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# Tedeschi Trucks Band

## Soul Mates



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# GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

Tedeschi Trucks Band takes  
a tragic work that spurred a classic album,  
and allows it to shine anew.

By  
**DEAN BUDNICK**



“WE REALLY HAVEN’T changed a lot as humans since the 12<sup>th</sup> century,” observes Susan Tedeschi while commenting on the

Persian poem that inspired *I Am the Moon*, the new 24-song, four-record opus from the Tedeschi Trucks Band. “A lot of the themes are similar, particularly those involving relationships and heartaches. So while we were writing these songs, I felt like some of them could be from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and, simultaneously, from the present day. We were also creating this during the pandemic and there were a lot of parallels with the original story as well.”

“The whole process was pretty magical on a lot of levels,” Derek Trucks adds, as he reflects on the means by which the married couple and their dynamic 12-piece group created *I Am the Moon*.

“I think of the four albums as this massive undertaking that went really well at a particular moment that was important for a number of reasons. It felt like a healthy, hard reset for the band—a big inhale and an extremely long exhale.”

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, the group was already at something of a creative nadir and had planned to take three months off the road.

“We were feeling burnt out,” Tedeschi acknowledges. “We had experienced losses among our band and friends, so we needed to step back for a little while.”

Founding keyboardist/flautist and virtuoso Kofi Burbridge had passed away the prior February and while Gabe Dixon had filled in admirably on the road, his status with the group was uncertain, given many competing projects, including his own Gabe Dixon Band.





“Kofi was such a monumental part of our lives, musically and otherwise, that it was kind of hard to think past that.” Trucks admits. “At one point, we began to ask ourselves, ‘Is it time to do something else?’”

As the pandemic continued to drag on, the guitarist began to find focus by working at his home studio in Jacksonville, Fla., with sound engineer Bobby Tis, mixing what would become *Layla Revisited (Live at LOCKN’)*. The 2-CD, 3-LP release captured the group’s August 2019 festival performance with Trey Anastasio and Doyle Bramhall II, in which the expanded collective performed the music from Derek and the Dominos’ classic *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*.

Ultimately, the 1970 double album that teamed Eric Clapton and Duane Allman would have a more longstanding impact on the group’s musical mission. It also became a secondary source, leading Tedeschi Trucks Band to Nezami Ganjavi’s *Layla and Majnun*. This romantic epic, written over 800 years ago, is often cited as the inspiration for Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In this instance, it provided the spark that set a trajectory to the *Moon*.

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MIKE MATTISON PROPOSED THE READING assignment.

The vocalist and acoustic guitar player joined the Derek Trucks Band in 2002 and then made the transition to the Tedeschi Trucks Band when the group debuted in 2010. He is also a scholar of American culture, whose book *Poetic Song Verse: Blues-Based Popular Music and Poetry*, co-written with Ernest Suarez, was published in 2021 by University of Mississippi Press.

“Mike’s kind of the old sage of the band,” Trucks remarks. “He doesn’t throw around ideas lightly. He’s not always spitballing and telling us: ‘Here’s what we should do.’ So when he does make a suggestion, everyone perks up and gives it the weight it deserves.”

In this case, Mattison recommended an approach that had already proven fruitful for Scrapomatic—the blues project he founded with Paul Olsen in the mid-‘90s and has continued to explore over the years. He explains, “Since the members of Scrapomatic couldn’t be together at the beginning of the pandemic, I suggested that we write to a narrative. There’s a great book called *Rising Tide* by John Barry about the 1927 Mississippi flood. We thought it would be interesting to write about a town caught up in that flood since it seems like every third blues song is about the flood. So we wrote 20

songs from the point of view of all these different characters because it touches on race, politics and geology, with a spiritual component, too.

