

Bio

For Ernie Hendrickson, the process of writing and recording his new album, *Roll On*, has been bound up in the changes he's gone through as an acclaimed musician who is a perceptive chronicler of life in America, as a husband and father, and as an artist who remains open to the challenges and rewards that living this ever-so-complex American life can bring. What *Roll On* does so superbly well is bring life-affirming humor, wisdom, and even doubt, to the stories Ernie tells throughout the record's thirteen songs.

Ernie's latest songs were written over a period that stretches from the release of his last album, 2013's *One for the Dreamers*, to late 2018, when he began recording *Roll On* with producer Brian Deck at Narwhal Music Studios in Bucktown, Chicago. Ernie Hendrickson's journey from recording *One for the Dreamers* in Nashville--home of country music, Americana, and big dreams--to finishing *Roll On* on his home turf of Midwest, U.S.A., found him walking a path of self-affirmation and hard work that makes his new music his richest and most universal to date. In classic singer-songwriter fashion, Ernie writes about what he sees and feels, but *Roll On* is a record that speaks to the human condition in ways that transcend time and place.

Recorded live on the floor with the most minimal of overdubs, *Roll On* represents Ernie's art at its most direct carefully worked out. This is not a paradox, this combination of craft and spontaneity. The contributions of Brian Deck, who has helmed great recordings by Americana and rock artists Iron & Wine, Josh Ritter and Counting Crows. was, as Ernie enthusiastically admits, crucial to the process. Equally important is the sympathetic, muscular playing by a crack studio band that included guitarist and pedal steel player Brian Wilkie, bassist Pete Muschong, drummer Gerald Dowd and keyboardist John Kattke. Several songs are enriched by horn arrangements that suggest Dixieland jazz on riverboats on the Mississippi and Randy Newman. *Roll On* is a true fusion of songcraft and sound, and represents Ernie's artistry as writer, singer and player in its fullest form.

As Ernie--who realized a life milestone in 2016 when he and his wife celebrated the birth of their first daughter (they have another daughter on the way, due in late April 2019)--says about *Roll On*, it is the result of his ongoing fascination with and immersion in great American songwriting. There have always been elements of the Jerry Garcia-Robert Hunter collaborations in his writing, as well as nods to heartland rockers like Tom Petty and John Mellencamp, but Ernie adds another name to that list, that of Nashville songwriter and storyteller Todd Snider, whose irrepressible forays into American manners and mores he says influenced his work on the new album.

"I kind of got plowed over by him," Ernie says about Snider. After the release of *One for the Dreamers*, Ernie took the time to delve deeply into Snider's catalog, and took every opportunity to see the masterful, mercurial songwriter play live. (He says he booked dates near Snider's shows, so he could drive to see him.) You can hear Snider's influence throughout *Roll On*, though it's subtle, since Ernie has his own style of untangling and reassembling everyday life in unexpected patterns. The acoustic-guitar driven *Roll On* track "One More Pull" was, Ernie says,

informed by his love for Snider's "Just Like Old Times," a song from the Nashville songwriter's 2006 album *The Devil You Know*.

Another major influence on *Roll On* was producer Brian Deck himself, who pushed Ernie to refine and edit the songs he'd written over the past five years. For example, Ernie began writing the beautiful "New Midwestern Winter Blues" in 2013 during a particularly cold, snowy Chicago winter. He road-tested the song, and realized it didn't go deeply enough into what he wanted to say about his relationship to the reflection winter can impose on human beings. Deck saw the potential in the song, and asked Ernie to refine it. The result is a moving meditation on stillness, strength of character and forbearance, all themes of *Roll On* that Ernie explores with humor and a heart as big as the Midwest itself.

Roll On explores the physical landscape of Ernie's home turf, and it also gives him room to make connections between the physical and emotional--not to mention moral--aspects of life in modern America. Fueled by a joyous horn arrangement by Matt Ulery, who is Ernie's brother-in-law, *Roll On*'s opening song, "Do It for Love," takes an ordinary day in Ernie's life and turns it metaphysical without making a big deal out of it. Ernie takes the 6 a.m. train into the city, where he shops at his favorite record store and revels in the feeling of being alive in the moment. That joyous feeling continues in "One Day of Life," a Texas-style ballad reminiscent of a Roy Orbison classic. He mentions everyday hassles like traffic jams and checkout lines, but he won't let anything get him down. As he sings, "There is no other day/Don't give this one away."

There are serious moments on *Roll On* that reveal Ernie as a sharp-eyed observer of American life. "Standing Like a Rock" rolls like a great John Mellencamp song, and features one of Ernie's perfectly wrought, biting guitar solos. It's about solidarity in the face of political and social division. It also reminds you what an accomplished guitarist Ernie is, and how he's learned lessons about rock and blues from his time in Chicago, where he's sometimes performed with some of the city's legendary blues musicians.

You hear traces of Ernie's omnivorous listening habits in every song on *Roll On*, but he makes everything his own. "The Losing Blues" is a half-funny, half-despairing look at economic uncertainty through the eyes of a young man who lives at home with his parents, while "My Friend, Roll On" takes an unsentimental but deeply sympathetic look at a man who rolls from place to place, with, perhaps, nowhere to go.

In every way, *Roll On* builds on the strengths of Ernie's *One for the Dreamers*, which was a product of Ernie's time in Nashville, when he absorbed the lessons of a very intense, very competitive music town. *Roll On* is about growth, and Ernie doesn't discount his time in Music City, which brought home deep insights about his identity as a Wisconsin-born, Illinois-raised

musician who also loves Nashville's blend of country, folk and rock. Call it a learning curve for a crafty guitarist who can rip it up with the best in the country, and a songwriter who has never stopped striving to express himself in the most intelligent, concise and moving way.

Roll On makes it clear that change--maturity and all that the word implies--doesn't mean you lose what you already had. It's a major statement by a man who has faced the world and figured out his place in it, and Ernie's most multi-layered music so far. It's a lesson in how sticking to your principles leads you to the long, rewarding pursuit of making music that flows as naturally as a river. Ernie has stayed true to himself, and you can hear it in every note of *Roll On*.

--Edd Hurt
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