



The Derailers soldier on

By Dawn Pomento, July 2006

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The Derailers are en route between gigs in Louisiana, leaving Lafayette and heading to Baton Rouge. Lead singer and founding member Brian Hofeldt says over his cell phone that he and the band always have a great time in Louisiana because the food is uniformly good, and the people are always smiling. His band gathers fans at their energetic live shows, so Hofeldt is understandably cheerful about touring.

The well-chosen words just roll out from him, "The Derailers are always out on the road, visiting our fine friends and fans in this great land of ours."

It's pretty clear from the start that Hofeldt will be unfailingly polite, enthusiastic and wisely careful in his comments. There won't be any complaints or revelations.

But The Derailers, who released "Soldier of Love" in June on Palo Duro, wouldn't have survived for over a decade without self-control and a plan for success. Most of that plan hinges on delivering a good show, even if that means a little sweat or discomfort.

Hofeldt admits, "I've sort of been ruing the fact that we decided to wear suits. One day, we decided that's what our band uniform is going to be. There's something about looking sharp that's important to us. People coming out, spending their hard earned entertainment dollars. With all the choices they have to make today, for entertainment, and they decided to spend it on us, we want to look sharp and help entertain them."

Entertaining the fans extends to a classic rock and roll song structure. Hofeldt says, "We're very oriented to the three-minute song. That's sort of another of that '60s throwback thing. Over the course of the evening we play a 90-minute, 2-hour show. We're doing a lot of songs. But that's all right; that's the way we like it. After a while, a song should be done by three minutes, I think."

"Once again, just like the suits in summertime, sometimes having three-minute songs just means we have to play more songs." Hofeldt jokes, "If we jammed a little bit, we could maybe cut our number of songs in half."

The band look and retro sound go all the way back to 1994, when Hofeldt and his longtime friend Tony Villanueva formed The Derailers. The two were from Oregon, but they aspired to the Bakersfield Sound with Beatles influences and found musical success with the band in Austin. Villanueva, who took most of the lead vocals, has since left the band to pursue a higher calling as a minister.

When asked if Villanueva has heard this new release, the first by the band without him, Hofeldt sounds a bit surprised himself and says that Villanueva hasn't.

"I gotta get him a copy of this. He lives up in Oregon now. We're a little bit out of touch. I'm so busy doing what I'm doing, and he's busy doing what he's doing. I gotta give him a shout, get him a copy, see what he thinks. Tony's a great guy. He's always been very supportive and encouraging. I'll bet he'd be proud."

Like most big splits, the one between Villanueva and Hofeldt caused turmoil. "New Year's eve 2003 was his last gig." Hofeldt explains. "At that point, with Tony leaving the band, I just wasn't sure if I wanted to keep doing it because Tony and I had such a tight musical relationship, and we'd been doing that for 10 years at that point, and gosh, it was like a divorce. I missed my buddy. But I took a month off and talked to the guys in the band, and we decided to forge on."

The current guys in the band are Ed Adkins on bass and backup vocals, Scott Matthews on drums, Sweet Basil McJagger on piano and organ, and Chris Schlotzhauer on pedal steel and backup vocals.

"Soldiers of Love" pares down the extra production value that had been added, with mixed success, to the last two Derailers releases on Sony, "Meet the Derailers" and "Genuine."

This is also the first Derailers CD on Palo Duro, which makes Hofeldt especially happy. "Palo Duro is a great little label. The last four records have been with a major label. Now Sire/Warner Brothers, we really felt we were a priority, and they were interested in what we did. Then we moved to Sony, and we were sort of the stepchild eating in the garage. Kind of like a small fish in a big pond. We wanted to be with a label that looked at us as a priority and would be willing to do all it could to help us. It wasn't though such a bad experience with the others. But I wanted to be the big fish in the small pond instead. And Palo Duro was wide open. Chris Thomas, the president, he loved our show and loved our music. He was also a great cheerleader to what we were doing. We found a good home."

The Derailers found a new home and, unexpectedly, Hofeldt found a new collaborating partner for this CD.