“That worked so well that I thought it would be a nice experiment to throw into the TTB mix and see if we could create in a different way. It feels like we’ve often just done things by the seat of our pants because we’ve never had all that much time. It would be tour, tour, tour, then we’d come off the road, realize it was time to do a record and we’d write, write, write. We hadn’t really been able to hunker down and experiment creatively with each other. Then, after COVID hit, it was clear that we finally had the time. Frankly, we didn’t know when we’d be able to play again, if ever. But I thought we should start considering what we might be able to come out with at the end of all this. I felt this might be a nice little rubric to put over the songwriting process and see if that got us anywhere.”

Mattison suggested Ganjavi’s *Layla and Majnun*, which Clapton had purportedly drawn on while writing the *Layla* album. At the time, Clapton was yearning for his friend George Harrison’s wife Patti Boyd, and the songs focused on the “love madness” aspect of the story.

However, the original poem contains many other elements. It tells the story of a king’s son named Qays, who meets Layla in school when they are both very young. Due to his obsession with her, which earns him the epithet Majnun (meaning “possessed” or “mad”), Layla’s father refuses to accept his wedding proposal. Majnun begins wandering through the desert, befriending wild animals as well as human companions, even as he remains fixated on Layla. At the behest of her family she eventually marries another man, but remains chaste due to her feelings for Majnun. Eventually, the husband dies before Layla, herself, takes ill and passes away. When Majnun discovers this, he visits her gravesite and calls upon the Lord to “release my grieving soul and speedily bring me to her for all eternity,” whereupon he perishes on the spot.

While Clapton’s approach was monomaniacal, Mattison discovered the nuances in the poem. “There’s a really rich narrative story—all these characters, all this evocative language, all this stuff going on. If some guy’s just sitting beneath your window every night, whining and yelling at you, it behooves the artist to ask, ‘What does Layla think about all this?’ Well, if you read the poem, Layla has a lot to say about it, and so do her parents, his parents, their friends and this crazy bunch of wild animals. But we never conceptualized

what we were doing as an answer to *Layla*, the album. Instead, it was, ‘Hey, this is an interesting way to think about a relationship and how it affects not just the two people involved in it, but the entire community around them. So, what if we looked at a love relationship from a 360-degree point of view?’”

At that point, a collaborative songwriting process began, facilitated by shared Dropbox folders, with everyone agreeing that the results would not need to hew too closely to the original text.

“We didn’t really have any rules, other than let’s not make it a rock opera,” says Trucks with a laugh. “We didn’t want to get in the trap of tying everything in, chapter by chapter. We said, ‘This is the starting point and if we keep coming back to it, great. But it’s also fine if we end up with a bunch of material with a common theme.’ The poem was there as something to keep it tethered to a root emotion.”

The ongoing peril of COVID-19 also informed the resulting material. Trucks affirms, “We all were all kind of locked away in a tower like Layla. A lot of the isolation in the story and the spinning off into madness felt really appropriate.”

Tedeschi identifies some additional factors that came into play while they were creating the music. “We were conscious of mixing up the grooves,” she notes. “When you write songs for a project like this, you don’t want them to be too similar. I think that’s important as a songwriter. Derek, Mike and Gabe all excel at that, where they can write songs with different subject matters that also can be completely different groove-wise. It’s good to be aware of those things when you’re writing. But, ultimately, what’s a great song? Melody and intention and story.”

With all that in mind, it is not surprising that the initial contributions did echo *Layla and Majnun*. Mattison explains that his song “Fall In” was “loosely based on this crazy gang of wild animals that kind of becomes Majnun’s groupies. It’s about how attractive it is to give yourself over to someone who’s insane. I tried to make it a funny song, but also address that topic. I was trying to match the musical impulse to the theme of the song, which is, ‘Anybody wanna go crazy? Get in line!’ So there’s also a nod to a New Orleans second-line thing, without making it exactly like that.”

Gabe Dixon’s “I Am the Moon” was another important early offering.

