

It's a strange thing penning the liner notes for your own greatest hits record. In this case particularly strange because, for one thing, none of these songs were hits. For another, the band continues to write songs, play shows, and make records. The Hawks abide. Still, we've gladly undertaken the task. It's not the first time we have adapted a definition to our own idiosyncratic uses and meanings. Those who buy this record (or more likely get it for free from any number of sources) might be familiar with our tendency to take a well-known concept and twist it up and smoke it. Here goes . . .

Our beginnings as songwriters, back at the turn of the century, were childlike, with swaggering and staggering first steps, a thrilling patch of colorful flowers and weeds. Many things were on the minds of Rob Waller and brothers Anthony and Paul Lacques at the close of the 20th century – earth as self regulating organism, love, animals, death (always death), geographical features near and far, and the possibilities of the revived outlaw country rocker. We'd rise up in defiance like the rebel poets of old. It had been a sinister year in Nashville, indeed, a sinister decade. We wanted to put the lights out in Music City, USA. Nashville is cashville, my assville. The Hawks imagined an America post oil, fertilizer, and gated communities, and an American folk music with tendrils cracking concrete to reach people aware of the ground they stand on. And the craziest thing of all is we were convinced (and still pretty much are) that we could do it. The band name was a code, a question, a diffident invitation: if you see hawks, then maybe we should talk.

2000. Things are mellow, mellow's last gasp, in this last Year of Clinton. From a comfy Echo Park front porch, the Hawks unhurriedly explore apocalyptic exposition and harmony vocal experimentation with Brantley Kearns, who wanders in occasionally with his fiddle. Rob's finding his country voice, and Paul's remembering his Telecaster licks from his days in bottom feeder country cover bands in the late 70's. We're drinking beer, writing ridiculous rants about Tom Hanks weeping at the Oscars, songs about Shaquille O'Neil and weevils plaguing the Waller kitchen cupboard. Anthony brings in tomes complete to the last stanza, which we put to melodies. We don't have cell phones.

One warm and bright afternoon we wander up to David Jackson's house in the Glendale hills to show him the songs we've been working on. Jackson, a virtuoso musician and crank, and high guru of L.A. country rock from its birthing in the 60's, ritualistically prepares highly concentrated coffee early in the day and then keeps it in a mayonnaise jar in the refrigerator. When we arrive he reconstitutes the java with scalding water, heavy sugar, and milk, and takes a quick listen to our songs. We play "I See Hawks In L.A." and "(Do You Mind If I Call You) Baby." That's a hit song, says Jackson. He sets up some mics and his ADAT system, and in 10 minutes we're recording. It's a surprise, no preparation, no worries, we just record it. We've included "I See Hawks In L.A." from that day on this collection. Thank you, David.

The imagery of our first songs is F-16s over the forest, whales, roadside fruit stands, maniacal fathers, missing mothers, dogs and death and first night stands. Ragged road and a setting sun. We were already looking towards an end of things. Where once I saw greed, I see the innocent tribe. Our beginning was a farewell. The bulk of our eponymous first CD was recorded in Rob and Katie's living room in their old wood bungalow east through trees from Echo Park Boulevard, a cocoon of books and old couches, and at Hyde Street Studios in San

Francisco, by brother Gabe Shephard. Rob and Paul on guitars, Anthony on drums, Brantley Kearns on fiddle, and Jackson on bass. *ISHILA* was released on September 11th, 2001.

America we love you but you've chosen darkness. Our sweet little band was knocked about by malevolent geopolitical winds, and only a year old. Anthony left to do History Channel documentaries. Paul got married, then Rob got married. We met to songify amidst obligations and schedules, innocence fading. We politicized our music, bitterly and reluctantly and sometimes unconsciously, our awareness blindsided by the collapse of a large chunk of America's psyche. Our song "Humboldt," written as the bombs fell on caravans in Afghanistan, is a small fist shaken at a new American government we feared was invincible and sinister. At a Starbucks down the hill from Paul L and Victoria's Silverlake house, two LAPD young warriors stand behind us in line, radiophones crackling. "They want some 9/11 acknowledgement," says Rob. "I'm not going to give it to them." It was lonely to condemn the President back then. "Humboldt" used to end with these lines: "you can have your September 11th, I'm heading off to a stoney heaven." Our intended meaning was, we're not going to be moved by your manipulation of the 9/11 tragedy. But when we first sang the song live in summer 2002 at Galapagos club in Brooklyn and the Knitting Factory only a stone's throw from the twin towers site, we could see a moment of hurt bewilderment sweep through the audience like a slap in the face. We dropped the line.

