

SOUL

by Mark Stelmach
photo by Jenny James

Soul Asylum may not have had any albums among *Rolling Stone's* selection of the top 100 albums of the 80's, but then again, who cares? What is important is that these guys are definitely a band to be reckoned with. If you don't agree, throw *Made to be Broken* (or any album for that matter) on your stereo, crank the fucker as loud as your ears permit, and sit back and enjoy. If your opinion of them doesn't change, forget the whole idea and throw a *Loverboy* album on instead.

It seems that everyone has been attempting to come up with a suitable definition to describe their music, but it's not easy. Do they resemble Cheap Trick? Maybe. How about Husker Du? Sure, this reference may be legitimate, but it too still falls short of accurateness. There's always the REO Speedwagon comparison (OK, who ever made this assimilation is more of a moron than Dan Quayle). The bottom line is that Soul Asylum is quickly creating its own genre of music.

It has been approximately two years since *Hang Time* came out, so news of Soul Asylum doing some recording was music to my ears. In order to practice some of the new material, they passed through Madison once again. As usual, they proved that they can jam live like almost no other band around. Before the show, frontman Dave "lawn boy" Pirner (check *Motorbooty* issue #4 for details) kindly consented to doing an interview. Not only did he agree to do one, he generously provided the beer. So, without any further rambling, I'll let you read the interview. The live pictures are from the Appleton show on 5/12/90. The interview was conducted on 4/14/90. As a wise person once said, "Give the fish a drink."

SR I hear Soul Asylum has a new album coming out in August.

DAVE Yeah, we haven't mixed it yet, but we just finished recording it. We're going to mix it in New York in two days. There's a lot to tell, 'cause it's been about two years worth of work now. It's been too long since we've put an album out at last.

SR Weren't you recording out in LA for a while?

DAVE Yeah, what we did was we went to LA and played everything live, altogether in a big huge room in a warehouse. Actually, we started recording on the A&M lot because they have a big soundstage there where they make Budweiser commercials and shit. It was great 'cause we played for three or four days and then they kicked us off 'cause the cops and neighbors were complaining, and they said it was too loud. So it was kind of ironic to be thrown off your own record label's recording space. It's just like getting kicked out of your mom's basement. So then we moved to another ware-



ASYLUM

house and finished the record with the same methods. It's pretty much live, except for the vocals.

SR I heard an interview that you gave for an LA radio station in 1987, and in it you mentioned that when recording, you guys turn up everything as loud as it can go in order to try and get the same sound in the studio as you get live.

DAVE Yeah, I guess the reason I said that is because at one point or another there may be an inclination for somebody to think that you don't have to play as loud in the studio because you're giving someone an arbitrary volume with your amp. We've never been able to get the sound that we wanted out of our amps without having it really loud. Part of the concept with recording this record was to have microphones set up all over the fucking room in order to try and get a more realistic feeling of what that volume is supposed to be. We were kind of chicken to make an album this way because when the song feels good, everyone's performance goes onto the record; but if three guys play great and one guy doesn't, there's nothing that guy can do about it 'cause it's his performance.

SR I heard that A&M is a lot different to record for than Twin/Tone in that A&M is much more concerned with what music will be coming out of the studio.

DAVE It's definitely different recording for A&M 'cause we get more money to record a record. We made records for Twin/Tone in three days, and now we're spending seven weeks with this record. Usually major labels ask for demo tapes before you go into the studio. It's funny because once you're like Eric Clapton, you don't have to do demos anymore. You just go in there and say "I'm going to make my record now," and then everyone goes, "OK, cool Eric." Everyone's still kind of unsure who we are and what we are up to.

SR I read that when Twin/Tone was going to merge with A&M, you guys were going to clear your problem with debts. Is that happening?

DAVE We spent ten times more money making records (for Twin/Tone) than we make selling records. In effect, we were deeply indebted to Twin/Tone for all the records we made for them. We pretty much got that paid off when we got signed up with A&M, but now we have an incredible debt with A&M. But if they drop us from their label, they can't ask for that money back.

SR Are you guys pleased with how *Clam, Dip and Other Delights* has been doing?