“That was my pandemic song,” Tedeschi discloses. “I was blown away. Mike had encouraged us to read the poem and think about telling the story from





Tedeschi Trucks Band: Gabe Dixon, Ephraim Owens, Elizabeth Lea, Kebbi Williams, Tyler Greenwell, Derek Trucks, Isaac Eady, Susan Tedeschi, Brandon Boone, Mike Mattison, Alecia Chakour, Mark Rivers (l-r)

her point of view. Well, ‘I Am the Moon’ is exactly that. I would give Gabe an A+ for the project. We lucked out with him because, at first, he was filling in for Kofi, who was sick. Then, when Kofi passed away, we thought we would have to find somebody else because Gabe has his own career. But, it turned out the chemistry was working for him too. He’s one of us.”

“We knew that Gabe was an incredible songwriter and talented beyond just the stuff we would see onstage,” raves Trucks. “That was part of the draw and mystery from the jump. I think, in a lot of ways, we were waiting to get into the studio to kind of reassess what the band was. It’s hard to do when you’re on the road playing material that you created with other people. Then, when we started writing with him, it was effortless. He helped save the day for us.”

Mattison remembers, “Gabe latched onto this bit of dialogue in the poem where Layla’s dad is yelling at Majnun: ‘Layla is the moon, and who presumes to possess the moon?’ He wrote the song coming out of that and he also incorporated Layla’s psychology and spirituality. It’s a stellar song and, when we were thinking about what the album cycle should be called, *I Am the Moon* was a no-brainer.”

“From there, the dam opened up,” Mattison adds, “and people started

grabbing bits of the poem and grabbing bits of events and feelings out of their lives.”

One such composition was Tedeschi’s “La Di Da.” Her songwriting predilection is to craft material that carries multiple meanings, which can vary with the listener. So while “La Di Da” reflects on the separation that Layla and Majnun experienced, it also functions as a bittersweet ode to a young person leaving home to begin an independent life (such as Derek and Susan’s daughter Sophia, who is beginning college this fall, just as her older brother Charlie did two years ago).

“Derek, Mike, Gabe, Falcon [drummer Tyler Greenwell] and I were the main writers on this record,” says Tedeschi. “And we all collaborated well together. If anybody was stuck finishing a song, the rest of us would gladly help. It’s a really cohesive band right now, where we have great chemistry and everybody is in such a good place.”

This buoyant spirit became a catalyst for the *I Am the Moon* writing process. Mattison recounts, “As soon as we started filling in blanks, it all became a little more 3D to us. The poem is so broad and the tapestry is so wide that it became hard to come up with something that we couldn’t apply to it. At a certain point, we had to just call a halt and say to ourselves, ‘Maybe we should turn off the spigot because this

is getting out of control,’ which is a good place to be.”

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THE *I AM THE MOON* SESSIONS NOT only confirmed Gabe Dixon’s vital new role with the Tedeschi Trucks Band but they introduced another member to the group.

While still shaping up the material prior to recording, the band began trying out drummers to replace J.J. Johnson, who had formed the initial tandem with Greenwell. When they finally brought in Isaac Eady, the audition session swiftly transitioned into a recording session.

“Our last shows with J.J. were in early 2020,” Trucks says. “He was moving off the road, so during lockdown, we began looking for a new drummer. As soon as we could get people tested and families were willing to let us steal their spouses for a while, we set up our own bubble. We lived together, made music and enjoyed each other’s company. That’s when we had a few drummers come in, just to see the chemistry. With each of them there were moments when we thought, ‘This could be the guy,’ but then Isaac arrived and his connection with Falcon, and with all of us, was immediately obvious. Everything about it worked.”

“By the time he came down, we’d

Tearing it up  
at the Capitol Theatre,  
3/26/22



already been writing, so we decided to try out some of the new material, including the stuff we were still writing,” continues Trucks. “It quickly switched from, ‘We’re auditioning drummers’ to ‘Well, this is the guy; let’s play some music.’ Some of the first days that he was in the studio are captured on the record—there’s something I really love about that. Everybody’s feeling each other out and exploring different places together musically for the first time. It’s almost like when you’re a kid riding a bicycle with training wheels and then, at some point, you look down and you realize you’re not using them. That’s not something you usually capture on tape.”

