

ARTIST: Tedeschi Trucks Band
TITLE: *Live from the Fox Oakland*

LINER NOTES

This album – recorded on one stage in a single night last September in Oakland, California – is a new peak in the continuing story of a working juggernaut and great American rock & roll family band. It also reminds me of an unforgettable night almost a decade ago. Because everything I hear in these two hours of blues, soul, jazz, raga and church – the emotional commitment and determined celebration in the singing; the matching fire and hosanna of the guitars; the improvising empathy sizzling inside the brawn and swagger; the interpretative adventure and lessons in the cover choices – I first heard in early, thrilling form in January, 2009: at Swamp Raga, the studio built by guitarist Derek Trucks and singer-guitarist Susan Tedeschi behind their riverside home in Jacksonville, Florida.

I was there to interview Derek and Susan for a story in *Rolling Stone*. The couple had just walked off their tour bus after an overnight drive from a gig in Washington, D.C., straight into another rehearsal with their first duo project, a fun-time crew called the Soul Stew Revival. It was basically the Derek Trucks Band, his long-time group, with a second drummer and Susan – a solo artist, band leader and touring warrior in her own right, for nearly fifteen years – up front. But the inspirational lineage was obvious as soon as everyone hit the gas in "Comin' Home," Delaney and Bonnie and Friends' exuberant 1969 single with Eric Clapton, and "Space Captain," Joe Cocker's 1970 B-side with his road circus Mad Dogs and Englishmen.

Susan and singer Mike Mattison traded verses like gunfighters, then bonded in high storefront-church harmonies. Derek soloed against Kofi Burbridge's choppy-waters organ and in sweeping skids and breakneck curls of slide guitar, detonated with the same Zen-like concentration I knew from so many other nights: Derek with his band; in Phil Lesh and Eric Clapton's touring groups; with his other family enterprise, the Allman Brothers Band. There was more of that action at Swamp Raga the next day, as Derek and Susan ran everyone through Aretha Franklin's version of King Curtis' "Soul Serenade," from her first Atlantic LP; Howlin' Wolf's "Meet Me at the Bottom"; and the torrid defiance of Etta James' 1968 B-side "I'd Rather Go Blind," delivered by Susan with her own slow-burn fury.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was witnessing birth at work, a few dynamite hours in the passage to a more ambitious and enduring collaboration. A year later, in 2010, Derek and Susan officially launched Tedeschi Trucks Band, an 11-strong army descended from that big-band rock and soul of the late Sixties and Seventies but also a powerful advance – in songwriting, exploration and collective improvisation – on that classic school of roots and ascent.

"There's always somewhere new to go and always that sense of plugging right back into the source," Derek told me at the time, summing up both the scale and focus of his and Susan's ambitions for the group. "The biggest revelation is taking all these things that inspire you and doing them with the songs themselves. Once we get on the road, the soloing and performance – the stretching out – will happen naturally."

"The most important thing about being a musician is loving to play music – you don't do it for any other reason," Susan said in 2009, one afternoon on a bench outside Swamp Raga. She glanced with a smile at the tour bus, still parked up in the front yard. "People think this is a magical world of non-reality. It's not like that at all. It's actually really hard."

But, Susan added, "I really do believe in dreams. You can create your own reality if you work hard toward things and love something." In fact, by then, "It's not just a dream. It's really going to happen."

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Seven years, three studio albums and hundreds of shows later, Tedeschi Trucks Band are still an evolving experience – in membership, song bag, creative reach and the exuberant, always-rolling laboratory of concert work. Since their first live album, 2012's *Everybody's Talkin'*, they have become an even-dozen pieces with Alecia Chakour joining Mattison and Mark Rivers in the choir; a pair of new horns in trumpeter Ephraim Owens and trombonist Elizabeth Lea; and a bassist, Tim Lefebvre, who arrived in 2013 with a biblical-length scroll of jazz, fusion and session credits. In 2015, at points during the sessions for the last studio album, *Let Me Get By*, Lefebvre was also commuting to New York to play on David Bowie's final record, the harrowing, experimental masterpiece *Blackstar*.

