

STANDING TALL

By Peter Cooper

Jason Ringenberg is Nashville's greatest 20th century rock 'n' roll frontman.

He and his band, Jason & The Scorchers, bridged rock and country in a way that had never been attempted, let alone actuated, and they paved the Music City rock roads on which new-century talents like Dan Auerbach, Kings of Leon, and Jack White now reside.

Whether filling notebook pages with songs or whirling across stages, extra-long mic cable mummifying him in black rubber and copper, Ringenberg exudes the riotous energy of rock 'n' roll, while favoring welcome and affirmation over sneers. He moves like Jagger, without the preening. He possesses the melodic sense of his old tour buddies in R.E.M., without the lyrical ambiguity. He's got the fire of Jerry Lee Lewis ... but without all the guns and stuff.

And he believes in the old-school, look-'em-in-the-eye-when-they're-talking-to-you ethic of classic country performers, while retaining a willingness to tweak tradition.

He and the Scorchers have an *Americana Music Association Lifetime Achievement Award for Performance* to show for what *Rolling Stone* called "singlehandedly re-writing the history of rock 'n' roll in the South."

So, if you're Jason, what do you do when you've done all of that? Hard to say, and hard to know. Problems occur . . . crises of confidence come along. Long ago, in 1985, Jason sang on the Scorchers' "Change the Tune," "Even your heroes are wondering what to say." That still holds true.

The Scorchers' opening act lasted twenty years, with some notable anniversary encores. Ringenberg occasionally skipped off for tremendous solo albums, but at some point you're getting older and your ability to play blistering rock 'n' roll all night long exceeds your audience's ability to receive blistering rock 'n' roll all night long. There are families and baby sitters and whatnot.

So in 2002, Jason created a children's character called Farmer Jason, and started winning awards (an Emmy!) and playing in the mornings . . . in libraries and elementary schools and city parks (well, he played the bohemian Coachella festival, too). Farmer Jason turned out to be one of the music business's most fun and most exhausting jobs: Try holding 100 small kids' attention for 45 minutes with only a voice and a guitar, then doing it all over the next day . . . and the next. And then every couple of years, the audience moves on from songs "He's a Hog, Hog, Hog" or "Moose on the Loose," and you've got to find a whole new crew of kids and parents.

Farmer Jason happily persevered, but Ringenberg's original solo albums ended with 2004's *Empire Builders*. And Nashville's greatest 20th century rock 'n' roll frontman spent a lot of time growing tomatoes on the farm, raising a family, and hosting annual easter egg hunts, giving wagon rides to kids who never saw him and the Scorchers play amphitheatres with Bob Dylan, or shake Conan O'Brien's hand on late night television.

Then he heard from the Sequoia National Park in the Sierra Nevadas, asking if he'd come be an artist-in-residence, play some park concerts, walk the mighty sequoia groves, and stay in a mountain cabin. He left Middle Tennessee resigned that halcyon recording days were over. A month later, he returned enthused, with a new bag of songs and an inclination to share them.

People get into big trouble for lighting fires in the Sequoias, but this time the Sequoias lit their own fire, and no longer was the old hero wondering what to say. Suddenly, there were songs about playing blackbox clubs with the Ramones in Texas, and about John the Baptist. There were songs about the Civil War, and even about sequoia trees. It's all here; in an album Ringenberg calls *Stand Tall*.

And so — more than 45 years after leaving his dear parents' Illinois hog farm in hopes of some kind of life in Music City — Nashville's greatest rock 'n' roll frontman of the 20th century took a break from singing children's songs, spent an old-growth, new century month in the Sierra Nevadas, and emerged recharged, renewed, and restored. As Jason sings in "John Muir Stood Here," a song about the naturalist who is considered "Father of the Natural Parks," "How I wish that I could thank the folks who saved this place a century ago, who stood upon this sacred space."

This music rises through the proud trees and from a proud man, all standing tall.

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