

RAILROAD EARTH

Railroad Earth is one of America's greatest bands playing today, plain and simple. They sing of our nation's changing landscape and social ills with a commitment reminiscent of Woody Guthrie, while interpolating instrumental timbres that could have been pulled from Celtic or Cajun culture. And as anyone who has caught them live will attest, their concerts are imbued with the fire-in-the-belly passion of straight-ahead, blue collar rock & roll. Then there is the newest album from the New Jersey sextet, which is the most cohesive embodiment of their myriad gifts to date—hence the decision to simply call it Railroad Earth—showcasing nine new selections that draw strength and inspiration from an acknowledgment of our shared past, while also embracing new ideas and celebrating diversity... just like America when she is at her best.

Like their fellow musical travelers, from Bob Dylan and Gram Parsons to Wilco and alt-country chameleon, Ryan Adams, Railroad Earth eagerly embraced change in pursuit of an aesthetic breakthrough. "It was time to do something different," admits lead singer, songwriter and guitarist Todd Sheaffer. He and his band mates—violinist Tim Carbone, mandolin player John Skehan, multi-instrumentalist Andy Goessling, and drummer Carey Harmon, plus new bassist Andrew Altman—have spent nearly a decade refining their sound and modus operandi. This time, however, they elected to take some cues from their new A&R man, Michael Caplan (Allman Brothers Band, Los Lonely Boys, Keb' Mo'), and change up their game "to get a fresh perspective." The result is the band's most compelling set to date; encompassing rousing ballads and string-band funk, wistful waltzes and quirky time signature folk.

To realize this vision, Railroad Earth enlisted co-producer Angelo Montrone, whose résumé ranges from work with Matisyahu to Natalie Cole. Sheaffer credits Montrone for helping the band know when to scale back—and when to forge ahead. "We focused on the arrangements a lot more carefully and honed in on our ensemble playing." The producer urged the band to draw out the rock elements of its sound, with additional electric guitars and even some judicious distortion, thanks to an arsenal of vintage amplifiers at Montrone's place. ("They'll probably ban us from the bluegrass festivals," chuckles Sheaffer.) The record even features some mean and dirty lap steel playing, courtesy of Goessling, which is a first on any Railroad Earth album.

Michael Caplan also encouraged the band to highlight one of its most secret weapons. "We have some great singers in this band, and we've always had a lot of background singing and harmonizing," says Sheaffer. "This time we wanted to push it further and utilize that instrument more fully, so we spent a lot of time on the backing vocals." It worked: Railroad Earth features some of the finest harmony singing committed to record. Just listen to "Black Elk Speaks," as evidence; a masterpiece reminiscent of

CSNY circa *Déjà Vu*, and inspired by the 1932 book of the same title, in which a Sioux medicine man recounts the changes he's witnessed in his lifetime. The poignancy of Sheaffer's lyric and the electrified country-rock sound is enriched further as each new vocal part enters alongside him, harmonies and vibrations illuminating the song's spiritual core. Likewise, the humble lyric of "On the Banks" is suffused with a halo of golden light through the rich chorus of voices that surround Sheaffer's gentle delivery.

That emphasis on the vocals works to underscore Sheaffer's emergence as one of the most compelling lyricists of his generation. His succinct yet distinctive imagery and feel for the unique cadences of language, with key turns of phrase repeated, as if in prayer, fuse with the music to yield far more than the sum of its parts. "The Jupiter & the 119" uses the tale of the first transcontinental railroad—which literally brought together the country, and united disparate camps in a common goal, to reflect upon the hopeful wave of union and transformation that swept over the nation following Barack Obama's election. Putting a more personal spin on the sentiments of "Black Elk Speaks," "Lone Croft Farewell" explores Sheaffer's feelings about being driven from his New Jersey home to accommodate the construction of a massive electrical plant: "They're diggin' at the edges... to build the power line / Same old story... but now the story's mine." There's even a ghost story, "Potter's Field," about a Civil War-era specter of Scottish origin, wandering this mortal coil in search of peace. This classic-sounding, edgy folk song was inspired in part by a visit to the Old Man of Storr, a rocky hill on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. "The kind of place where you can feel the ancient spirits," Sheaffer says.

Only history and the passing of time can truly make a landmark. The first reference to Plymouth Rock came over 120 years after the Pilgrims landed on the Massachusetts shores circa 1620. Nevertheless, those first settlers knew that one phase of their journey had ended and another begun. And so it is with *Railroad Earth*. It may fall to our children and grandchildren to validate the album's longevity and influence, to file it alongside Patti Smith's *Horses* or Neil Young's *Harvest* as a record for the ages. But at the moment, anyone with ears should recognize its significance as a turning point in a great American story that is still unfolding.