"The first few years, it was certainly touch and go," Derek said that year, reflecting on the early trials of keeping such a big – and expensive – proposition together. "It was like going back a decade or so, the early days of the solo band, where everyone makes a living but you," he added with a drawling laugh. But Derek had just heard *Let Me Get By* in its final mixes, and he was ready to boast. "I feel like I can see everybody – everybody's personality in the band – a lot more." He laughed again. "It feels like hanging on the tour bus."

Live at the Fox Oakland is just one night, September 9th, 2016, on an itinerary without end. But it is an authentic, widescreen group portrait from that stop in the road – hot, poignant, nervy and soaring, with nearly all of the first disc and the entire second disc running in the exact sequence of the set lists that evening: the sharp turn from the outer-limits R&B in "Don't Know What It Means" – especially saxophonist Kebbi Williams' free-blowing coda – into the bullish sunshine of Derek and the Dominos' "Keep on Growing"; the tandem chug of drummers J.J. Johnson and Tyler Greenwell in the long-ride jam through Sleepy John Estes' blues "Leavin' Trunk," then into the tighter sorrow and pleading of "Don't Drift Away"; the extended, instrumental swim in "Ali" – a 1970 outtake from Miles Davis' *Jack Johnson* with Derek and Lefebvre jousting on the main Hendrix-quote riff – before the climbing finale and ensemble grip of "Let Me Get By."

Most live records are a simulated experience – the next best thing to being there, mostly for those who weren't. *Live at the Fox Oakland* is simply the truth of what happened, in all of its shared glory. And setting, in this case, is everything: the combination of dimension and intimacy that I already know from Derek and Susan's annual fall residencies, since 2011, at New York's Beacon Theater. Like the Beacon – the city's great, surviving heir to the Fillmore East and Derek's home every March for almost two decades with the Allmans – the Fox is a historic treasure, a former movie palace opened in the waning days of the Roaring Twenties and decked out in faux-Moorish grandeur.

I can vouch for the effect at the right gig, at any volume. I saw Oakland boys Green Day blow up the place, figuratively, in 2009. Two years later, I heard the entire crowd gasp in unison as a briefly reunited Buffalo Springfield opened their encore with a resurrection of Neil Young's symphonic ballad "Broken Arrow." "There is something about that size venue that I think, for what we're doing, for bands in our realm, is as good as it gets," Derek said of the Beacon – and, by extension, the Fox Oakland – when I interviewed him and Susan for Sirius XM radio only a few weeks after this show. "You don't feel you can break it down to a whisper when you get into a larger venue."

A good example here of the band in quiet storm: sarod player Alam Khan, recreating his studio role in "These Walls" from 2011's *Revelator*. Khan – a son of Ali Akbar Khan, the Indian master and, for a time, Derek's teacher at the Ali Akbar College of Music – enters in near-silence, then engages with Derek in gently ecstatic tangle and meditation. Even in a group as large and roaring as this one, there is always room, between the rush and shout, for deep breath and communion.

"In some ways," Derek said in that interview, rooms like the Beacon and the Fox are also "where the band checks in and you see what kind of progress you've made – or did not make – through the year musically." That is true of some covers here. Leonard Cohen's "Bird on the Wire" is a hearty country-gospel survivor from Tedeschi Trucks Band's acclaimed concert tribute in 2015, at the Lockin' Festival, to Cocker's Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour. (That performance featured some of the original participants, including ringmaster Leon Russell in one of his last major concert appearances.) As for Susan's turning of the tables in Bobby "Blue" Bland's 1961 scorcher "I Pity the Fool": I first saw her nail that Southern-R&B vengeance during a 2015 Jazz Fest set in New Orleans. Yes, it's Bland's hit for eternity. But now a woman owns a piece of that soul too.

On the radio, while we were discussing covers, Derek quoted one of his late elders, the Allmans' founding guitarist Duane Allman – something, Derek noted, that the latter once said of the bluesman Taj Mahal: "He said, 'That's not just a man. That's a lesson in how to live.'" Tedeschi Trucks Band are, in turn, not just a band. They are a big, steadfast lesson in how to live – and grow – together.

Derek also recalled something he'd read in the liner notes of a John Coltrane boxed set about the saxophonist's drummer Elvin Jones. "His aunt was like, 'Son, I don't care if you're playing drums or whatever. Tell your story.'" And when Jones played, Derek affirmed, "You're like, 'That dude is telling a story.'"

Live at the Fox Oakland is only one night in this story so far. But you get it told in full.

David Fricke

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