

Q&A



Brian D. Garrity

Dan Murphy, Dave Pirner, Michael Bland, Tommy Stinson

SOUL ASYLUM

After six years, the chart-toppers are finally ready to rock again

TWENTY YEARS AGO MINNEAPOLIS-based Soul Asylum broke through with their triple-platinum album, *Grave Dancers Union*. Solid work followed, but the loss of bassist Karl Mueller to cancer in 2005, coupled with leader Dave Pirner's move to New Orleans, cast doubts on the band's future. *Delayed Reaction*—the group's first album in six years—shows fans have nothing to fear. Rounded out by founding guitarist Dan Murphy, longtime Prince drummer Michael Bland and Guns N' Roses bassist Tommy Stinson, the current lineup fuses garage-rock fire into Pirner's increasingly sophisticated compositions. From his home studio, Pirner recounted the making of the new album.

Why six years between albums?

After Karl passed away we weren't sure what would happen. I was approaching things cautiously, though we never stopped playing together. We sort of became a live band, and there didn't seem to be a pressing reason to put out an album. Eventually Michael said, "Come on out to L.A.—let's record some stuff."

Did you want to change your sound?

I'm always trying to push the parameters

of that. I always loved it when the Rolling Stones did a country song or Led Zeppelin played a reggae thing. I grew up listening to the Beatles and the Stones covering old R&B and blues songs. That's part of why I moved to New Orleans. I wanted to embrace the music here and let it inform me.

Did you succeed with "Cruel Intentions"?

I'm still a rock boy in a jazz town, but I had a breakthrough and was able to put that into a song. I tried to dig deep and learn things in an academic way, but that was holding me back, so I started playing by ear. One day I was doodling and a piano player said, "Hey man, you know what you're doing? You're playing jazz." I thought, "All right!" I was just dabbling, but if he said that's what it was, I figured I must be getting somewhere. "Cruel Intentions" is about as far as I'm willing to take that—just so I don't start abusing that form of music!

What was done in your home studio?

Most of the vocals, some guitars, some keyboards and most of the editing. At one point the band came here and we all sat and played. We ended up using a few things from

that session, but mainly the studio is for me. There's a closet-sized room that I put amps in, and there's the main room, which could fit two and a half ping-pong tables. And there's a drum room, about the size of a drum kit. It's all soundproofed, so I can play the drums at 4 a.m. if I want. It's great being able to walk in, press a button and start playing bass or drums or guitar or piano with tape rolling.

What's your go-to guitar?

A Martin D-28. My next-door neighbor works on guitars and he's getting ready to break the neck and reset it, which makes me nervous. I also have an Epiphone Bluesmaster—my favorite for grabbing and throwing on a plane.

Reflections on *Grave Dancers Union*?

That album was pivotal in the band's evolution. We were getting our feet into what it means to make things work. It became a situation where the playing had to be as good as the music. Today, almost by accident, the band is perfectly tailored to the material. The idea is to serve the songs in such a way that we do them better than anyone else.

—Russell Hall

'I wanted to embrace the music of New Orleans and let it inform me.'

