

SPOTLIGHT



Mark Seiliger

Craig Finn, Galen Polivka, Tad Kubler, Bobby Drake

THE HOLD STEADY

Aging gracefully, struggling mightily and thinking positively

ON THE HOLD STEADY'S FIFTH ALBUM, *Heaven Is Whenever*, singer Craig Finn continues his evolution from a scenester reveling in gritty detail to an elder statesman with wisdom to impart. "On the last record, I was concerned with aging and the attempt to age gracefully, which is a tricky business in rock 'n' roll," Finn says. "This record sounds more like it came from a 38-year-old, at least lyrically."

The band laid down demos last year while on the road touring behind 2008's *Stay Positive*, and recorded most of the album last fall during a two-week stint in a studio in upstate New York. Without piano from Franz Nicolay—who left amicably to pursue various other projects—the music this time tilts more toward Thin Lizzy than Bruce Springsteen, with burly guitar riffs that latch on tight.

"We were able to go back and experience more space in the music, have a little more openness," Finn says. "We really enjoyed that. Rather than try to fill up every little space with music, I think things are able to breathe a little more."

Finn had specific ideas for subject matter on the album, although as often happens, he found himself surprised at the way the songs developed. "I definitely

come in with a theme in mind, but there's always some part of it that reveals itself to you," he says. "This record, I was really kind of concerned with struggle and reward. Heaven is the ultimate reward in the Christian sense, so I was thinking a lot about that."

Finn introduced a handful of recurring characters on the Hold Steady's first album, 2004's *Almost Killed Me*, to steer the narratives of his songs. Although they still pop up, his references to the likes of Hallelujah, Gideon and Charlemagne have grown more oblique.

"The characters are used to move stories along, so they all sort of represent something that's always there," Finn says. "But I've gotten away from using their names so much. I really want people to be able to put their own lives and their own experiences in these songs."

It's not a stretch to say that the new album also reflects Finn's own life and experiences over the past few years. "I feel like I'm in a pretty positive place," he says. "Certainly this is the best job I've ever had. Flying around the world and playing rock shows to excited fans, it's pretty easy to be positive."

—Eric R. Danton

AS SEEN IN: MAY 2010
M MUSIC & MUSICIANS
MAGAZINE

