

“As a band, our aim is to make music that acknowledges the pain and difficulty of the moment, but takes a step back to look at the harmony we can create through all that life throws at us.

- Trent Wagler

Virginia-based folk-rock band The Steel Wheels have spent almost twenty years writing, recording, and touring, all the while constantly honing their evolving brand of American roots music. Additionally they are the founders and hosts of the Red Wing Roots Music Festival, a beloved staple of the Shenandoah Valley. Through the years, The Steel Wheels have drawn on both traditional form and modern sounds to capture the beauty in all of life’s varied trials and triumphs. Their new album, *Sideways*, which releases on February 9, 2024 via Big Ring Records, is a meditation on resilience and survival. Trent Wagler, the band’s lead singer and primary songwriter, penned many of the songs in response to loss, and the uncertainty that comes with facing what we can’t control.

*Sideways* begins with “Wait On You,” bounding out of the gates with a fervor carried by The Steel Wheels’ signature close harmonies and propulsive mountain energy. Through a seemingly simple story of the naivety of youth, the belief that we can skate by without being prepared for misfortune and the unexpected, the album kicks off with a kind of emboldening invitation in the face of an unavoidable truth. The world doesn’t wait on us—it’s our responsibility to shore ourselves up, to show up, to be ready to be a part of it all.

*This year hit like a hurricane.  
The winds they knocked me over  
...  
All the books you read were just a wish,  
If you don’t show up, then you’re finished.  
- (from “Wait on You”)*

In 2019, The Steel Wheels were blindsided by the death of fiddle player and vocalist Eric Brubaker’s young daughter to a sudden illness. This incredible weight inspired some of the lines of “Easy on Your Way”, an almost hymn-like anthem that speaks to the desire to find something to say or give in the middle of heartache. But in spite of the weight at the heart of the song, it still rollicks with energy like a barn dance dirge—it’s a call to just *be* in your grief and pain while holding on to hope that we are in it all together.

*I don’t have a song to sing,  
There is no song to sing.  
If words could do anything  
I’d go and face the day.  
...  
Lift your voice when I am gone,  
Lift your voice when I am gone.  
If you ever have to sing this song,  
Easy on your way.  
- (from “Easy on Your Way”)*

In addition to finding resolve in loss, many of the songs on *Sideways* heavily grapple with the experience of watching the suffering of those we love, but feeling unequipped and helpless to know what to do—or if

there is even anything we *can* do. In the depths of a pandemic, mostly isolated and sequestered from the rest of the world, Wagler's own child faced a serious mental health crisis and needed immediate treatment. Thankfully they were able to find a program to receive the help they needed. Still the complicated, unending journey of mental health, experienced from the inside and as a spectator, was at the front of mind as the songs for *Sideways* were written.

"We all cast ourselves in the leading role of our story. I wrote the song 'Hero' in the midst of trying to help my child, and needing to be okay with it being their story. The refrain 'I thought I was the hero' is poking fun at myself for thinking I should or could fix anything. I had to take a backseat to listen and understand exactly what *they* were needing in that moment. Many of the songs on *Sideways*, including the title track, were a reflection of my own emotional confusion and processing."

- Trent Wagler

*What will I do without the mask on?  
Can it be true and still a love song?  
Does anybody want to sing with me?*

...  
*Is it something I can locate?  
Do I have enough to give away?  
Is it even under our control?  
Some feelings grow sideways.*

- (from "*Sideways*")

Sonically, *Sideways* encapsulates the band's most ambitious outing to date. At their inception, The Steel Wheels played exclusively on acoustic instruments, around one mic, drawing inspiration from the mountain music and string band traditions of Virginia, where the band was formed. But 2017's *Wild As We Came Here* represented an evolution in the band's sound. It was then they first collaborated with producer Sam Kassirer (Lake Street Dive, Langhorne Slim, Josh Ritter), adding sonic textures and pushing the boundaries of what the band's sound could be. This same chapter also saw the addition of Kevin Garcia (drums, percussion, and keys) to the band.

"We're more than a string band, what we do has fundamentally changed from four guys around a mic. This was clearest to me when we were writing *Sideways*. I realized we were being influenced by so much other music—psychedelic rock, pop, jam, you name it—just overall paying attention to a broader palette of sound, not so focused on our own little world."

- Trent Wagler

For the recording of *Sideways* in 2022, The Steel Wheels once again tapped Kassirer to help them bring the album to life. The band holed up together at the Great North Sound Society in Parsonsfield, ME, moving into the studio for a week, cooking their meals together around a woodstove in a farmhouse, and, most importantly, playing all together again—for the first time in over two years.

The result is at-once a powerful, anthemic, at-times joyous, and contemplative reflection on our shared human experience—both tapping into the personal and reaching for something universal. And all throughout *Sideways*, we hear and see the image of resilience, resolve, and strength despite the trials. We are reminded that we are all still here... pushed and bent by the wind, yes, but still standing.

As Wagler says, “It’s beautiful and crushing to be alive sometimes. We aren’t here to sing songs that only cut one way—but if they do, they’ll cut sideways.”