The Hawks shifted sonically with every gig across Southern California, with guest guitarists on bass, a wife on drums, till bassist and big league vocalist Paul Marshall and drummer Shawn Nourse joined us at Ronnie Mack's Barndance in Burbank 2002 and at SXSW 2003, respectively. The big sound in our big heads was here at last.

It took us three years to finish our next record, *Grapevine*. Were we a bit nervous to make the sophomore follow up? Did life indeed get in the way? Did we have no money? We recorded the entire album with two prototype Mojave microphones on a Korg D-1600 we bought with the proceeds of a score we did for a History Channel cattle ranching documentary. Sweet Korg. 16 bits of stone cold memory. ProTools may be the industry standard but it distracts and dement's the artist's mind. The portable Korg with its 3 inch monochrome screen sits silently in on the table and doesn't bug you.

We released *Grapevine* in 2004. Two battered love songs, one sad valentine to Earth, one trucker song, songs of unsettled youth coming to hard landing, a song about Jimmy Carter, high desert madness, the Book of Revelations, a bluegrass song about theft too big to fail sung by Brantley. Our good buddy John McDuffie's pedal steel tells many tales throughout. Cody Bryant on banjo and Richie Lawrence on accordion first show up in these tracks.

Long serious reviews and good airplay for *Grapevine*. A glimmering of a career beckoned, and we hit the road. Dawn to dusk to midnight talks, on the 10, the 40, the 95, on planes, on floors in New York City and Austin and Lander, WY. Four guys and gear in a GMC Yukon, from L.A. to Vermont and back, and back, festivals and dives and theaters and record store stages and tiny radio studios, and back. XM satellite radio, iPod, laptop, Red Bull, cigarettes sometimes but always plenty of whiskey, and herb for the all night drive. Nice work if you can get it. Paul Marshall wanted to bring his gun along but chose weed over weapon.

The faux leather seats of the Yukon are scorched by the powerful and fiery political discussions that rage as the band pounds down the interstate. Tears have been shed. Feelings hurt. And yet compromise and respect have come around too. The two poles of the Hawks' political thought are held by our eldest brothers. Paul Lacques is far to the left of all save his siblings and mom, and Paul Marshall (at first glance) sits on the right. The two have each gone so far around the corner of their ideologies that they occasionally meet on the other side. The younger Hawks Rob and Shawn both hang around on the left side of the equation. Shawn wishes for humans to behave at their best and to not hurt each other. Waller is a bit more nihilistic and in love with post-human landscape, convinced that the nuclear chapter of man's folly will conclude spectacularly where it began, on American soil. We're all drawn to the drama of the underdog, the stone in David's hand as he faces Goliath. What could be better than to throw that single perfect stone?

Mostly the road is big, big fun. This band can eat. We've eaten one two many Waffle House smothered and covered combos on five day tears through the Carolinas. We've searched for hours for a breakfast joint in New Orleans that had been shut down for 2 years, eaten our way through Austin, and we make sure our mountain tours include the Red Iguana Cafe in Salt Lake, best Mexican food on the planet. We've created a powerful psychedelic dessert chocolate sauce with indoor hydroponic Quebecois and Belgian chocolate in a Vermont cabin, worked as prep cooks in Rob's wife Katie's deeply missed bowling alley diner in Highland Park. Between gigs we've had time to hike a trail to an underground river in Wyoming, wander the streets of Lafayette at dawn, see ospreys dive at Russian River river otters, get lost in the high desert, jump into any quarry or creek pool that a local invites us to. We've had many a home cooked meal from a kind fan, crashed on many a kind couch. A driven, cutthroat band we have never been. We are of a softer sort.