The instrumental “Pasaquan” features another rarity within the TTB studio canon—an extended improvisational sequence. The song started with Trucks playing a pattern on a Dobro, envisioning something of a front porch blues song. However, when bassist Brandon Boone

first encountered the work in progress, he had a suggestion.

“Brandon heard the downbeat on the opposite side of where I was hearing it,” explains Trucks. “What he started playing felt almost like ‘Mountain Jam.’ Then, the drummers fell in and it was off to the races. It kind of took on a life of its own. We leaned into the Butch Trucks groove, which was a nice nod to some of the places he would go with Jaimoe.

“Knowing how hard it is to capture a feeling like that in the studio, I would save it for when we were warmed up and feeling good at the end of the day. Some days we didn’t even try it at all. I could tell Isaac was excited to play it because he’d be asking, ‘Hey, are we going to do that instrumental today?’ I knew that if it was something we threw in occasionally while we were making the record and we didn’t beat it to death, then we would get a good, honest improvisational moment captured in the studio.”

Just as “Pasaquan” evolved, Mattison’s “None Above” took on a new identity. “It ended up almost like a Peter, Paul and Mary meets the Grateful Dead kind of dirge but it started out more like ‘Starman’ by Bowie. It didn’t quite get there, but that’s OK,” he affably observes. “It’s kind of a little ditty. The idea I wanted to attach to it was a Layla-type person saying to Majnun, ‘You’re just in love with yourself being in love.’”

The version of “So Long Savior” on *I Am the Moon* is a spontaneous take, featuring Tedeschi on drums. “I had this guitar idea that felt like a Hound Dog Taylor song set in a dangerous back barroom place,” remembers Trucks, who produced the album, while Tis handled the recording and mixing duties. “Sue just eats that stuff for lunch, so I would play a line, she’d sing it back and I was like, ‘Oh shit, this is gonna be good!’ At that point, the band had gone home for a few days, but Bobby and Sue were still





out back, working in the studio while I started messing around with a guitar line. Sue sang along and then she sat behind the drum kit and started banging around. At that moment, I said, 'Let's record it right now!' So I played the guitar track and she drummed through the whole sucker. That's how we tracked it, with just me and Sue. Then, we added percussion on top along with voices and a second guitar. It was a fun one to put together."

Another standout, Mattison's "Emmaline" was recorded late in the process, even though it was written earlier. Trucks clarifies, "The idea was not to overthink it. Mike has a way with painting a picture, and the demo that he made at home was kind of perfect. It was heartbreaking and beautiful, so when the day felt right, we tracked it."

Mattison divulges that the impetus for "Emmaline" was his realization that he had a penchant for speaking with friends who have passed away. "I found

myself talking out loud to someone from Minnesota, where I'm from. At first I was like, 'Well, that's very strange,' but then I noticed, 'Oh, yeah, I guess I do this a lot. I talk to Kofi and some other people as well.' I thought it might be an interesting subject for a song because after scolding myself for doing it, I thought about it a little more and came to the understanding that I'm going to keep doing it. That's the connection I have. So the song is about feeling a little crazy for talking to your lost loved ones and then saying, 'Well, screw it. That's all I've got. So let's chat.'"

All told, the two-dozen tracks that appear on *I Am the Moon* explore a range of accounts and emotions that roughly parallel the arc of Layla and Majnun's story. The titles hint at some of the narrative—even as the songs are often imbued with broader meanings. After starting with "Hear My Dear," the sequence includes "Playing with My Emotions," "Rainy Day," "Hold That Line," "Gravity," "Take Me As I Am," "Where Are My Friends?" and, finally, "Another Day."

