

The OKLAHOMAN

Jason Boland & The Stragglers take “Dark and Dirty Mile” to Cain's Ballroom

By [Brandy McDonnell](#) | Published: May 17, 2013

Call him a classic country torchbearer, a musical outlaw or an old-school folk singer, Jason Boland just wants to make sure his songs mean something.

“It's just folk music is all it is. All folk music should have a little wink and nod to the salt of the earth, and that's all it's ever doing. It's just trying to live up to Woody Guthrie on through Merle Haggard. Man, go listen to a lot of old Merle Haggard — it was all topical and about something. I think that's one of the biggest problems with music is that it's just lost talking about anything. It just talks about have a good time or cry over something,” the Harrah native said in a phone interview last week.

“Not every song has to be some world-changing protest song or some great history lesson. There's time for dance songs, cry-in-your-beer songs. There's time for everything. So I think we just try to keep a mix of it.”

That mix is evident on “Dark and Dirty Mile,” the red dirt musician's seventh studio album with his band, The Stragglers. Released Tuesday, the album is already earning widespread praise for its old-school country sound, profound songwriting and Boland's weathered baritone.

The 11 tracks include the poignant funeral ode “See You When I See You,” the lovely ballad “Lucky I Guess” and the timely two-stepper “Electric Bill.”

That last one, a toe-tapping tribute to love in hard times, sneaks in the topical line “When they need to take a closer look at what it means to love, they can watch with a drone from miles above.” From the sobering story song “Ludlow” to the band's cover of red dirt pioneer Randy Crouch's “They Took It Away,” Boland often expresses what he considers a healthy distrust of the government in his music.

“Well, I guess that's why they call us outlaws or something,” he said with a laugh. “I just think, isn't that what patriots are called to do? Is just always question things, you know. I think that's just part of our job is just being critical thinkers. Just to be aware of things.”

Boland and his cohorts make it a point to record great songs by their red dirt music forerunners, and they never have a problem finding plenty of options.

“We're always lookin' to do songs by the people that inspired us to approach music the way we do today. So, we always do (Bob) Childers songs, and we've done several Crouch and this was another one that just fit the record. I think we got a really nice take of it,” Boland said from the road in his adopted home state of Texas.

Boland, 38, coproduced “Dark and Dirty Mile” with singer-songwriter Shooter Jennings.

“He was just what you need, just a good hands-on producer, an extra trusted ear in the room, another set of ideas, another person that's not one of us in the band that's locked into this that's been playing 'em night after night getting 'em ready. The guys worked really hard on this record, too, just arranging their parts and getting their songs together. It was a big group effort of producing the music on this record.”

The band again recorded at Cedar Creek Recording in Austin, Texas, and he said Jennings understood the tone and sound they wanted for the album.

“We just got in there with the band and some buddies and cut it straight to tape and mixed it down to tape and tried to keep the computers out of the process and had a great time doing that. And I think anybody that was a fan of the tone and the sound we were going for on our first record, ‘Pearl Snaps,’ I think they'll really enjoy listening to this record and hearing where we've gone,” Boland said.

The singer-songwriter recently returned from a European tour that included a solo show in Belgium, acoustic performances in Italy with Stragglers fiddler Nick Worley and a full-band gig at Mayfest in Pontivy, France.

“It was a lot of fun, good crowds and a lot of good sightseeing,” said Boland, who had previously played a 2004 festival in France but saw more of Europe on this trek.

He and his bandmates are playing a much more familiar spot Friday, when he will celebrate the new album with a home-state show at Tulsa's legendary Cain's Ballroom.

“Cain's is truly one that rises to the top when we say our favorite all-time gigs. It's just it's special to us all in so many ways, really. However cheesy it may sound or nostalgic, if there's any place that fires that up in us, it's Cain's,” Boland said.

“We're rooted in the region. I don't think any of us consider ourselves any kind of spokespeople or anything, but ... if they hear it and they know it's true, then we feel like we've done our job.”