



Shane Smith & the Saints *Norther*

"It ain't black or white, babe; it's all the greys between," Shane Smith sings in "The Greys Between," the first single from *Norther*. On the surface, it's a cinematic love song about a relationship's twists and turns, punctuated by slide guitar, Appalachian fiddle, and sharp storytelling. Take a deeper listen to Shane Smith & the Saints' fourth studio album, though, and those words also sound like the motto of a band that's spent the past decade blurring the lines between genres.

Norther is anything but monochromatic. Written and recorded during breaks in the band's touring schedule, the album captures Shane Smith & the Saints at their most colorful, offering up a hard-hitting version of American roots music that's influenced by country, folk, and roadhouse rock & roll. It's a sound that's been shaped by the road, where the Saints spent the past decade on tour, building a cult audience with each gig. Those years of raw, redemptive performances are now paying off — not only with headlining concerts at bucket-list venues like Red Rocks Amphitheater (which the group sold out in 36 hours) and the Ryman Auditorium, but also with an appearance on the hit TV show *Yellowstone*, where the Saints premiered *Norther's* final track, "Fire in the Ocean," with an onscreen performance.

"If you spend 10 years playing dive bars and small clubs almost every single night, and you go to the merch booth after every show and hang out with the fans until the staff literally kicks you out, you get to turn those fans into friends," says Smith, who grew up in Terrell, Texas, before launching his band in Austin. "That's how we built this thing. We've done as many as 240 shows in a single year. We've worked so hard to get there, and that hard work has created a beautiful, meaningful audience."

Beautiful, indeed. Named after the northern winds that blow across Texas during the winter, *Norther* begins with the haunting "Book of Joe." Bennett Brown's fiddle gives the song plenty of orchestral atmosphere, Dustin Schaefer's electric guitar adds anthemic punch, and Zach Stover's percussion — which builds toward a pummeling finish, locking in with Chase Satterwhite's bass along the way — rolls like thunder. At the center of that sound is Smith's voice: a husky baritone that's been textured by countless gigs in smoky bars and loud dance halls. It's a gorgeously raw instrument, caught halfway between tender and tough, and it's there — somewhere in the middle — that the Saints shine their brightest.

"When you're in a band like ours, everyone gets their turn to play their music in the van," Smith explains. "Bennett grew up listening to Appalachian and Celtic-inspired folk and bluegrass music, and you can hear that in the way he plays fiddle. Dustin grew up

loving classic rock. When I met my wife, she introduced me to music like Arcade Fire, Alberta Cross, and First Aid Kit — bands that I'd categorize as cinematic folk or cinematic indie-rock — and that had a massive impact on my writing, too. Everybody in this band has their own influences, and we've spent years together, letting our sound evolve into something really unique."

That sound began evolving onstage. Thanks to early albums like 2013's *Coast* and 2015's *Geronimo*, Shane Smith & the Saints became a popular act in Austin, regularly cutting their teeth with marathon gigs at venues like The Stage On Sixth. "We'd do four-hour sets, sometimes back-to-back, meaning we'd be onstage for eight hours," Smith remembers. "It taught us to grow tighter as a band, experiment with our sound, and find our identity."

Released in 2019, *Hail Mary* introduced the band's current lineup, as well as a heavier sound that separated the Saints from other Texas acts. It wasn't rock & roll. It wasn't country, either. It was everything that connected those genres, glued together by the camaraderie of a road-tested band that built its audience the old-school way: by hitting the stage and winning over the crowd, song after song, night after night.

Norther builds upon that singular sound while also highlighting the bandmates' road-warrior chops. "We'd be on the road doing shows, and there would be a 48-hour gap where we'd fly into Dallas and try to record everything we possibly could, then fly right back to wherever the bus was," says Smith, who tapped producer Beau Bedford to helm the album. "It was like that for the entirety of the recording process." The result is an album that's filled with all the electricity and eclecticism of the Saints' live show. For the band's country-loving fans, there's "1000 Wild Horses," which barrels forward at a rootsy gallop. For rock fans, there's "Fire in the Sky," which makes room for fiery fretwork and a massive chorus. For those looking to slow dance, there's "All the Way," a threadbare piano ballad captured live in the studio, imperfections and all. "*Norther* has little bit of everything," Smith says proudly. "It's not a one-sided album. It's got every single element of what makes up our sound right now."

For an independent band like Shane Smith & the Saints, the work is never done. "It's like you can't help but feel like you've paid your dues to get to a certain spot, but once you get there, you realize you're just starting to touch the surface of the bigger picture," Smith admits. "At the end of the day, it still feels like we're getting discovered. But maybe that's what it's all about." *Norther* is the soundtrack to that discovery. It's the sound of a band pushing its limits, broadening its reach, and expanding its audience.

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