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THE HARDEST WORKING MAN IN BLUES

by Bill Rosenbeck

With two full West Coast tours and four different trips to Europe on top of his usual slate of Midwest and East Coast shows, Nick Schnebelen played over 250 dates in 2017. For context, if we exclude the 52 Saturdays, 53 Sundays, and ten Public Holidays that fell on last year's calendar, there were 250 business days in 2017.

And Nick Schnebelen worked all of them. Then, he worked a few more.

In addition to a bursting-at-the-seams live schedule, Schnebelen spent two weeks recording *Crazy All By Myself*, his first studio album since Trampled Under Foot's 2015 break up. [During that time, Schnebelen has released two live albums.] Experienced musician in the booth, Schnebelen released four studio albums with Trampled Under Foot, all of which took in the neighborhood of eight days to complete. But as the frontman of the Nick Schnebelen Band, the Kansas City native upped his studio presence even further, endlessly writing, recording, tinkering, and re-cutting, as he gives his first album the most difficult thing for Nick Schnebelen to come by: time.

"It was that important. We didn't want to put the last nail in until we knew it was going to be the last nail," Schnebelen says. "I always put my soul into a record, but this one took a lot of a time. We worked on the songs for over a year, and that's not because we were being lazy. That's because we wanted to get them right."

Unsurprisingly, "getting the songs right" proved yeoman's work for Schnebelen: in one case, he and co-writer Jeff Paris spent 22 hours working on a subtle, bouncy track called "Soul Magic," which runs counter to the heavier tones and blues stomp central to the Trampled Under Foot catalog. While not every song on the album reached the all-consuming level that "Soul Magic" did, the song is representative of the care that went into *Crazy All By Myself*, a feature born from the responsibility Schnebelen feels about leading an eponymous act

in the blues world. While he doesn't say it overly, the opportunity to make a musical statement independent from Trampled Under Foot must have colored Schnebelen's approach to the new album, as the former outfit still casts a long shadow.

Veterans of the Kansas City scene, Trampled Under Foot was a family venture formed in 2002, which featured Nick on guitar, his sister Danielle Schnebelen on bass and lead vocals, and his brother Kris Schnebelen on drums. Road warriors in their own right, the trio spent over a decade in

legacy left by Trampled Under Foot. It's a leg up for a "new" band, and something Nick appreciates, as he continues to make his living in music.

"I made a lot of headway with Trampled Under Foot, and I feel like I'm in the family of people who know about blues. It's cool to be part of that family and get their support," he says. "A lot of time has passed, but Trampled Under Foot made such an impression that people are going to be associating us with that for a very long time."

While many audiences are familiar with Schnebelen, they'll likely come to understand new layers of the 39-year-old on *Crazy All By Myself*, as the record may prove an exception to the old saying that you can only make a first impression once. After all, he says he, Hagerman, and Moore "are creating a new, cool, blues sound."

"[This record] is an introduction to my style of composition: there's some tunes in there that have a little TUF in them, but there's a lot of new stuff, a lot of variety, which is fun for me. I've always loved all the



different styles of blues: I love swing, I love stompin' stuff, I love low-downs. There's a little bit of everything. I don't want to just find one sound and make a record with it."

During the writing process, that variety was initially intimidating, as the songs seemed more disparate from one another than Schnebelen had initially planned. Eventually, though, tracks began to "pair up"—they "all have siblings" Schnebelen says—which not only gave the record a necessary balance, but provided comfort and confidence for a writer who is signing his name to a solo, studio album for the first time. And in doing as much, Nick Schnebelen is treading new ground as a songwriter, a guitarist, and a singer.

Traditionally, Schnebelen's reputation is that of a shredder, not a wordsmith, as he won the 2008 Albert King Award for Best Guitarist at the International Blues Challenge. As a result

the industry before breaking through to new levels in 2013, as *Badlands*, their fourth and final studio album, received the Blues Music Award for Contemporary Blues Album of the Year and reached the top spot on the Billboard Blues Chart.

However, that newfound success was not enough to keep the group together, as Kris chose to leave the band a year later, while Danielle and Nick laid the project to rest after a 2015 farewell tour. For many fans, the proximity between the band's greatest commercial success and their untimely end was perplexing, but today, the Schnebelen's continue to enjoy the benefits of Trampled Under Foot's popularity: Kris currently plays in the Sean Chambers and sister Danielle's, Danielle has released two acclaimed albums on Concord Records, and the Nick Schnebelen Band, a trio that features drummer Adam Hagerman and bassist Cliff Moore, has seen plenty of full crowds on the road, thanks to the

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of such accolades, as well as his obvious abilities, fans "want to see [him] kick ass on the guitar" at shows, which he is more than happy to do. On the record, however, there's a new level of economy folded into his work, which is proving a six-string evolution for the guitarist.

"I'm kind of working my way back towards simplicity," Schnebelen says. "I write simply. I could write crazy changes, but I just want to play the song. Every song has its own unique flavor, its own unique personality, and you can play to that with music. That's what I'm doing: complimenting the core of the song."

The same can be said of Schnebelen's voice, which was often underutilized in *Trampled Under Foot*. A timeless, soulful croon with the spiced sweetness of Kansas City barbeque, Schnebelen's vocals seem to come from a bygone era, but remain cathartic and refreshing both on the stage and in the studio. With a heartfelt rasp, his lyrics often serve to even out the high-end of his guitar, but with either voice or strings, Schnebelen narrows his focus to the song; everything else is simply a tool to use within his role of singular songwriter and creative decision maker.

"I don't write empty songs, I don't write filler songs. Every song has a thought out purpose," he says. "I totally stand by [this record.] That's tough for an artist to say; it really is. I can't say I've felt that way about every record I've been apart of."

When we talk, the final mixes of *Crazy All By Myself* have just arrived in Schnebelen's inbox, and he can barely hide his excitement at the prospect of the world hearing his record. But like with everything he's involved in, there is more work ahead: on top of shows, summer festivals, album promotion, and appearances, Schnebelen has to find a label to help release *Crazy All By Myself*. If not, he'll put the record out independently.

It would seem crazy for someone to do all by themselves, and after a jam-packed 2017, Nick Schnebelen deserves a day off as much as anyone. But he just laughs, and says "I already started writing the next record." - BMM



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