"Obviously, the story doesn't end on the highest note," Trucks comments, while considering how the final song engages everything that preceded it. "But back to Mike's original idea, we didn't have to track it too closely. We had different scenarios of how we were going to end it but I don't know if it's necessary for us to leave things dark. I don't think that's quite our role or even how we feel. I think so much of what we do in this band is we put one foot in front of the other. You've got to keep going; you've got to keep marching on."

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**I AM THE MOON WAS A UNIQUE PROJECT** from the outset, in terms of how it came together, when it originated and what it represented. The creative process began with the songwriters but when the horn section (Kebbi Williams, Ephraim Owens, Elizabeth Lea) and the vocalists (Alecia Chakour and Mark Rivers) finally arrived, they provided an accelerant.

"It reminded me of our first record, when we didn't really know what we were doing, and I mean that in a good sense," Mattison says. "Back then, there were no rules and we just kind of threw everything at the wall. This time, we started writing with a small group because it would have been untenable with 12 people. But when we came back together again, everyone recognized that this wasn't a business as usual sensibility."

"Alecia, Mark and the horns were not fully privy to the concept and story before they came down," Trucks adds. "But

almost immediately, you could see the light bulb go off and their ideas started kicking in. There was a lot to chew on. It's a lot of little puzzles and things to solve. I enjoy that part of it, and what I noticed this time around, is it seemed like the whole band enjoyed that process more than ever. The contributions from everybody across the board just felt a little different this time."

As a direct result of this enthusiasm, the band had to devise a means to release 24 worthy songs.

"I think what happened was we all wanted to contribute our ideas," Tedeschi suggests. "Then, as we started recording them, we realized that we had a lot of music and none of it was fluff. That's when we finally said, 'Wait a minute; we've got to figure this out. We've got to do something here.' It was pretty funny at one point."

"We started fretting about this some months down the road," Mattison affirms. "How are we going to pare this down to an album? I think it was Derek who asked, 'Well, what if it isn't an album? What if it's a double album?' Then somebody else said, 'What if it's triple album?' And Derek said, 'What if it's not even albums? What if it's just little pieces of music?' That's when we realized that were no rules anymore. Our industry might not even exist. That led to another fun group conversation where we asked ourselves: 'If there are no rules or we're pretending there are no rules, how would we want this presented?'"

Ultimately, the answer became four records, released four weeks apart between early June and late August. Picking up on the *I Am the Moon* theme, along with the Layla and Majnun narrative, they were named *Crescent*, *Ascension*, *The Fall* and *Farewell*. Derek and Susan enlisted their friend Jud Strickland, a Jacksonville educator, to come in with a fresh set of ears to help with the sequencing.

Each of the albums contained approximately 40 minutes of music, which Trucks felt was the sweet spot. "When I think about my favorite records, like *Axis: Bold as Love*, *A Love Supreme*, Sly Stone's *Fresh*, the Wayne Shorter Blue Note records, they're all in the wheelhouse of the exact amount of music I want to listen to when I sit down and put on a piece of vinyl."

After committing to the four-album plan, Trucks faced an additional hurdle. "Over the last few years, I have been grappling with how to hold back the music until a record actually comes out. When you release a record, in the two weeks leading up to it, you give iTunes the first

three songs. Then there are two singles, and by the time the record drops, people have heard it all hodgepodge. There's no excitement about dropping the needle or hearing the record for the first time from start to finish. I really wanted people to hear these that way, so we were thinking about ways to do it. During the lockdown, we did the 'Fireside Sessions,' airing different live concerts once a week. So I was like, 'What if we just drop the records for people on a Thursday night? We'll do that every few weeks, and maybe there's a fireplace on the screen.' It was a way to get people to sit around and listen to the record as one piece of music."

The fireplace idea eventually morphed into four 40-minute films that would accompany each of the albums. Mattison pitched the idea to his friend Alix Lambert, who he believed had the proper skill set.

