

STEADY AS WE GO

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About The Songs And The Production

STEADY AS WE GO is your 16th album since 1994. Why bother making another one?

Well, we've built our own studio, all the musicians were in town, the catering was good and I had a nice collection of songs ready to go. It was summertime, we had three days to record ten songs. It was the right time to do this. Also, it's been more than three years since "This Place Belongs To The Birds".

Of the eleven songs on this record, only three are new originals. Why record so many covers?

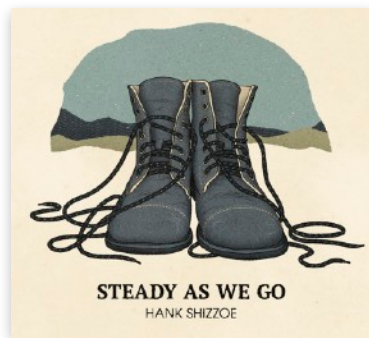
These are all songs I like to sing and play when I'm at home. Picking and singing for the joy of it. It's so nice to have songs with you during the day. Suddenly an old folk song pops into your head while you're going out for groceries, shining your shoes, picking up the dry cleaning, whatever. Some of these tunes became like friends, family even. I've been writing since finishing the Birds album. The three originals on STEADY AS WE GO somehow had something to do with traditionals, country blues and folk songs. Suddenly a good dozen tunes formed their own little family and I thought, oh, these go together well. In the five years I've been playing with drummer Simon Baumann and guitarist Tom Etter we created our own sound. It's got a lot of depth to it, room to breathe, the whole spectrum from strong and heavy to tender and gentle. A few of these songs had found their way into our live sets and I remember thinking that this creates something new and very personal out of elements we all are familiar with.

Tell us more about this song family.

Ok, we're starting with Careless Love, a song that has seen many incarnations. It's probably from the late 19th century. There are literally hundreds of versions - W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith with Louis Armstrong, Cash, Dylan, Big Joe Turner, Joan Baez, Siouxsie Sioux - you name it, everybody did it. A particular version by Lonnie Johnson from 1965 got stuck in my head, not the most politically correct lyrics there. This arrangement is different from Johnson's famous 1928 recording. So good. I came up with the intro and outro on a Japanese electric guitar from 1965, so it's this little suite now. The band fell right into it, it's just beautiful how they got the pulse I was aiming at. And to top it off, Tinu Heiniger plays a Sidney-Bechet-style clarinet that paved the way for a 1940s steel guitar I'm really proud of.

Next is I Been Treated Wrong. One of my first and still my favorite blues albums is "The Country Blues", a Folkways collection curated by Sam Charters. I think I was 16 or 17 when I first heard this. Imagine that, Bukka White, Blind Willie Johnson, the Memphis Jug Band, Robert Johnson and more on one album. It was like finding a door to another dimension, I couldn't believe it. The last song on side B is Washboard Sam's I Been Treated Wrong. I must have listened to this a thousand times. Big Bill Broonzy's guitar, that beautiful piano and this voice telling this incredible story in these simple words.

The funny thing is that early in my career I was often billed as a blues artist and I never understood this. Blues music has always been very important to me, especially country blues, not the Bonamassa-plastic oompah-oompah variety. But I've always been interested in more than that, you know, folklore, western swing, rock music. Anyway, this is by far the most downhome blues recording I've ever done. I never play straightforward twelve bar blues, especially not with my band. So this was a one take thing. After the last chorus we just looked at each other, wide grinning all around. Also it's kind of a tribute to my late mother. Her early life had been very difficult, to say the least.



On Top Of Old Smokey is a very old folk song. Its origins are unclear but probably date back to the 18th century. One of the first versions that surfaced came out of the Appalachians. Later The Weavers introduced it during the folk craze of the 60s and then Dave Van Ronk, Harry Belafonte, Bing Crosby and everybody's brother recorded it. I love the version Hank Williams does on the Mother's Best flour radio shows. So we went about it all 40s style, really reduced, bone dry. Hendrix Ackle plays such a beautiful piano. I took up playing pedal steel guitar two

years ago and this proved to be the perfect vehicle for my accomplishments on this wonderful instrument.

Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor is another ancient folk blues song. Everybody loves Mississippi John Hurt's version, curiously enough appearing as "Ain't No Tellin'" in the 1920s. This also was recorded all live, only the tenor banjo was overdubbed to give it a bit of a jug band drive. For the recording of this album we got hold of a very rare Slingerland Rolling Bomber drumkit from the 1940s. Simon Baumann loved it, the way it moved air. On this song you can hear that thing breathe, huff and puff. It's got an enormous bass drum that really drives this song, together with Poffet's fantastic upright bass. I can say in all modesty that Tom Etter and I really delivered on the guitars. Lyrically to me this is a bit of a counterpart to Careless Love, the narrator being afraid of his wife and the other woman's husband. I've always loved that song. At my age now I'm confident enough as a singer to perform it.

I found Days Of Heaven on a Randy Newman boxset that was given to me after a dear friend had passed away. He instructed his wife to show me his huge music collection and that I should take home anything I wanted. Imagine that. I've always been a fan of Randy Newman, who isn't, and I thought there might be a few cuts I'm not familiar with in this box. Lo and behold there's this solo piano demo from the 1980s. What an incredible song! This dark realism, sarcastic and brutally honest and this typical optimistic twist. I couldn't believe anybody else hadn't recorded this. So we did this jazz-shuffle thing and then Michael Flury, one of the best trombone players this planet has ever heard played a three part harmony on it. My instructions for him were, "play like the Salvation Army in a damp and deserted train station one week before Christmas." That's what he did.

