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HUFF POST ENTERTAINMENT

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Conversations with Harry Connick Jr., TTB's Derek Trucks, and Carly Ritter

Posted: 08/28/2013 7:47 am

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## A Conversation with TTB's Derek Trucks

**Mike Ragogna:** Dude, I was a wise-ass with the receptionist. I hope that doesn't get you in trouble.

**Derek Trucks:** [laughs] Works for me. I'll be out of here in two hours, man.

**MR:** Derek! How are you man, what's going on?

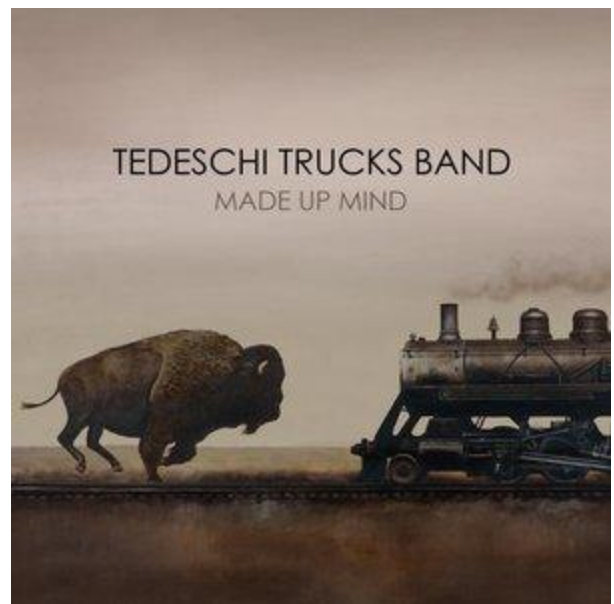
**DT:** I'm good, man, how are you?

**MR:** I'm okay. So you're on the road. You're not with Susan [Tedeschi] right now, what's happening with the TTB tour? I don't understand what you're doing right now, help.

**DT:** [laughs] We just finished that Black Crowes and Tedeschi/Trucks tour, and I started the next day with The Allman Brothers, so I'm out for about three and a half weeks, then we start back up with our group. It's a long Summer.

**MR:** Yeah, I heard she's home with the babies.

**DT:** Yep, yep, our kids are eleven and nine and they just started school back up Monday, so she went home to get them ready, buy school supplies, and get them in bed in time.



**MR:** More shoutouts to Susan. By the way, how's The Allman Brothers tour going?

**DT:** It's going all right. It's quite a change of pace. That Crowes tour with our group was pretty over the top. There was a lot of hanging going on, a lot of sitting-in. It was one of the better tours I've ever been on. That was a full-time hang party, this one's a little quieter.

**MR:** I have to say, I was totally disarmed by the front cover and title of your new album *Made Up Mind*. For a couple of the nicest people I've ever interviewed, to have you represented by a picture of a buffalo facing off with a train, well, I'm just not sure what to think anymore.

**DT:** [laughs] I love that image, man. I feel that the way we make music in our band, the way we think about music, we kind of do it the old way. It's kind of tried and true. I feel like, in a lot of ways, modern music and whatever is going on now is just kind of this inevitable thing that's happening and I think of the band as the buffalo. I think it'll be painless when it ends, but there's something pure about it.

**MR:** Then do you think the train, among other things, also could represent the pop charts?

**DT:** Yeah, you know, every once in a while, I guess about once a year, I think, "All right, I'm going to quit just being a crotchety young old person that only listens to good music. What's in the Top Ten?" I try to listen but I don't get it, man. I try. I tried the new Kanye West record and I was like, "This is bulls\*\*t. This is not only bad, it's detrimental. You're hurting society." I feel like this band and the music we make is done with a little bit of a chip on its shoulder, just in that this should be the norm and it should not be as unique as it is...people playing instruments and caring about what they do. So much of music in the music business right now is the bottom line and it's about getting something over on people. The music I grew up with and the stuff that means something to me, you can tell that the people are doing it because they want to and they have to. There's a real thrust behind it, and I don't get that with a lot of what's going on now.

**MR:** Yeah, well you guys seem to be part of the Delaney & Bonnie and Joe Cocker's *Mad Dogs & Englishmen* tradition. There are people like you and Joe Bonamassa that are out there carrying the flag, but then again, look at the amount of people that do follow you and are very receptive to you. It's not only about the pop charts.

