

Widespread Panic 2008 Bio #Free Somehow#

“If I was to pass anything on to other bands, it would be find people you like and trust them” says John Bell (JB). If you’re gonna listen to anyone, it might as well be JB. As lead vocalist and rhythm guitarist for Widespread Panic he knows what it takes to make a band work. What started as a few friends picking guitars at the University of Georgia has evolved into one of the most successful rock bands in the world. In their 22 years together they’ve sold over 3 million albums and are consistently one of Pollstar’s Top 50 grossing live acts. No relationship that lasts this long is easy, but the path Widespread Panic has traversed has been marked with challenges; none more difficult than the 2002 loss of co-founder and lead guitarist Michael Houser to pancreatic cancer. Great bands overcome tragedy by bonding together and using it to grow. And that’s just what Widespread Panic has done.

Although the years following Houser’s death were trying, the arrival of guitarist Jimmy Herring in late 2006 signaled the dawn of a new era. It wouldn’t happen overnight, with hundreds of songs in rotation and a completely different show every evening it couldn’t, but as we enter 2008 Herring has mastered the band’s vast repertoire and is pushing Panic to new creative heights. While Herring’s unique vocabulary allows the band to explore fresh possibilities, the euphoric feeling of adventure he has instilled reminds bassist Dave Schools of what has always made Panic so special. “It’s like a stagecoach with a pair of horses that are crazy out of control running down a mountainside,” says Schools, “and somehow, the wheels don’t fall off.”

Part of what keeps the wheels glued on is the team Widespread Panic has amassed. Beyond the six men on stage, the band’s crew, dubbed "The Home Team," allows Panic’s rabid fans to experience a unique, world-class concert every night. From famed lighting designer Candace Brightman (who worked with the Grateful Dead for 20 years) to sound engineer Chris Rabold to the folks back in the office, this is a well-oiled machine, each piece working towards the goal of a transcendent performance. “We’re about 25 people on the road, and then another 10 people in the office,” says JB. “So right now, we’re sitting here with 35 people in the unit and everybody is cooking. And even when we have a new intern, if they’re bringing a spark to the thing, it translates all the way out there to the music.”

The band’s uncanny ability to adapt and evolve can be seen not only in personnel and sound, but also in the recording process and channels of distribution. Many of Widespread Panic’s fans have never purchased vinyl, some of them have never even seen it, yet the band’s first release, *Coconut* was pressed as a 45 rpm single. Today we live in a world where Panic’s tenth full-length album, *Free Somehow* (available February 12, 2008 with a vinyl edition in March), will be downloaded over the Internet. And as formats have changed so has their music. The influence of Herring and the union with producer Terry Manning (Led Zeppelin, Al Green, ZZ Top) has allowed Widespread Panic to craft one of their most sonically adventurous albums to date. “I think it was sort of building on a lot of the work that John Keane had done on *Medicine Takes* [1999],

particularly with horns and background singers,” says Schools. “We really love those kinds of embellishments that have been done on this record. I’m excited. It’s gonna catch a lot of people off guard, but this is what the studio is for.”

Not only does *Free Somehow* build off the foundation laid by John Keane, it brings the band back to the Bahamas to work with Manning at Compass Point Studios, as they did on 2006’s *Earth To America*. That album was their first project with Manning, a first date of sorts. With *Free Somehow*, the relationship has advanced along with their trust in Manning, and it shows in the results. “There’s a big difference here because Terry and Widespread Panic knew each other a little better,” says JB. “We were ready to fall off the cliff a little more for each other.” Manning used this trust to add layers of orchestral strings, woodwinds, horns and lush backing vocals, all working to realize a bold vision in the studio for Widespread Panic.

This is also Jimmy Herring's first opportunity to write and record with the band. “People should withhold their judgment of Jimmy until they hear this record, because he never had a fair shot to create material,” explains Schools. “He’s got songs that he brought from his idea pool that are part of this record that we all collaborated on.”

Another shift we find on *Free Somehow* is a new approach to writing lyrics. “Some of the songs are more straightforward and less metaphorically cloaked,” says JB. “Although there’s still plenty of that going on.” A prime example of this is “Walk On The Flood.” Perhaps the most direct song the band has written, it deals with current-day issues in a way they’ve rarely approached. In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, JB was overcome with emotion and the song poured out in a single day. “There’s so much stuff coming up right now that it didn’t feel wrong to address it somewhat directly,” reflects JB. “You’re talking about folks that are going through a real thing, right now. Why not cut to the chase and have some lyrics come out of you that are just more matter of fact than they’ve been in the past? So we let that happen.” While the spark for “Walk On The Flood” came from the massacre at Virginia Tech, the imagery stretches to New Orleans. “With Hurricane Katrina and the way the environment has been kind of Indian wrestling us, we need to realize that we’re messing with it, too,” says JB. A new world with new conflicts calls for new types of songs, and Widespread Panic adapts.

This is a band that stands behind their principles. Not only are they addressing social concerns on an artistic level, they are committed to affecting change in a tangible manner. In response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Panic has joined forces with the Make It Right Project to help rebuild the Lower 9th Ward, donating an entire house as well as offering an advanced MP3 of “Walk On The Flood” through LiveWidespreadPanic.com with proceeds going to Make It Right. Widespread Panic is also dedicated to rebuilding our nation’s dwindling music education. Through their annual Tunes For Tots charity they have raised over \$300,000 for the purchase of middle school and high school instruments.

In many ways *Free Somehow* is a new chapter for Widespread Panic. It’s their studio debut with Herring. They’ve cemented their relationship with producer Terry Manning,

entered new areas of songwriting and gained a fresh sense of inspiration on stage. “What I’m witnessing now is a really nice feeling of harmony within the group,” says JB. “When you feel that everybody plays a little harder.” They’ve broken free of their past, free of their own expectations, free of themselves. The pieces have fallen into place and Widespread Panic is free somehow.

Aaron Kayce