DAVE It was a fun record for us, but I haven't really heard any incredible reactions toward it. It just seems to be an album for people who are into the band. Personally, it was a good record for me because it was a couple of old things that were not exactly near-and-dear, but were forgotten, and I always thought they were kind of cool. When we put out the English version, we decided we had too much time to sit on it (before it was released in America). We recorded *Hang Time* and there were all these songs that we didn't put on it, like

"Artificial Heart". "Artificial Heart" was probably one of the things I enjoyed most in my recording career. There's a movie for it too. It's a narration of the story. It's a hacker, a real bad horror movie with a lot of slashing and blood.

SR That's what MTV didn't want for a video?

DAVE Yeah, it's really kind of horror stuff, but I had a really good time making it. I felt really lucky that I had time to do something like that. It was exciting and instructive. I don't know how productive it was, but it was definitely constructive.

SR How did you guys get involved with the Neil Young tribute album, *The Bridge*?

DAVE (Dave pauses) Are they playing a Meat Puppets' cover down there, (the Poster Children are playing) or is that the stereo? Why weren't the Meat Puppets on that record, that's the thing.

SR ...or Killdozer.

DAVE ...or Killdozer...or Souled' American; they play tons of good Neil Young covers. It was just one of things. A guy had a vision and wanted to put the album together to raise money for Multiple Sclerosis. We were just one of the bands that he wanted to be on the record I guess.

SR Any special reason why "Barstool Blues" was chosen?

DAVE We were covering three Neil Young songs, and then Danny said, "Let's do that one," so it was like, "Cool, let's do it, let's learn a new one." We just always liked that song I guess. It's a good song. We rocked out a little bit. That whole record is great.

SR When *Hang Time* first came out, *Rolling Stone* compared the album, specifically the guitar and vocals, to Neil's *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*. They said it was one of the best albums, as far as guitar and vocals, since 1964. I thought that was a great compliment.

DAVE I thought that was a great compliment too. I was flattered. But you really can't put that shit into perspective or take it too seriously. It doesn't seem true to me because it's like two completely different kinds of records.

SR Why was *Say What You Will* re-



DAN MURPHY

leased on CD as an LP rather than as the original EP? DAVE It's funny because people do this kind of shit all the time. You know, you're always putting out some funky 12 inch in England that has a song on there that no one will ever hear. You throw shit here and you throw shit there just to mix things up. It keeps people guessing. It was supposed to be an LP when we made it, and the people at Twin/Tone said it should be an EP. We said, "Fuck, it's our first record, I guess we better take a couple of songs off." It was pretty heavy stuff. It was pretty horrifying to listen to. The problem was that the whole LP could have been rounded off; we could have mixed it a little bit more. We didn't really think about it too much. The selections that went on the EP weren't necessarily the right ones, so we thought we'd throw all that shit back into the pool

SR Can you explain why stuff from *Say What You Will* is never done live anymore?

DAVE Because we were Loud Fast Rules and we were writing all these songs, then we became Soul Asylum and Pat (Morely) quit the band, and then Grant (Young) joined the band, and I just had to say, OK, I'm going to start over. I wanted to have that start on everything with a fresh approach. It's funny to look back on those songs, they're so fucking long and it's just hysterical.

SR Madison has always been some kind of trouble for Soul Asylum. The O'Cayz shows always had sound problems, the Turner Hall show had sound problems and crowd problems, and the last show at Walley Gators had problems also. Is Madison becoming a big bummer to play?

DAVE We've always sucked here. I've been coming to this town for so long. I'm from Minneapolis, but all my friends went to college in Madison, so I'd come down here a lot and hang out. We just suck when we play in Madison. You know, it's three hundred degrees and the fucking ceiling is falling in or you can't get beer. That was the case with the last show; we couldn't get beer. We're in fucking Madison and there's no beer at the show! Who's going to have a good time? The band has never played without drinking beer, so we're just kind of going, "great, let's have another soda." We've played

churches and the hippie co-op, and we have never really had something here. It seemed like for a while I knew what was going on with this city. We kind of had a rapport. But maybe it just got too dispersed. There's new people every four years here, so maybe it's just the turnover of people. Now we don't know who we are anymore 'cause people perceive us differently. There's all these new kids coming in.