**DT:** We are incredibly fortunate. There are no complaints on how well this band is doing. We love what we do. To be able to keep an eleven-piece band on the road and not have it go belly-up is a feat. We know how lucky we are. We get to play with our favorite musicians on the planet whether it's the people in our band or getting to be out on the road with B.B. King or Herbie Hancock. We get to run in the circle with our heroes. There's definitely no complaining from that end, I think it's just a general overview of the musical landscape.

**MR:** Well your success is beyond luck, to me. I think it's one of the perks of actually being able to play your instruments incredibly and sing incredibly and appreciate quality music.

**DT:** Yeah. One of my good friends is kind of a Southeastern musical guru, Colonel Bruce Hampton. I remember him always saying, "If you have talent, you just have to stick around long enough. The taste will eventually catch back up." You've just got to stay out there doing it. It'll eventually happen. Generally, I think that's right. You see it all the time, like Bonnie Raitt on her fifteenth record breaking through, but she was always great. It's not like she suddenly became great. I think a lot of music is that way. I hold out hope with bands that we know, people like The Wood Brothers. We wrote the song "Made Up Mind" with Oliver Wood, an incredibly talented singer-songwriter and guitar player. He and his brother Chris Wood, who plays with Medeski Martin & Wood. But the Wood Brothers are an amazing band. They're people that are really doing it; writing great songs, singing, playing, it's the whole thing. There are some people that do some of that, but it's rare that you get all of that together.

**MR:** Yeah, and *Made Up Mind* has a lot of the same production crew, a lot of your usual pals joining you from the last albums. This is the third album out, so I guess you're a little committed to it at this point.

**DT:** Yeah, you know, I was committed to it when we started it. The whole reason that we didn't keep our solo bands together was we didn't want to have a safety net. We didn't want to be able to, if the going got rough, just say, "All right, well I could just be doing this again." The idea was, "If we're going to put a band together and do it, let's actually do it. Let's go through the ups and downs and grind through this thing and make it happen." When you have that much talent together with a band like this, you know it's possible, it's just a matter of putting in the time and energy to make it happen and come to fruition. We've been hard at work and patient at the same time. After writing all the tunes and being on the road for two years and just everything starting to feel like a band, when we hit the studio this time and started recording, we pretty instantly knew that it was on track and things had grown quite a bit. The confidence level when we went into the studio this time was pretty night and day. We knew what was possible with this band and we knew what the band was supposed to sound like and we knew what it feels like on a great night on stage and we were not going to leave until we'd captured that spirit. This record had a different lean to it from the beginning.

**MR:** It's great because the progression of *Revelator* to the live album to *Made Up Mind* benefited from the entire process, didn't it?

**DT:** Absolutely. You know, *Revelator*, we formed essentially while that record was being made, which was great because you really get the first glance and you kind of get those first connections happening. But you know, everybody was feeling each other out in a lot of ways and kind of feeling out your place in the band and your place in the sound, so a lot of it was fresh and new and maybe a little bit more timid. By this time around, with a live record and all of the shows we had done, when we hit the studio, there was none of that. Everybody's feet were firmly planted. You know, that's what it takes to really do some heavy lifting.

**MR:** Right. And could there have been any more fun recorded than "Misunderstood" on your album?

**DT:** Yeah, that's a fun track, man. The whole band gets to kind of unload on that thing.

**MR:** [laughs] Do me a favor, stop me from going through the album song-by-song, which I was about to do. Can you take us on a little tour of the album?

**DT:** Yeah...I'm trying to think about when we first started writing. We started thinking it was maybe time to do another studio record. We had our favorite songwriters, the people we'd been writing with, and I think Doyle Bramhall was around or he was available. He flew down and I remember right when he landed, I picked him up at the airport and he was like, "Man, I've got this bass line stuck in my head, it came to my on the plain." I remember we just rolled in and frantically got out to the studio, made sure everything was on, he threw down that bass line and was like, "You play drums, you play this part," and then I got a guitar, I played drums, played a guitar part, then him and Susan started just mush-mouthing lyrics and melodies. It was fun. There are different ways that songs were written for this, but that one was just this flurry of ideas. Twenty minutes later, an hour later you have this song almost formed. Hearing his falsetto on it, I started thinking of Saunders [Sermons], our trombone player, thinking it's a perfect fit. So that song was fun to make. It just became that Motown, Muscle Shoals feel. We didn't fight it, we were like, "All right, that's what it is. Let's let it be."

