ensemble that has largely self-produced and self-released their music for two decades, Trampled by Turtles welcomed Tweedy to tweak their songs and add his own musical flavor.

"We had a nice time in the studio together," Tweedy says when asked about the Turtles sessions. "Different artists need different things out of a producer. Sometimes you're the down-to-business scold, keeping the train on the tracks. Sometimes you're the last one in line to challenge them musically and lyrically in hopes of pushing everything to greater heights. Sometimes a producer takes the politics and organizational duties off of the band members and lets them

concentrate on just being music makers. And sometimes a producer is there to make everyone comfortable and then get the hell out of the way. My roll on this record was a bit of all of these, I think."

The result is one of Trampled by Turtles' most gently flowing, utterly lovely albums to date—a beautiful, impeccably catchy collection of sing-and-strum-along tracks, created by a gang of friends with a deep intuition for what fits.

"I think our greatest strength, musically, is just listening," Saxhaug says. "We spend so much time listening to each other, and that creates so much trust."

Alpenglow is named after the reddish light that appears over mountains when the sun dips beneath the horizon—a suggestion from the band's Colorado-based banjo player Dave Carroll.

"You're looking at this mountain that was green, and now it's red; it's this lovely feeling," Simonett says. "And it was a perfect word to describe this record. The whole process of making it was just warm and inclusive. It was really beautiful. Calling the record *Alpenglow* was perfect." 🐢