



story: Kyle Petersen Photography: Thomas Hammond

American Gun is in Therapy

One of the songs on the back end of American Gun's new album, released May 10, 2011, is about the joys and travails of being in a local rock band—and it's called, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion, "Breakin' Up." It's a sneering punk-rock tune, full of careening guitars and a biting cynicism about band mates, club dates, and alcohol. But halfway through the song, something striking happens. In the space of just a few beats, the guitars fall out and the drums go from pummeling forward to marking out a muscular half-time groove that lifts the tune from a sweaty barroom into the rock-and-roll arena. The instruments build the song back up again, eventually renewing their lunge forward with a new purpose. Lead singer Todd Mathis goes from bemoaning his problems to elegantly summarizing the whole reason for this venture. "But you keep going forward because it's all you know to do/ the music makes you happy, nothing else is true," he sings, half full of desperation, half full of a blind assuredness that this is, in fact, what he is meant to be doing.

Any band is almost defying the odds just by releasing a fourth album. As "Breakin' Up" suggests, rock bands face a unique set of challenges and problems in staying together. Rock music is often a dangerous cocktail of rebellion, alcohol, and personal expression that makes for rather volatile situations. True to form, American Gun has seen members come and go, causing the music to shift and evolve in an effort to maintain the delicate balance that keeps the engine running.

The group started out in 2004 with the stated purpose of writing "three-chord songs you could get drunk to" and quickly became Columbia's go-to alt-country band. They released two LPs, *Dark Southern Hearts* in 2006 and *The Means and the Machine* in 2008, that mixed stone-cold rockers with tear-in-your-beer heart-jerkers and borrowed the talents of a bevy of outside musicians and producers, most notably pedal steel player Al Perkins, who has played with Bob Dylan, Garth Brooks, The Flying Burrito Brothers and Chris Stamey, who has worked with both Alex Chilton and Whiskeytown. The band toured throughout the Southeast, flirted

with a number of regional record labels, and even got a few songs licensed to cable television shows. Still, the going was hard. Two thousand nine saw the group changing up guitarists and adding and subtracting a keyboard player, and, following the release of their third LP *Devil Showed Me His Hand*, the departure of co-leader Donald Merckle.

Merckle's departure, as disappointing as it was, pushed the band in new directions. In tandem with the songwriter's leaving was the arrival of local record producer and engineer Paul Bodamer, who began serving as an unofficial "fifth member" and what drummer Andrew Hoose refers to as the "catalyst" for the new record. Bodamer himself describes his role as merely pushing a different approach to arrangements and vocals in a new direction and providing some technical expertise—things like "figuring out tone, whether you want the guitars to be dark or bright on a particular song, what snare to use, what cymbals to use—subtle things that serve the particular song."

Bodamer's tech-savvy approach to recording and energetic enthusiasm for the band pushed the members to try new creative approaches. "This was the most pre-production we've ever done," Mathis says. "His level of expertise, as far as

engineering and stuff, and creating really well-done pre-production recordings, made a big difference on this record." Bodamer went out of his way to talk to each band member individually, which they all agree was a big part in making the new record more of a "straight-up rock and roll record" than they had in the past. "It sounds exactly like the four of us," lead guitarist Noel Rodgers says, the pride made clear in his voice. "If you don't sound like who you are at this point [in your thirties], you've missed something along the way."

This subtle stylistic change-up was something of a conscious decision, as the group was determined to present a more "honest" document of the band this time around. "It was the idea early on to have an album unlike our other albums, with half the songs we didn't want to play live," says bassist Kevin Kimbrell. Rodgers concurs. "A lot of times we would find ourselves trying to twang up something and Paul would say 'Stop! You are being a great rock band right now. Just be a great rock band!'" This input and approach, along with the extensive pre-production, gave the record a different bent from the start.

Pre-production kind of seems like a pseudo-professional term for "band practice," but what it really means is "band practice for making a record." In this case, during the spring and summer of 2010, as the band was hashing out some new tunes, Bodamer set up a makeshift recording room in the band's practice space in the Rosewood area of Columbia so they could play the music back and shape songs more constructively. "We did a lot of recordings, and a lot of listening and thinking back on it," which was something new, says Kimbrell. This approach freed up the band to both have "Todd walk in with a chord progression and lyrics and, by the end of practice, have a badass song," says Rodgers, remembering the creation of the album's title cut "Therapy."

This freedom also meant the group could re-imagine and try different approaches to tunes like "Movin' Down the Line." The song was brought in with Mathis's sole directive to make sure it did not turn out "a white boy blues song." After several attempts at finding a satisfying arrangement, the band was almost ready to discard the song. However, the next practice Kimbrell came across a fuzz-toned bass line that locked in perfectly with the mid-tempo rock groove Hoose was playing at the time. Bodamer lit up at this casual creation, and the band began re-building the song around it. The end result is a dark, noisy tune that owes as much to Tom Waits and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club as it does to rowdy Southern rockers like Lucero and the Drive-by Truckers.

On the whole, Merckle's departure also had another unexpected benefit in opening up new space in the band's sound. While all of the band members will attest to the songwriting chops and talent their former co-leader brought to the band, his acoustic guitar presence "cut out a lot of the high-end stuff that me and Kevin are doing," Noel points out.