Some of the other tunes were a little different. The tune, "Do I Look Worried," we wrote with John Leventhal. We had written another song that didn't make the record and then he had helped me finish off the "The Storm," writing lyrics. As he was getting ready to leave the house, he was like, "I had this one idea, maybe we can get started on it. I just have a title for it, I was just thinking about Susan and maybe a relationship-gone-wrong, just a badass, strong woman being like, 'Do I look worried to you?'" It started with a song title, and then he had this little chord pattern and that one came together super quick. You never know what the seed of an idea is going to be, but if it's a strong enough idea, it's amazing how if you get one or two creative minds on it, it can just be

fully formed in the next twenty or thirty minutes. Other tunes are harder, but running down the record, it was kind of two waves. We did this session with Taj Mahal right before the record, and then we had Bakithi Kumalo come down, he was going to do some dates with us, and right when Taj left, we had an extra day before the tour started. We had written "Idle Wind," "Misunderstood"... We had all these songs and we figured we'd just set up and play. We'd tracked "Misunderstood" first, but we weren't even planning on starting the record for a few more weeks, but one or two takes, and it was done. It just felt right. The stuff Bakithi played on it was amazing. The way we set up in the studio sounded great, so the record got off to a start without us even knowing it. We were really kind of half-rehearsing, half-feeling out the room, and maybe we'd kind of work out some of these songs early, and a few hours later we had tracked "Misunderstood" and then we moved on to "Idle Wind," which started with acoustic guitars and percussion.

It was just so much fun making the record. Things would just happen, you know? Not that much of it was planned. We knew Piño Palladino was coming in for a few days, so there were certain tunes that I had in mind that I really wanted him to play on. So we saved a block of tunes for him and when he came in, I think that's when the real bulk of the recording happened. But we had a good friend, Dave Monsey, a friend of J.J. Johnson, from Austin who's an amazing player. He ended up playing on "Part Of Me," and I think maybe "Do I Look Worried?" was the other tune that he played on. Just an amazing player, man, super-tasteful. Then George Reiff played on a tune called "Whiskey Legs." The whole thing was just really musical. It's one of the few recordings I've been a part of where there were really no days where we were down there as a band where you didn't get done what you had hoped to or more. It just kind of rolled. It was a band at the top of its game with songs that everybody could really dig their teeth into. It just felt right the whole time through.

I thought Susan really stepped up this time. A lot of her live vocals made this record. While we were tracking, she was always singing in her vocal booth. You always knew that you could go back and re-sing it, but there's something great about everybody on the floor while you're playing it, being like, "This is the take. We're not going to have to do much fixing up at all to this thing." There was just a great spirit about the whole recording. It was a confident band that felt really good about the work being done.

**MR:** Were there any tracks that you got in your pocket from these sessions that didn't make the album?

**DT:** Yeah, the one tune that we wrote with John Leventhal that we fully recorded. Really, every time this band goes in the studio, there's a handful of tracks left over, and eventually, we're going to have to dig through that stuff. There's a lot of good stuff. It's funny because I think on the first record, there was this tune called "Look Around" and a tune called "Don't Drift Away," which were some of my favorite songs the band had written. But when we tracked them and put the sequence together, they didn't really fit with the plan, so they fell by the wayside. That tune we wrote with Leventhal this time, I don't even remember what we finally titled the song, but that was one of my favorites going into it that just didn't make the cut. So there's a lot of good cutting-room floor material.

**MR:** I wonder if those songs would get better if you took them on the road and explored them more in a live setting.

**DT:** Maybe so, that's a good idea. Maybe next time I'm home, I'll put a little playlist together and we'll try to dig into some of those on the road.

**MR:** Nice. Here comes that traditional question for I have a traditional question for the third time. What advice do you have for new artists?

