

American★ songwriter

the craft of music

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NAMED AFTER THE INDIAN NATION TURNPIKE,

an Oklahoma tollway that runs a 100 mile stretch from Hugo to Henryetta, the Turnpike Troubadours get their boots muddy with Red Dirt roots-rock and dusty Americana on *Goodbye Normal Street*. The band's story may sound familiar – they're a group of road warriors who cut their teeth on the Bible Belt club circuit, carving out a sound influenced by Waylon Jennings' hard-livin' honky tonk and Steve Earle's blue-collar rock and roll along the way – but these Troubadours make a unique racket, and *Normal Street* slices its way through the American heartland without really following another band's tracks.

Frontman Evan Felker is clearly the captain here; he sings like a younger Rhatt Miller, confident enough with his voice to deliver country music without hiding behind a hammed-up southern accent, and he writes about small-town life in the flyover states with sharp, personal details. The songs on *Normal Street* are filled with characters who spend most of their evenings at the bar, chasing girls and raising toasts to old memories, before closing time spills them out into the street and sends them stumbling back home, where bad luck and hard times await. You get the feeling that Felker knows every single one of these people, from the wannabe actress who ditches town for the bright lights of Chicago in "Morgan Street" to the cash-strapped "Southeastern Son" who signs up for the National Guard, eager for an easy paycheck in a jobless town, and winds up getting deployed. The protagonist in "Blue Star" is a military man, too, on leave for a night of hell-raising at one of his old hometown haunts. Like "Southeastern Son," "Blue Star" isn't a political song as much as a character sketch, and Felker makes sure not to throw his allegiance to the

right or left, proof that he's the kind of smart songwriter who knows how to appeal to a broad audience without whitewashing his lyrics.

The rest of the tunes are mostly love songs, usually directed at the one(s) who got away, and more often than not referencing some form of alcohol in the lyrics. This whole bar-band thing has been done before, of course, but the Turnpike Troubadours are one of the few groups to actually get it right, to tackle old Americana stereotypes with enough chops and charisma to make them new again. And as good as Felker may be, *Goodbye Normal Street* is more than a vehicle for his songwriting alone. It's a full-band album, full of fast, furious violin solos, loud Telecasters, harmonica solos, harmonies and rootsy blasts of pedal steel. The guys perform everything as though they're playing to a packed house, rarely staying away from big, melody-driven choruses for too long, and they focus most of their attention on the sort of roadhouse pop-rock that Tom Petty's confederate cousin might've written. There are occasional curveballs, too: the Celtic punk cadence in "Before The Devil Knows We're Dead," the bare-boned acoustic arrangement of "Empty As A Drum," the sad-eyed country shuffle that turns "Call A Spade A Spade," a duet with Jamie Wilson, into one of the album's surprise highlights.

For the most part, though, this is upbeat music designed for barrooms and pool halls, for highways and country lanes, played by musicians who've clearly spent time with the heartbroken, whiskey-swigging Southerners they're singing about. There's no macho posturing. The Turnpike Troubadours are the real deal, and *Goodbye Normal Street* – the band's third album – is pretty close to as good as it gets. – ANDREW LEAHEY