Hofeldt recounts the story of how producer Buzz Cason approached the band. "We first ran into Buzz at Larry Joe Taylor's Texas Music Festival. That's a friend of ours who runs a great music festival, mostly Texas music, but he invites his friends from all over the country to come, too. I reckon he has over 50,00 people out there over the course of a weekend. Buzz was there as a singer/songwriter for

the showcases. Buzz had come up and seen us and really enjoyed the show. He said it reminded him of starting out with his band, The Casuals, in Nashville. He's had an amazing career as a songwriter and producer. He wrote 'Everlasting Love' among many others. He also wrote 'Soldier of Love,' which had been a favorite of mine, since I had been a big Arthur Alexander fan, and obviously The Beatles - they both cut that song."

Cason wanted to capture the live sound of The Derailers, and as producer, he seems to have hit that target. Hofeldt can't say enough about the affect Cason had on the band and the fast-paced CD.

"Buzz is a great guy, a great friend of ours. Somebody I'm glad I crossed paths with. We had quite a kinship from right at the beginning. We got together to write. Next thing you know we were making a record. We met each other in April, got together in August, and by December, were done."

The song that inspired the CD title, "Soldier of Love" has a retro feel, with the kind of doo-wop chorus that could have been written only in the 1960s. It mixes well with Hofeldt's own songs and the ones he co-wrote with Cason.

One Cason song, though, doesn't sound like any other on the CD or like a typical Derailers tune: "The One Before Me." Hofeldt explains that Cason had many older songs for Hofeldt to consider recording. "Of all the songs he had to offer, that one really appealed to me," Hofeldt says. "It's the overtones of jealousy, just sort of a passionate plea to a lover. I thought, 'Man, I like that song a lot, I think we can do it.' I hadn't done a lot of ballad singing previously. In The Derailers, my former partner Tony had done most of that, and I had been the rock and roll side of it. But a lot of people really react to that one."

Cason has been nominated to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame for his 50-year career in music. Hofeldt says "He is from a different generation, but he kicked me in the butt and motivated me. They don't call him Buzz for nothing - he takes the stairs two at a time. It made me move up a notch and take things really seriously."

While Cason's influence on "Soldiers of Love" is obvious, there's also no mistaking that Bakersfield Sound that has always been the thumping heart of The Derailers. That's because Bakersfield was the impetus for the band.

"For Tony and I, that was our common bond. We had a lot of common bonds, but that was definitely the main one. We loved that Bakersfield Sound. Some of the stuff that Buck Owens did in the '60s was at that time so shockingly in your face in some ways that it really turned people on their ear."

"And I think it retains some of that electricity today. His recorded legacy is amazing. He wasn't afraid to mix in his influences. And (did) that without worrying about what people thought. It was hugely successful, fortunately for what he wanted to do. We just really admired that and really wanted to have that same sensibility in what we did. And try to do it like Buck did."

Not only were The Derailers able to do it like Buck did, but they were able to perform for and with their hero. "We first met Buck in '95, I guess, and he was really knocked out by our sound." Hofeldt says, laughing.

"It sounded like him. Of course he liked it. He had us play at his 70th birthday party there in Bakersfield, and soon thereafter had us play New Year's Eve. These were his parties that he was throwing with his friends and family, and he chose us to entertain. That meant a great deal to us. He really loved our single, which I guess at the time was 'California Angel.' It was really amazing for us to get that nod from our hero. He was very kind and supportive to us throughout the years."

After that kind of musical endorsement, what else could a band aspire to? Hofeldt's answer is surprisingly frank and philosophical. "Some of these accomplishments that you reach for. It's like that song 'Everything I Believe In' on this new record. I wrote that with my friend Bill Whitbeck. And I got the idea from this quote by Carl Jung. I read a lot, and I don't think I was actually reading Jung, I think I read a quote from him in someone (else's work). You never know what you might find us reading here on the bus."

"To paraphrase it, we're happiest when we're striving to reach our goals and dreaming about what it will be like when we do, rather than the point when it happens, and it's maybe not as exciting or joy-inspiring as dreaming about it. Because once you've reached that place, you have other goals past that. It doesn't seem that monumental."

But still, what might happen next for the band? "This is a journey that we've done over the years with The Derailers. Things pop up that you wouldn't expect. We'll just keep hoping." Hofeldt says with a laugh, "Maybe we'll get to meet Paul McCartney one day."

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