

Surfing and Songwriting

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEREK THOMAS



Derek Thomas, center, with his band, Skyline Drive. In 2011, Skyline Drive launched their debut album, “Topanga Ranch Motel,” mostly recorded in Thomas’ trailer, which he recently sold.

Derek Thomas reminisces about Topanga living in new album.

By Kateri Wozny

They say music is what life sounds like. For singer/songwriter Derek Thomas, music became the center of his universe when he was four-years-old.

“I never met my real dad and much of my musical influences came from my mom’s stepfather,” Thomas said. “We went on a cross-country trip in his Cadillac and the soundtrack playing in the vehicle was artists like Gram Parsons, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. As I grew up I realized that trip had a really strong impact on me but I didn’t realize it for many years.”

As Thomas entered high school, he started playing the guitar and was influenced to write his own lyrics after listening to great songwriters such as Jackson Browne, Neil Young, The Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd. He would also later be influenced by Bobby Charles, JJ Cale and Jerry Jeff Walker.

“I would figure out their tunes and make up my own in the way I would choose to say and influence things,” Thomas said.

After graduating from high school in Fountain Valley, attending SBCC and three music schools throughout Southern California, he moved to San Francisco in 2004 and formed psychedelic band 60 Watt Kid. With them, he was a multi instrumentalist and the band even received a four-star review from German *Rolling Stone*.

Once parting ways, he returned to Los Angeles in 2008 to set out to do his own thing and discovered Topanga on his drive to Malibu. He would live here for five years and create the band name “Derek Thomas and Skyline Drive” before moving to Laguna Beach, his current residence.

“I moved into a little place off Skyline Drive that used to be (singer) Joni Mitchell’s cabin,” Thomas said. “I loved

that you have young guys and people in their 70s and everyone gets together for house parties and chant music. You don’t find that anymore in communities.”

BEHIND THE MUSIC

In all of his songs, Thomas, 39, contributes to the insightful songwriting, raspy lead vocals and acoustic guitar. His music combines, folk, soul, alternative country, country rock and Americana genres that reflect his days living in the Canyon.

“Most of the songs I write are about friends, things and experiences in Topanga. It is such a huge influence in all of my work,” he said.

In 2011, Skyline Drive launched the debut album, “Topanga Ranch Motel,” that was mostly recorded in Thomas’ trailer (which he recently sold). It was well-received by music critics and contained songs such as the upbeat “Nothing Like You,” an emotional break-up with “Damaged” and a catchy song, “Bartering Line.” Thomas considers this album his most “retrospective” to date.

In the band’s new sophomore album, “Beyond the Trestles,” Thomas pays homage to songwriters Jackson Browne and Cat Stevens. It was recorded in studios in Los Angeles and New York City and produced by Chris Wonzer (R.E.M, Rod Stewart) and Malcolm Burn (Emmylou Harris, Bob Dylan).

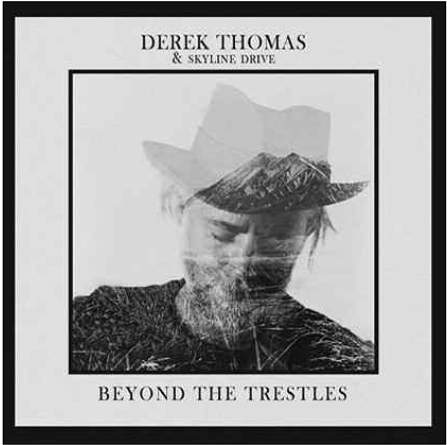
“Derek’s music seems to step out from some strange musical time machine where the past and the future meld into a beautiful strange blend of sonic molecules,” Burn said. “He is a cool guy and inspiring to work with.”

“Trestles” was recently released on iTunes and the lead single, “Honey Whiskey,” is a feel-good tune to kick back with a cold one while “Midnight Lady” has a ballad vibe with guitar solos.

Thomas’ favorite song on the album is “Broken Angel,” which he says “cuts deep. This album has more energy and



Derek Thomas surfing, one of his passions. As a surfer, he donates 10 percent of proceeds to Waves 4 Water, an organization that helps provide clean water to communities in need throughout the world.



Album covers for “Topanga Ranch Motel,” and right, “Beyond the Trestles.”

variety, it’s about moving forward,” he said. “It’s one of those albums where you need to listen to it a few times to get into it.”

Another aspect music listeners will notice in the songs is Thomas’ love for surfing. Not only does he teach surfing in Long Beach but travels to different places to perform live and enjoy his favorite pastime. He recently returned from Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

“When you’re surfing, you’re in a natural environment and get energy from the waves. It’s very soulful and free,” Thomas explained. “The same thing goes with songwriting, time doesn’t exist and I get lost creating the song.”

When making an album and performing live, band members have included the talented Erik Kristiansen (Ryan Adams), pedal steel; John Schreffler (Shooter Jennings), pedal steel, harmony vocals; Carl Byron (Ann McCue, Amilia White), piano, accordion, harmony vocals; Ted Russell Kamp (Shooter Jennings), bass guitar, harmonies; Jamie Douglas (Shooter Jennings), drums; Greg Cahill, guitar, harmonies; Kellii Scott (Failure), drums; Randy Mitchell, guitar; Paul Ill, bass guitar; Gregory Boaz, bass; Steve Mugalian, drums; Dave Alvin and Jamie Drake, harmonies.

“The band members are very talented and passionate,” Thomas said. “I usually bring in the tunes and we flush them out quickly so we don’t overthink

it.” Speaking of live, the “Trestles” album launch party is set for Nov. 13, at the House of Blues in West Hollywood. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the show kicks off at 8:30 p.m.

KEEP ON ROLLIN’

With all the magic going on, Thomas even found time this year to create his own independent record label, Soulwater Records. He hopes to have other artists sign onto it—particularly from the Canyon—and donate 10 percent of proceeds to Waves 4 Water, an organization that helps provide clean water to communities in need throughout the world. He also has a desire to play live at more venues, pursue film and TV, and co-write and collaborate with other artists, such as singer Jason Isbell.

“His sparseness is very unique and he’s very versatile on the guitar, in storytelling and melodies,” Thomas said.

As far as signing with a major label, Thomas is open to the idea. “It will really depend on what they had to offer and the position I am in,” he said.

For more information about Derek Thomas and Skyline Drive: skylinedrivemusic.com/ and Soulwater Records at soulwaterrecords.com/.

Additional information about the House of Blues show can be found at houseofblues.com/losangeles. ■



Derek Thomas’ truck cab, with all the hats he wears for his musical career.

WHAT’S HAPPENING IN TOPANGA’S REAL ESTATE MARKET?

86 Total Sales from January 1 to October 29, 2014

96 Total Sales from January 1 to October 29, 2013

Real Estate Activity from October 15 to October 29, 2014

• 3 New Listings

• 0 Back on the Market

• 6 In Escrow

• 5 Price Reductions

• 3 Sales

• 0 Expired, 2 Withdrawn

41 Current Active Listings, 13 Currently in Escrow

Thinking of buying or selling? Please call. You’ll be glad you did.

EXPERIENCE ISN'T EXPENSIVE... IT'S PRICELESS!

With FORTY FIVE years of COMBINED local experience.

The Campbells, Keeping Our Fingers on the Pulse!

310-383-1786

BARBARA CAMPBELL

310-663-9039

CATHERINE CAMPBELL

Sotheby's

INTERNATIONAL REALTY

Sotheby's International Realty and the Sotheby's International Realty logo are registered (or un-registered) service marks used with permission. Operated by Sotheby's International Realty, Inc.

Messenger, November 6, 2014, Page 10