

QUAKER CITY NIGHT HAWKS

"Good evening from Fort Worth, Texas." Those are the first words of out Sam Anderson and David Matsler's mouths on 'El Astronauta,' The Quaker City Night Hawks' electrifying debut album for Lightning Rod Records, and it's the only introduction you'll need. Over a viscid, bluesy slide-guitar, the band transports you to the sweltering Texas heat, a "land of oilfields, iron nightmares, and fevered dreams." That song, "Good Evening," plants the band's flag firmly in the sand, simultaneously celebrating the pride of home and acknowledging the ominous clouds that hang over it, all while perfectly setting the stage for the raucous journey through time and space that follows.

The Night Hawks—Anderson and Matsler on vocals and guitars, Pat Adams on bass, and Aaron Haynes on drums—are a Southern band, to be sure, but it's not the South we've come to expect from our rock and roll. Equally influenced by ZZ Top and science fiction, they write of landscape both familiar and foreign, of a people working to shed their past but still burdened with its repercussions even in the distant future.

"Dave and I both pull from older artists when we write," says Anderson, "but we're trying to put a new spin on it. We're harkening back to old Texas, but we're writing about a new southern culture, maintaining the past and moving it on into the future."

Eras collide in every aspect of the record, from the title—which merges Texas' Spanish and Mexican roots with its role at the center of the modern space race—to its pop art cover, depicting a classic hot rod from the 70's that's been modified into a spacecraft hovering over an exotic desert landscape. Songs like "Mockingbird" play out as a classic-rock road warrior's tale souped-up for the 22nd century, while "Liberty Bell 7" re-imagines current-day border issues through the eyes of a "space coyote" smuggling illegal immigrants on and off the planet. The track, which was engineered by Centromatic's Matt Pence, is actually named for a real NASA mission from 1961.

"At the time, it was the furthest into space that anything had gone," says Anderson, a huge space travel junkie. "Upon reentry, it crashed into the ocean and filled with water and sunk down to the bottom. This thing had been as far out into space as you could go and as deep down into the ocean you could go, and that's how the narrator of the song feels, he's been as far out and as low down as you can get."

The Quaker City Night Hawks have been far out there, but they're anything but low down at the moment as they prepare for their first major foray into the national spotlight. Paste hailed the band's "blues-infused southern" sound, while the Dallas Observer dubbed the "relevant and timeless" rockers the Best Band of 2015, and several of their songs were featured in the hit FX series Sons of Anarchy. Anderson was one of the first to invite fellow Ft. Worth-native Leon Bridges to perform during set breaks at his shows, and the two recently reunited to perform for an upcoming Danny Clinch documentary which was teased during the GRAMMY Awards, and dates with Chris Stapleton, Lucero, J Roddy Walston, and Whiskey Myers have solidified the Night Hawks' status as one of the Lone Star State's most exciting new acts.

"Our name is pulled from a Mark Twain book called 'The Innocents Abroad or, The New Pilgrim's Progress,'" explains Anderson, "where Twain, along with many other Americans, set out in 1867 aboard the chartered vessel *Quaker City* to see sites in Europe and the Holy Land. En route, he found that the only time his fellow passengers of varying religious backgrounds refrained from petty bickering and squabbles was

when they met together at night to play cards, smoke, and drink. That gathering became collectively known as the Night Hawks."

It's a fitting moniker for a band that seeks to bring their audiences together every night onstage, but despite the group's clear sense of identity, 'El Astronauta' was almost a very different record, as they aborted an early recording session only to revisit the songs later with a new perspective.

"Usually Dave and I write the songs and then we record them a few weeks later," explains Anderson, "but on this one, because we decided to re-record, we had the opportunity to incorporate them into our live sets for a while, and songs can change so much when you play them 100 times in different cities."

"Our old studio habit was to get there and knock out as many drum and bass tracks in a day as possible," adds Adams, "but this time around, we took the approach of trying to fully complete each song before moving on to the next, and that was a really good spark for our creative vision when we finally got back into the studio."

"There was definitely a gestation period," reflects Matsler, "where we gave the songs time to develop on their own, and sometimes they changed pretty drastically."

Change, and the need for it, is a central theme on the record, and one that weighs heavily on the bandmembers' minds as they enter a new phase of adulthood. "Beat The Machine" is a protest song of sorts according to Matsler, not against any one particular war but against the military and prison industrial complex that seems to hold a vice grip over modern American politics, while the JFK-inspired "The Last Great Audit" grimly assures that we'll "never walk through the gates of His promised land 'til we shake off our bloody ancestors' blues," and album-closer "Sons and Daughters" is a rollicking dose of secular gospel.

"That song caps the album because it's about the realization that things aren't exactly right and they have to change," explains Matsler, "but the changing part doesn't have to be sad or morose. It's a call-to-action to head out the door and change the world."

"This whole record sums up that feeling when you finally start to realize that you've been surrounded by bullshit," adds Anderson with a laugh. "It's immense and depressing at first to understand that things aren't the way people told you they would be growing up, but coming out the other side, you see everybody else is in the same boat. We've been lied to for a long time, but now it's time to figure it out and move on and do something about it."

For the Quaker City Night Hawks, that means getting onstage and singing their hearts out every night. This isn't the South of their fathers, nor is it the America they'd been promised growing up, but we're all in it together, and maybe, by the time souped-up hot rod spaceships are cruising between planets, we'll have learned a lesson from the original Night Hawks onboard the Quaker City and put aside our differences long enough to make life just a little better for everybody.