

The Derailers

Soldiers of Love

When last we checked in on the Derailers, things were looking mighty bleak for our sharp-dressed heroes.

Bleak like a cliffhanger to one of those Saturday afternoon serial matinees of yesteryear, where even though you *know* the good guys always win, the odds seem so stacked against them that you can't imagine how they could possibly survive. First, after nearly a decade of guarding their priceless Beatles-by-way-of-Bakersfield sound against the corrupting forces of Music Row, the boys suddenly found themselves pushed dangerously close to the edge of mainstream conformity. They fought the good fight through two records with major-label behemoth Sony Nashville and escaped full assimilation by the skin of their teeth, but then smooth-throated co-founder Tony Villanueva told his co-frontman, Brian Hofeldt, and the rest of the boys that he was leaving the gang. That's when the band's most diehard believers clenched the sides of their seats for dear life or covered their eyes, too squeamish to watch. Like a runaway train barreling toward a broken bridge over a perilous gorge, it seemed only a miracle could save the Derailers from certain ... derailment.

A miracle, or maybe just a 100-proof shot of good ol' fashion rock 'n' roll, spiked with a renewed sense of purpose, a little new blood and a fortuitous pairing who a man who was born to help the Derailers make the best record of their career: their Palo Records debut (and sixth album to date), *Soldiers of Love*.

"Actually, *we* were born to be produced by Buzz, because he came first," corrects Hofeldt with a grin. That's Buzz as in legendary songwriter (and Rockabilly Hall of Fame member) Buzz Cason, who slipped Hofeldt his card after being blown away by a Derailers performance at a festival in Texas last summer.

"I said, 'Hey, if you guys are in Nashville and want to cut some songs and fool around in and old, rockin' analog studio, let me know,'" says Cason. "That was in May, and in December, we had the record finished. When I get excited about something, I like to roll with it."

Although he'd heard a Derailers record or two in the past, it was the band's live show that piqued Cason's interest. Back in the mid-'50s, before he wrote the evergreen hit "Everlasting Love," Cason was a charter member of the Casuals, generally regarded as Nashville's first rock 'n' roll band. "We weren't the greatest musicians, but we really put on a *show*," says Cason. "And seeing the energy of the Derailers that day just took me back ... I liked the freedom and the reckless abandon they played with." The band's actual chops and sharp suits won him over, too. "That was the way we dressed, too!"

Meanwhile, Hofeldt was just thrilled to work with the guy who wrote "Soldier of Love" — a minor hit for Arthur Alexander in the early '60s that was also performed by the Beatles for the BBC (and featured on the Fab Four's 1994 *Live at the BBC*).

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“I’m a huge Beatles fan, which is no secret, so that song of his was our common bond at first,” says Hofeldt. “And then we got together and started writing, and really hit it off right off the bat. At the time we met, I had been kind of down, thinking, ‘What are we gonna do?’ But Buzz has the enthusiasm and energy of a teenager, and he really boosted me up and got me fired up again. I thought, ‘Man, I better amp up a little bit to keep up with this guy!’”

Hofeldt and Cason ended up co-writing several songs for the record, beginning with the opening “Cold Beer, Hot Women & Cool Country Music,” a straight-up honky-tonker that would have been right at home on the Derailers’ 1996 debut, *Jackpot*. There’s plenty more “cool country music” on *Soldiers of Love*, too, including Hofeldt’s devilish shuffle “Lookin’ at the Man” and the closing Cason/Hofeldt co-write “It’s Never Too Late to Party,” arguably one of the most Buck-Owens-sounding tracks ever cut by one of the late Owens’ favorite bands.

But while they can still more than hold their own against any country dancehall band in Texas (or the world, for that matter), *Soldiers of Love* is anything but a business-as-usual outing for the Derailers. Hofeldt is the first to admit that the band lost a major asset when co-founder Villanueva left the fold a couple of years ago for a higher calling (retiring from music and moving back to Oregon to become a church pastor), and filling the Tony-shaped-hole in the band required no small amount of retooling. First, Hofeldt knew he’d have to step up to the plate as a full-time frontman as well as lead guitarist — effectively doubling his stage workload as well as challenging him to tackle more ballads (which he handles astonishingly well, as proven on the new album’s Cason/Anthony Crawford-penned “The One Before Me,” not to mention the Derailers’ own ultra-smooth pass at “Soldier of Love”). Then, building on the already rock-solid rhythm section of bassist Ed Adkins and drummer Scott Matthews, two new Derailers were recruited to fill out the band’s live sound as well as to provide a broader overall range of sonic possibilities: ace steel guitarist Chris Schlotzhauer and a Jerry-Lee-Lewis-style piano-pounder boasting the impossibly cool name of Sweet Basil McJagger.

But most significantly of all — as evidenced both at the band’s recent live shows and throughout *Soldiers of Love*, most notably on party stompers like “Donna Sue Erlene,” “Hey Valerie” and “Get ‘Er Done” — they upped the rock ‘n’ roll.

“We’ve always been a country band with a rockin’ heart,” says Hofeldt. “When Tony left, we knew that we wanted to maintain the sound and vibe of the Derailers. But I always said that Tony was a little bit country and I was a little bit rock ‘n’ roll, so there’s a little more rock ‘n’ roll in there now.” Indeed, now more than ever, the Derailers’ are as likely to chase a barroom shuffle with a full-bore rave-up riffing on everything from Buck’s Bakersfield Sound to Cavern Club-era Beatles to CCR to the Doors to Johnny Cash. *That* was the Derailers that Cason wanted to make a record with at his Creative Workshop studio in Nashville.

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“I wanted to make something you could sink your teeth into, and that sounded just like the band would if you went to hear them at (Austin’s) the Broken Spoke,” says the veteran producer. “I didn’t have any preconceived notions about what the band *used* to sound like, but nobody ever said, ‘We can’t do *that*,’ or ‘That doesn’t sound like us.’ I think everyone went in like we were wiping the slate clean and starting over — like it was a brand new band.”

“It really does feel that way,” confirms Hofeldt, noting that the streamlined, no-nonsense, no-pressure approach to making the new record helped reaffirm the band’s confidence and identity as just that: a *band*. “That band thing is why people responded to us in the beginning, but we kind of lost that on the last record (2003’s *Genuine*). We were on a major label, and there was a lot of pressure to get on mainstream radio and we kind of bent over backwards. We kind of got Nashvilled on that one. I read a review that went, ‘Why does it take 17 additional musicians to make a Derailers record?’ And I went, ‘Damn straight!’ It’s ridiculous!

“So getting to work with Buzz on this record, and finding a label like Palo Duro — I couldn’t be happier,” Hofeldt continues. “It’s a win-win situation as far as I’m concerned. We all feel excited doing what we do again, because it just feels good to be back doing what *we* want to do, and in the way we do it.”

Which brings us back to our cliffhanger. Go ahead and open your eyes (and ears), and heave a Texas-sized sigh of relief. Because against all odds, the Derailers are back, remarkably unscathed, impeccably dressed, and — impossibly — better than ever. Or, to borrow a line from *Soldiers of Love*’s “It’s Never Too Late to Party,” “... *we just got this thing started!*”

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