"I've known her for about 30 years," he says. "She does conceptual art. She does gallery art. She does photography. She's a filmmaker. She's been a writer on TV shows [*Deadwood* and *John From Cincinnati*]. So she's got her toes in everything and she was up to the challenge of making a two-hour non-narrative film. She did some filming with the band, but she also used a lot of found material, along with her own photography and hand-drawn animation. It's a pastiche in the best sense of the word. If you watch all four films, there are these recurring themes that return with the music. It's quite thoughtful and brilliant."

"After a few meetings, we just turned her loose," Trucks notes. "We had some ideas and concepts, but again, we didn't want it to be too literal to the story. I liked the fact that when the first record was released, my parents and siblings came over. We all listened to the record for the first time along with fans across the country and around the world. There's something really nice about that communal listening experience. Also, with each of the films, Alix really captured the personalities of the band members. It felt very correct to me. Traveling with all these people is high comedy at times. It's like traveling with the Muppets."

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ON JUNE 24, AFTER TWO YEARS OF summer tour postponements, the TTB's *Wheels of Soul* package finally returned. This time out, they were joined by Los Lobos and the Gabe Dixon Band. Opening night featured a complete performance of *I Am the Moon: Crescent*, which was released three weeks prior to the initial gig, with the others following over the course of the tour.



"I had this guitar idea that felt like a Hound Dog Taylor song set in a dangerous back barroom place," Trucks says. "Sue just eats that stuff for lunch, so I would play a line, she'd sing it back and I was like, 'Oh shit, this is gonna be good!'"

"It was wonderful to be able to play *Crescent* right away and then add songs as the different records were being released," Tedeschi says. "I love it when we can play a song like 'I Am the Moon' and it elevates at the end. You can almost hear the audience react with an 'Ahhh' moment. It's been really nice to have something to look forward to and new material to play. I also like how the audiences are interacting. They're interested and they're captivated. They're waiting to hear the new stuff as it comes out just like we are, which is a beautiful thing."

"At Red Rocks, we busted out 'Emmaline' for the first time because that record had just come out," Trucks recalls. "Mike has written some great songs, but every once in a while he delivers a heater. The set was building and then we dropped this really slow ballad in the middle of it. For the first few seconds, you couldn't tell if the air was going out of the place but then it went into full trance mode because the song is so good. It felt incredible."

When asked for his thoughts on the tour as a whole, Trucks laughs, then awards the MVP trophy to Dixon. "Gabe is working *really* hard. There have been some extremely hot days and he is out there doing his set, then most nights he's sat in with Los Lobos before he's up there with us. He is busting his ass. Of course, it also feels really good to be out there working and playing with the full band again. I noticed a few weeks into it that there was a night where it felt like something just switched and everyone's road chops came back. Just by playing every day, something happens when you get into the middle of a tour, where

everybody gets a little bit more fierce musically. So that's been fun."

Meanwhile, Mattison reveals, "I'll pop onto the Los Lobos bus when they're hanging out together, so I can shut up, sit at their feet and listen. They are hands down my favorite working band out there. They've been doing this for 50 years now, since they were teenagers. They have seen it all and they still function like a brotherhood. They are the great American rock-and-roll band. The fact that they're not in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is a disgrace. They're *that* good. I defy you to show me another band who have stayed together for 50 years and are operating musically at that level."

Tedeschi Trucks Band still has a ways to go by that standard, but the group's talented 12 musicians welcome exemplary company, and with *I Am the Moon* they are setting their sights high.

"The beauty of works like *Layla and Majnun*, and things that stick around that long, is they're hitting on universal human themes, elements and emotions," remarks Trucks. "We were conscious of that. This particular story also had a lot of incredible parallels with the world we were living in when we wrote and recorded the music. There have been some serious bumps in the road but you've got to keep moving. You can get down in the work for years at a time, but every once in a while, you've got to wake up and make sure that you're pushing and not just doing. This whole project felt like a deep breath. Right now I feel like we're ready to take on anything. We're up for whatever we choose." **T**