SR Is there any chance you and Dan (Murphy) could take your acoustic shows on the road or possibly into the studio?

DAVE Well, see the thing that happened was that we played these (acoustic) shows often enough so I wrote a few songs for that kind of thing. A couple of them may or may not appear on this record. The band still plays

on the songs, but they're written for an acoustic setting. I don't think we'd ever do a Pirner and Murphunked kind of thing. It's more of a live thing because we have to do it. You know, we have to play at a record store 'cause we owe the guy there because he let us sleep at his house the last time we were in town. It's kind of a gesture. It's fun, but it's something we have to be motivated to do, or otherwise it's like "let's play with the band." It's nerve-racking, so it has to be kind of an intimate setting, some place small, without too much pressure or else I think we'd both explode and have to hide behind our amps that aren't there.

SR When a band is as far

along as Soul Asylum, people begin to talk about the band "selling out". Is this an issue you guys even worry about?

DAVE No. You can't ever worry about what anybody says about your band, otherwise you would have quit a long time ago because you suck when you start out. Everybody says you're are trying this, and that you're a hardcore band, or you're a punk rock band. This new record has some mellower shit on it and it happens to be what I'm into right now. We had an amazing experience with Steve Jordan who produced the record. It was fun to work with him, we had a really good time. Steve said to me, "Aren't you worried about putting this stuff on the record?" We recorded sixteen songs and there's going to



GRANT YOUNG

DAVE PIRNER

be twelve songs on the record. It's going to be a matter of throwing the mellow shit off or throwing the hard shit off because there's a bunch of both. What kind of format I write the songs in, whether it's a folk song or a hardcore song, has never mattered to me. It's never been a criteria for what I do. I've always tried to think independently of what kind of genre I'm involved with. You're a punk rock band when you start out, not because you want to be, but because that's the only way you can play. So, I told Steve we've never worried about it



KARL MUELLER

before because we've always managed to put out whatever we've managed to come up with. It's a band process, and we put out whatever feels good. I think we've managed to be diverse enough that there can't be that many expectations on what style of music we're supposed to be playing.

SR Soul Asylum has been compared to Husker Du, Cheap Trick, U2 and even REO Speedwagon. Do comparisons like these bother you?

DAVE REO Speedwagon! I've never heard that. Come on? That's a pretty low blow. U2, that's a pretty low blow too. The whole idea is to play something and see how people react to it. Rarely do you evoke the reaction that you are trying to get. Basically you're trying to get somebody as excited about your idea as you are, which is never going to happen. People are going to try and assimilate you with something they can relate to, whether it's fucking REO Speedwagon or whatever. I think it's funny. I think it's a gas to play covers and fuck with people and to have fun and not worry what people think about you. That's what it's always been about for us. It's a laugh 'cause when people go from saying you suck shit to saying you sound like REO, and you're the same band, it doesn't add up. If you're going to do your thing, you got to do your thing.

SR Are things getting to the point where you guys feel like you're getting somewhere?

DAVE You can't say you've made it somewhere if you never really set out to get some place. That's what I think is special about this band. It's a stereotypical rock band. We toured for eight years and played to no one forever. I get to spend a lot more time on it now and I feel

good about the fact that there is actually going to be someone coming to the show. I think we've definitely made progress. I feel like we are playing great on this album. It's phenomenal how much progress we have made as players, and that's what it's all about. It's exciting as hell. It's not what's happening outside the band that I get into, it's what's happening inside the band.

SR What is to be expected in terms of Soul Asylum's future?

DAVE The future for any rock band is always pretty frightening. In most situations you do something that is working toward your future. Playing in a rock band is not exactly working toward your future. So, in that respect, it's exciting and it's scary. It's a roulette kind of thing. You gotta roll with it and you gotta keep playing and keep your head down and keep writing and just do it. If you start to think career-wise about it, then you are getting involved with what people talk about when they speak of "selling out" or "buying in". If you want to play music, it's a pretty special life to be able to have. I don't have another job right now and I'm pretty happy about that. I know it's not going to last forever. I'm realistic about that too. Anything can happen, that's the whole idea. ☺



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