Steady As We Go is the first original song on this album. The expression comes from seafaring lingo. "Steady as she goes" is what you yell at the helmsman when you want to keep a ship's current course. As humans we have that thing that we can go on regardless of the obstacles in our way, even if we put them there ourselves. At this point the fate of civilization as we know it seems to be unclear. We all know that the way we've been doing things will change. Either we will be forced to react or we find solutions as individuals, states, countries, continents. In any case it looks right now like change for the better is not really on the agenda and that losing hope seems realistic, that failure is an option. It just doesn't appeal to me.

Cool Water was written by the great Bob Nolan in 1936. The Sons Of The Pioneers had a hit record with their version in the early 40s. It's about a man and his mule named Dan getting lost in the desert, looking for water, meeting the devil and so forth. It's such a beautiful melody, it's got a great pace, a master class in songwriting. Again, this has been covered by a wide range of artists from Burl Ives and Frankie Laine to Joni Mitchell and The Replacements. I recorded a basic track of just spanish guitar and voice. Later Jürg fuyuzui Zurmühle came in and played shakuhachi, a japanese bamboo flute. He's a true master of this instrument. It's a very moving, direct sound, this column of air transporting these emotions. I also had the pleasure of Rhani Krija visiting the studio. He plays in Sting's band. With his arsenal of percussion sounds he lets you feel the dry heat, the shifting sands and finally the cool water. I added heavily processed pedal steel and piano.



After a heated discussion with the lady of the house I drove to the recording studio one night, switched the radio on and Stand By Your Man started playing. Tammy Wynette's voice cuts through the thickest fog, the steel guitar wailing away. During the first chorus I thought to myself, "this should be sung by a man." Thus came the late addition of this song to the canon. We recorded this on the first morning of the session, unrehearsed, cut to the chase. What you hear is exactly what we played and sang on the studio floor, just the four of us, all live. Tom Etter's guitar teleports us to Memphis, the year is 1956.

Some years ago I was driving from New York City to Washington DC. After a detour to visit the C.F. Martin & Co. guitar factory in Pennsylvania I needed a place to stay and ended up in this creaky old hotel in Havre De Grace, a small town in Maryland. This is where the Susquehanna river meets the Chesapeake Bay. A lovely area, where Captain John Smith met Pocahontas in the early 17th century. Havre De Grace missed becoming the capital of the United States by one vote during the First Congress in 1789. Today it is known for the iconic Concord Lighthouse and - to a lesser degree - as the hometown of David Hasselhoff. That is true, as is every single line in the lyrics. It was a couple of weeks before Halloween when I visited. Pumpkins, dark and quiet streets, not much to see, we're doing great, move along.

Most of the men and women making headlines are not the people you would like to spend time with. That's because They're No Good. This initially had a kind of rhumba groove. When I started playing it on electric guitar the rhythm got streamlined and we got rid of most of the chords. Michael Flury's trombone was added later. He reacted to the lyrics.

A couple of months before I started working on this album Tom Petty passed away. His music and his songwriting had and continue to have a huge influence on me. After the seminal Wildflowers album in 1994 Petty reassembled his Heartbreakers and recorded songs for a soundtrack to the movie "She's The One". You'll forget about this movie while you watch it, but the songs and tunes are really, really good. My favorite is California, presumably a Wildflowers outtake. It's classic Petty with its wry humour ("California's been good to me, I hope it don't fall into the sea") and it reflects the beauty and mood of this majestic land in very simple, elegant and straightforward words. I thought it would be a fitting tribute to the great man to whom I owe so much and it's got a nice connection to the original version: Stephen Marcussen, the mastering engineer for STEADY AS WE GO did the original mastering for Petty's recording of this overlooked gem. California's always been very good to me, too.

What was the recording process like?

Our studio is just one big room that sounds excellent. There is no separation, everything bleeds into everything else. To me, that's what music is about. You move air together, resonance is what you want. We didn't set out to recreate something from a bygone era.

But if you listen to recordings from the

40s and 50s you hear musicians playing off of each other. That's what we love about these recordings, like the Blue Note stuff, or early blues, western swing and certainly jazz recordings. They've got a vibe going.

This is not a rock'n'roll record. We didn't play very loud, used small amps but still got full volume. Nobody was wearing headphones. That makes a huge difference.

I sang almost all of the songs live into a nice old ribbon microphone. We have a tasty selection of mics and preamps on hand. The Slingerland Rolling Bomber drumkit was recorded with just three mics, which also picked up the room nicely. It's a joy to record like that. Everybody pays attention to the big picture, it's like playing straight to mixdown. The entire session was done on eleven tracks. Recording this way comes with a price: There is no fixing things. Everything is on all tracks. You can't really edit beyond simple cuts. That saves you a lot of time because you really have to focus on the performance. And it helps if you play with world class musicians.

Sonically I am very proud of this album. It sounds just the way it sounded in my dreams. And I am very happy with the mastering by Stephen Marcussen. He said it was a relief to be involved in a production with actual musicians playing together. What you hear on CD or vinyl is basically how it was for us when we played and sang.