2006 arrived with a batch of road proven songs, and we felt ready to rock in studio. Signed to a new independent label, Sovereign Artists, with wizened vets of both SDS and Warner Brothers Records, us Hawks thought we might be on the verge of breaking through to a more mainstream audience. Big meetings and big plans at big wood tables, dueling lawyers. A real budget, and we recorded with Burbank tracking *maestro* and independent crop circle expert Paul Dugre, with our new labelmate Chris Hillman guesting on mandolin, and pedal steel magician Dave Zirbel laying down his Sonoma County vibe. Alas, the label burned through its mysterious Denver seed money, quite a pile, and folded, just as we delivered the finished master and artwork. The good gentlemen of SA gave us everything, songs and art, to do with as we wished, and we cranked up our own Western Seeds label again, releasing *California Country* on summer solstice 2006. Thanks, brothers.

The cover of *California Country* is dark--a highway gas station in Idaho at 3 a.m. Inside, a dark concert photo, dark lettering. We're not a young band. Were we ever? Songs about angry political vandalism, the paving over of California, soul rot in a Raddison, an uptempo murder/suicide ballad, a racist senator confronts a criminal President, we gamble away our tour money, split up, slag Houston, deal meth to ex-Marines, predict (rather accurately) the collapse of the economic good life. Hard times are here again, indeed. Justice is for the rich man, and Jesus is for the rest. What's gotten into us?

The release of *California Country* launched a long U.S. summer tour and got the Hawks over

to UK for the first time. We climbed on a super liner with Kip Boardman and Tony Gilkyson and headed to the British Isles, arriving in time for the mysteriously ephemeral jihadist bomb plot that turned Heathrow airport into a giant and angry waiting room. We played a venerated roots music basement in London, folk clubs in the Midlands, a tented festival in the holy hills of Scotland that passed like a dream. Far from the surveillance cameras that blanket England's avenues and rooftops, we felt the primeval tug of our Scots Irish and Irish roots in these green and gray hills, the DNA of the fiddle tune that runs through all that is Country and Western. Who knew that enthusiastic and literate crowds with knowledge of our songs would await us? Was Europe the better home for our orphaned career? Were we like the jazzers of old who found their audience and their dignity across the Atlantic? Maybe so, maybe so.

With *Shoulda Been Gold* we've broken the every-other-year CD release spell, coming on the heels of last year's *Hallowed Ground* (Big Book Records). We've included only one tune from 2008, "Highway Down," but it's got the flavoring of all the songs—a lonely road through the San Joaquin valley, wounded land we love.

Rob and Paul L were driving around musing on a title for a greatest hits record that contains no hits, and the title and title song resulted. We recorded it on a hot June afternoon at Shawn's house, along with two duets between Rob and Carla Olson: "Laissez Les Bon Temps Roulet," with real deal Cajun fiddle from Lisa Haley, and a David Allan Coe minor classic, "Bossier City," with the return of John McDuffie's honky tonk steel. Carla's a deep and soulful singer, from her days with the Textones through records with Mick Taylor and Gene Clark, and she's got big producer ears. It was sure fun working with her.

Summer '09 feels strangely similar to summer '99. Slow. Our new songs aren't fighting an administration or our own warpage of soul. Maybe the hope and the butterfly and Barack Obama are all a mirage, a *fata morgana*, a letdown, but something new is coming, and the feds and the rest of us humans won't be able to control it. The Hawks and their families are growing greens and tomatoes in our back yards, hope you are too.

This record also includes some previously recorded unreleased material. "Sexy Vacation" was a hit in the basement of Cole's Bar, 6th and Main east of downtown L.A., if nowhere else. Is this the first time we've mentioned Cole's? Holy cow, this is an incomplete history indeed. Cole's, where we hosted every last roots and alt country band in Southern California, every Wednesday then Friday for three years, will likely need its own history, or record, or major motion picture. "Soul Power," featuring our brothers from Double Naught Spy Car, makes an overdue appearance. All the new stuff is mixed by our new good friend Fulton Dingley, of Topanga late of Lincolnshire, UK. Joe Gastwirt, who's mastered every Grateful Dead album since *The Beginning*, worked his mysterious magic on these tracks and carried us across the finish line.

We hope you like it and hope you stick with us as we gather our wits and songs together one day for *Greatest Hits Volume Two*.

PL and RW
Los Angeles, California
July 2009