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GAC Album Review: Jason Boland & The Stragglers' *Dark & Dirty Mile*

By Daryl Addison | Leave a Comment

Oklahoma native **Jason Boland** and his band, **The Stragglers**, specialize in a brand of country music that doesn't garner huge amounts of radio exposure. The quintet's commitment to a traditional stance emphasizing acoustic guitars, fiddle and pedal steel easily recalls legends like **Willie**, **Waylon**, **Johnny** and **Merle**, while also making them heroes to legions of fans seeking out that old school sound. However, Jason Boland & The Stragglers aren't just siphoning gas from the outlaw movement; this is an experienced band with an expressive and poignant leader who desperately has something to say…and their seventh studio project, *Dark & Dirty Mile*, does just that.

Pairing up with country music royalty **Shooter Jennings** to co-produce the project, *Dark & Dirty Mile*, which is available now, is a consistently darker album than its predecessors like 2006's *The Bourbon Legend* or even 2011's *Rancho Alto*. The songs are similarly built for the barroom, but instead of exorcising his own demons in between more lighthearted numbers, Jason seems intensely focused on taking society's ills to task this time around. Starting with the winding, hypnotic title track, there's a sense that innocence has been lost and many of these songs speak to the results.

Story songs like "They Took It Away" and "Ludlow" directly reference history's stains. One of only two songs on the project that he didn't write, "They Took It Away" mixes moody passages and minor piano chords when describing the bloodshed that comes with fighting over land. "Ludlow" is about exactly that; the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 when a camp of miners was attacked. The descriptive songwriting is riveting and harrowing. And while Jason doesn't get overly political on the album, songs like the self-relying "Electric Bill" take subtle shots with lines like, *When they need to take a closer look at what it means to*

love / they can watch with a drone from miles above. Even the more up-tempo "The Only One," which plays like it should be a love song, carries shots at celeb-obsessed society with the line, *Money makes some able to call crazy the new cool*. Jason knows how to turn a phrase and consistently hits his mark.

Jason's rich baritone is classic in a way not heard much anymore. Songs like the stellar, aw-shucks ballad, "Lucky I Guess," hang in the air as vocal melodies come effortlessly wrapped in fiddler Nick Worley's and guitar/pedal player Roger Ray's emotional instrumentation. The album closer "See You When I See You" follows suit with thoughtful words on friendship (and possibly a direct message to fans?) and one of the most natural, harmony-filled fills heard anywhere.

There's a striking honesty to *Dark & Dirty Mile*. Social commentary has crept into Jason's songs in the past but not in quite the same way. Shooter joins on the Dixie meets **Deep Purple** "Green Screen," which tries to make sense of a fabricated culture with some uncomfortable visuals. Yet, Jason always seems to come back to the idea that love could be a means to the end. "Nine Times Out Of Ten" wonders indirectly about the one time left over while "Spend All Your Time" preaches doing what you truly love. For this dust bowl poet, on *Dark & Dirty Mile*, that appears to be crafting hard-hitting and unflinching songs listeners will undoubtedly feel.

Key Tracks – "Lucky I Guess," "See You When I See You," "Spend All Your Time," "Dark & Dirty Mile"