**DT:** It's probably the same every time for me, but it's just listening, you know? Just listen to as much real music as you can. There's so much stuff out there, I'm discovering stuff still to this day that was done forty, fifty, sixty years ago that is life changing. It's amazing how much great work has been done. I feel like when you're really moved by something and you really dig into something, it enhances what you do and it reinforces the things you

believe in about music and the things that make it special and powerful. I think it's important--just always follow whatever's moving you and keep your ears open. The other end of that is the cliché--and I don't even know if it still works this way--getting out and playing. Paying your dues that way. There's no substitute for real-world experience. You've got to get out there and do it. I've noticed even with myself, after years of doing it, certain things that are second nature now. It only comes from playing constantly and constantly being around people. I noticed just being on the road, if I'm out for a month or two, your road chops get to a point where things that were almost impossible to play a month ago you just do without thinking. So the more you do it, and I think there's no substitute for the energy you put into it, whether it's listening or playing, or if you can do both. You really have to get bit with that bug and have the disease where it's all you think about.

**MR:** That's a really great answer. You know there's a lot of TTB respect out there, the love is obvious, but do you actually know about the level of respect you guys get?

**DT:** Cool, man. We're trying. We have been really fortunate. I think that all the groundwork that my solo band and Susan's solo band and really everybody in this band has laid over the years, we're starting to notice it. When you play a city and you play at every club in town and you play at every small theatre and you just start moving through the different venues, it's fun to see promoters that were there with you fifteen or twenty years ago and they've kind of been rooting along all the way. It's fun to watch it work. I think that people realize that a band like this has been trying to do it honestly for a long time. Now that it's starting to roll, there's some real wind at our backs, which is nice.

**MR:** Derek, I want to introduce you to one of the Midwest's best drummers, David Proctor Hurlin. He's one of your biggest fans and he has a couple of questions for you. Is that cool?

**DT:** Yeah, man, fire away.

**David Proctor Hurlin:** Hi Derek, how's it going?

**DT:** Hey, man, how are you?

**DPH:** I found myself amused after I heard the way Made Up Mind ended, because it ends in an unresolved position. I was just wondering if that was a pun or something.

**DT:** You know, I always love how especially on records, you can get away with stuff like that. My instinct is to always leave things unresolved. We always notice that when you do that live--you can be playing a tune and have everybody in the palm of your hand--if you leave a song unresolved, there's like no applause. You can get away with it on a record, and I think that might have been the extent of it. But I do like that concept, now that you mention it. Made Up Mind and then it ending up being "maybe not so much."

[everyone laughs]

**DPH:** I really deeply respond to the emotional content of your guitar playing and it's kind of confusing to me. I have my own theories about how you access such deep levels of emotion, that you get in there in this very human way that sort of emulates the voice, and I really love it when you and Susan do that back and forth where she's singing and you're kind of "singing" also. I was just wondering how you allow that to happen in a live setting without overthinking it or pre-thinking it too much.

**DT:** You know, I think it's just that mindset and that concept of when you're playing, it's supposed to be an extension of the mood of the song or the lyric. I remember going to Ali Akbar Khan's college in San Rafael and realizing that he makes all the instrumentalists take vocal classes. Even if they weren't singers, he wanted you to learn how to sing a melody before he would teach you to play it. The whole concept was that you should be singing through your instrument. It's not notes, it's melodies. You should be emoting through your instrument.

Whenever I heard him play, I just remember the light bulb going off and going, "That's why he plays the way he does." He's not a singer but he's singing through his instrument. I remember early on recording with The Band before Rick Danko passed away. I was really young, I was sixteen, maybe seventeen, and I kind of walked into it a little bit blind. I knew about The Band but I didn't know as much as I should have. I just remember being in that session and they eventually asked me to play on it. The vibe was just so different. It was a band and the song, they took really seriously and whatever the lyric was, that's what the song was about. I remember taking a solo and Rick Danko after I finished kind of coaching me and almost having me breathe through it like a singer would breathe through it. You should be breathing when you're playing. I remember, at first, kind of resisting it because it didn't fully make sense, but as I kind of gave into it, I realized he was right. If you're playing too much in a song that doesn't call for that, it just feels unnatural in the song. I remember Levon playing a harmonica solo in the middle of a song and it was just so damn natural. It was just the song. He might as well have been singing. Those moments really stuck with me and then just you're always trying to dig deeper and refine that idea. I think standing next to great singers all the time--whether it's Greg or Warren or obviously Susan, Mike Mattison, the guys from The Band--when I hear them sing and I hear them dig in and make those real connections, especially if you're playing a solo in that very song, you try to tap into a similar thing. But sometimes a lyric in a song will be strong enough to carry you. You just kind of think of that sentiment when you're playing. But yeah, it is important for that stuff to be more second nature. You don't want to be thinking those things when you're doing it. It's got to be kind of ingrained.

