

Reviews

Compiled by MIKE GREENHAUS

WIDESPREAD PANIC

Street Dogs

VANGUARD/CONCORD



Widespread Panic have finally ascended to the halls of Valhalla. Not just because there was a vacancy

after the Allman Brothers broke up or because the surviving members of the Grateful Dead played their final shows together this past summer. No, these tireless road warriors got there legitimately with their insistence on evolution, reinvention, creative spontaneity and confronting everything, if not head on, at least metaphorically.

On *Street Dogs*, their 12th studio album, they move lyrically through tragedy, discontent and spiritual unease while wrestling with their continued search for meaning. It is a rather weighty burden, but music has always been the medium for bigger things for this outfit—a way to access the spiritual mysteries that have confounded statesmen, dreamers and religious figures for centuries. While Panic may not come up with any concrete answers, they still know how to have fun and their search has provided a gripping musical ride through rock, blues, folk, unhinged psychedelia and '70s metal, even producing the kind of intuitive jazz that recalls Miles Davis.

With *Street Dogs*, they've added more of a Latin accent, the kind that you might appreciate if you've listened to most of Santana's catalog or at the very least, some of your father's Tito Puente records. But it's only a fluid starting point. On "Angels Don't Sing the Blues," it's the hand-to-hand percussive combat that **Sunny Ortiz** and **Duane Trucks**—who subs for founding member Todd Nance—engage in that elevates this track, as they shift time signatures, tempos and

Widespread Panic



the entire focus before **John Bell** brings the tune back down to terra firma on gossamer wings.

"Cease Fire," a tune from 1999, uses a Santana riff as bait, yet it's the tribal percussion and the primitive unease that characterize this track. You could easily imagine Bell

putting on a pair of buck antlers and chanting the third verse around a ring of stones.

Another standout is the thunderous collision of British blues and Southern rock on "Honky Red," a Murray McLachlan cover that Northern

soul producer John Rhys brought to the band. The vocals are as deranged as Tom Waits, but without any of the preciousness, while **Jimmy Herring** unleashes the kind of heroic guitar that makes you forget that Clapton was once called God. *Jaan Uhelszki*