

SPOTLIGHT



SOCIAL DISTORTION

An all-American band explores its rock 'n' roll roots and its own checkered past

David Hidalgo Jr., Mike Ness, Brent Harding, Jonny Wickersham

IF WELL-INKED SOCIAL DISTORTION frontman Mike Ness doesn't already have a "Lucky Seven" tattoo somewhere on his body, now's the time to get one. On *Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes*, the California band's seventh album, Ness continues his streak of building fresh songs from familiar ingredients. By now, the singer and guitarist should have exhausted every possible blues-country-punk permutation—but against all odds, he's still finding new ways to blend those influences. When the group does step outside its typical parameters, Ness observes, "I just see them as enhancements to what we've already done."

What they've done is impressive indeed. The band fans refer to as "Social D" formed in Orange County in 1978 and released its debut, *Mommy's Little Monster*, five years

later. Although Ness had grown up listening to the Rolling Stones and Johnny Cash, he waited until 1988's *Prison Bound* to begin incorporating those and other classic sounds into his songwriting. "When I was starting the band at 17, there was a period where I put that stuff aside and couldn't sit through a five-minute blues song," Ness says. "It had to be fast and loud and hard. But by the mid-'80s that stuff got really old and punk started to stereotype itself. I felt the need, as an American band, to grab hold of my roots and start integrating that American music in combination with everything I'd learned from punk."

He's done just that ever since—and never quite as directly as on *Hard Times*, the first Social D album Ness has produced himself. While Ness—a onetime heroin addict

and all-around troublemaker—challenged himself to break from previous albums and write about topics other than his own checkered past, he couldn't help but incorporate a few autobiographical elements. "Writing on the Wall" is actually about my elder son, who unfortunately has chosen to go down a similar path I did at his age," Ness says. "It's been a rough couple years. He's been crazy, and without being literal, I wanted the song to have a certain mystery to it. It could be about a lover, or it could be about a family member."

"Not everyone has been in the same situations I have, but emotions and feelings are universal," he adds. "What I hope to do when I'm writing is capture those same emotions."

—Kenneth Partridge

IRON AND WINE | ADELE | DURAN DURAN | ERIC JOHNSON

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Blues power

DECEMBERISTS  
Barn burners

BRIGHT EYES  
Keyed up

STING  
Exploring his history,  
with strings attached

ZEP'S MASTERPIECE  
IN THE STUDIO  
PEDAL PUSH