**DPH:** Do you ever practice singing as a way to improve your guitar playing, or is it mostly just guitar that you're focusing on?

**DT:** It's mainly guitar. I know that sometimes when I'm playing, I might be humming a melody or something like that. But I feel like for me, I can get around enough with a slide that if I'm hearing something in my head, that's the best way to get to it.

**DPH:** Right. And in terms of arrangement, I know it's a different thing playing live, but how do you keep it so you're not overdoing it playing solos in the band? You want everybody to have a chance to step up and do their thing, but how do you keep the arrangements tight? How do you choose which instrumentalist is going to take a solo and how do you hone that so that you're really keeping the tension and the audience on their toes?

**DT:** That's a constant challenge, being on the road with a band like this, or even with anything you do, to make it exciting, to make it fresh and new every night, but to not be over indulgent with all of those things. That's that tightrope that we walk all of the time. Some nights you get it, some nights you don't. You just have to be aware of if you go too far or if you don't go far enough. You have to just be enough of a self-critic to be honest about it. The thing that I love about this band is every night when we get off stage, if it didn't go the way that it should have, even if the crowd loves it or it was a good night, you feel it and you know it and the drummers will be pissed that it just wasn't as good as it was supposed to be. The three or four of us will call it a hot wash and we just get off stage and immediately let each other have it. You're just brutally honest about what just went down. I've seen a lot of bands and I've been around bands where there's a lot of self-congratulating going on after a set, and with this band, you know how good it's supposed to be so that's just a given. If it doesn't meet those standards, you're pissed about it and you immediately get on talking through it, what to do to make it better. Sometimes, it's "You know what, this fell apart and we don't need to force it if it's not going to happen." Whatever it is--it can be subtle, it can be a big problem, a little problem--but I think it's just important to constantly be aware of those things. In the end, it just comes down to taste. I think, usually, the musicians you love and are into are the ones that you agree with their taste in music. That's what is for me.

**MR:** Derek, what's coming down the pike a year from now? Do you and Susan have any big plans in the works?

**DT:** You know, with the record coming out, we're about to hit it hard again. I think we finally found our bass player. We've been playing with a lot of different players; we had a guy come out for five shows on that Black

Crowes tour and I think the second show we did with him in Alpharetta, Georgia, everyone on stage could feel this wave of relief. We were like, "Oh, s\*\*t, this is it. We found our guy." I remember looking back at J.J., one of our drummers, and he just had this s\*\*t-eating grin on his face and I knew exactly what it was because I was having the same moment myself. So that was exciting. We're just excited to get back to work and move forward. We have a lot of shows coming up that we're excited about. We're doing three nights at the Beacon Theatre with this band; we're doing Royal Albert Hall, Mavis Staples is going to do that show with us, which is exciting. I think we're going back to Japan and doing India for the first time early next year. So the plate is full but it's all exciting stuff. I know for me and for the band, just finally having a stable bass player that we're excited about and moving forward is really the biggest thing. With a band like this, you always want to be pushing the envelope and you want to be moving ahead. We love playing with all the different bass players. We didn't want to rush into anything; we wanted to feel the possibilities. But having to relearn your own catalog six or eight times in six months is a little challenging. Having to rehearse every song that you've ever played over and over. It gets a little tedious. We're excited to be through that phase.

**MR:** And now, there are all those lost gems that you're going to have to learn.

**DT:** That's right! You just gave me more work.

**MR:** [laughs] This has been wonderful and I really love that we did this again. We've got to keep doing this, of course.

**DT:** I'm in, man.

**MR:** Derek, you're amazing. Thank you so much for your time.

**DT:** Thanks, man.

**MR:** Be good. Thanks again.

**DT:** Kickass, thank you.

*Transcribed by Galen Hawthorne*