

# Mike Campbell & the Dirty Knobs

## *Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits*

BY DAVID FRICKE

*Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits*, the third album by Mike Campbell and the Dirty Knobs, opens with a song about the one thing every rock band on the road needs to feel alive and going forward, night after night: the crowd.

“Look at this place, look at these faces,” Campbell sings through droning jangle in the acid-ballroom march “The Greatest,” marveling at the “amazing grace” of “voices raised together” the guitarist has experienced with his band at every stop for the last three years – and before that, in four decades with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. “The Greatest” is one of eleven new songs co-produced by Campbell with Petty studio veteran George Drakoulias and Martin



photo credit: Chris Phelps

Pradler – the same view from the stage in the Beatles’ overture to themselves on *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, except Campbell and the Dirty Knobs are firing all of that joy and wonder back at the fans.

“We had just come off a tour, and I wanted to write something for them, to say, ‘You are the greatest, thanks for coming,’” Campbell explains. “I’m so proud of my legacy,” referring to that previous lifetime of hits and tours, “but I’m creating my own music and direction with this band. I’m grateful that

there’s an audience for what we’re doing, and I wanted to put that in a song, to start the record: ‘Let’s go on this journey together.’”

*Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits* ends like a gig, too. “Amanda Lynn” is a brief dance of mandolins originally recorded as the walk-out music at Dirty Knobs shows. In between, Campbell, guitarist Chris Holt, bassist Lance Morrison and drummer Matt Laug have made the most expansive and dynamic album of the Dirty Knobs’ one-of-a-kind ride. Founded in 2000 by Campbell as a

writing and club-date project outside the Heartbreakers, the band finally got on record with 2020's *Wreckless Abandon* and 2022's *External Combustion*, both made with Drakoulias and Pradler.

Those LPs, Campbell says, were the Dirty Knobs (named after tech slang for a broken amp dial) "trying to find our way as a rock & roll band. Now it's down to great songs, the depth in the lyrics and chords." He recalls something Petty once told him: "Tom said, 'I love the English language. There's so much you can do with it.' I'm discovering that too. Looking for rhyme schemes, the right words – at first, it was a struggle.

"Now that door has opened," he says. "I've turned a corner" on *Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits*. The Dirty Knobs are "still a rock band but growing into different feels."

That includes the hard-rock seesaw of desperation, regret and time signatures in "Hands Are Tied" and the bruised-country ballad "Hell or High Water," a one-night stand wreathed

in misty-morning strings and sung by Campbell in a dusky, empathic duet with an old friend of Petty and the Heartbreakers, Lucinda Williams. "Innocent Man" is another song of the road

Crosby, Stills and Nash to the urgent, chiming guitars in "Dare to Dream." Nash was a guest on "The Breakdown," Campbell's interview show on SiriusXM's Tom Petty Radio, when "I got up the

courage," Campbell recalls, "to ask him, 'Would you be interested in singing on one of my songs?' He said, 'Yeah, I'll make your song better.'" Campbell laughs. "And he did! It sounds like the Hollies."

"Dare to Dream" was "perfect for him," Campbell adds, "because it's about hope and redemption in a wicked world. I don't write a lot of happy songs. But a lot of Tom's songs in the Heartbreakers – even though the characters and stories were dark, there

was hope in the end, that it's gonna work out. 'Dare to Dream' is a simple idea: It's gonna be okay if you hang on to hope."

*Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits* is proof in the grooves, a record of songs forged in changes and turning points. It's Campbell's first album with Chris "Sidewinder" Holt, who joined the Dirty Knobs in 2022 for the touring on *External Combustion* and has added keyboards



album artwork

with strafing-treble guitars and a true story behind the second verse – Petty and the Heartbreakers' full border-search treatment by U.S. customs on one tour – while "My Old Friends" is honky-tonk wordplay, Campbell having top-shelf fun with the many brands of firewater named after people.

Then there's Graham Nash, bringing his history in harmonies and Sixties idealism with the Hollies and

to the armory along with clear, sharp harmonies and a garage-guitar attack that fortifies the staccato riffing in “So Alive” and makes the double-time frenzy in “Shake These Blues” sound like the Byrds covering the 1966 nugget “Psychotic Reaction.” Holt is “really good at our approach” which, Campbell notes, is light on planning and all about the moment. “My thing is, ‘Don’t take the track home and work out the solo. We’re going to cut it now. When we get to the solo, do something.’”

Campbell also points to “the last two minutes” in “Shake These Blues”: that brawny, walking bass in the raveup, the way Paul Samwell-Smith used to stalk Eric Clapton’s explosive soloing in the Yardbirds. “That’s Crawdaddy,” Campbell says proudly – a/k/a Lance Morrison, a Dirty Knob since he joined in 2004. “He’s our backbone, a killer. He’s really important to the band.”

Laug, in fact, took off after *Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits* was all but finished to become the drummer in AC/DC. “He couldn’t turn down his dream gig of all time,” Campbell admits. “It would be like me going back and

joining the Beatles. I said, ‘Matt, before you do that, cut this record with us. I know it will go real fast.’” And it did – until Campbell’s wife Marcie suggested the guitarist take a look in his “analog tape locker,” as he puts it. “She said, ‘I think you locked some gems in there.’”

Campbell estimates that he and the Dirty Knobs had already recorded “about 25 songs” for the album. “But then I found these old tapes, done 15 years ago or more, things that never hit Tom’s table, that I’d set aside and forgotten.” Among them: “Dare to Dream,” “Hands Are Tied” and “Don’t Wait Up,” a freight-train boogie that now features a return engagement by Chris Stapleton – he sang on *Wreckless Abandon* – and Benmont Tench, Campbell’s bandmate in the Heartbreakers, on piano. “Chris came in and sang a verse, then Ben came over one day and slapped that Jerry Lee Lewis on it,” the guitarist says with delight.

And if the assured stomp behind those blues-army guitars in “Angel of Mercy” reminds you of Campbell’s other band, that’s because the drummer is Steve Ferrone, Campbell’s rhythm brother

in the Heartbreakers for more than 20 years and an original member of the Dirty Knobs when Campbell started the band as a trio with Heartbreaker bassist Ron Blair. “Angel of Mercy” was a song “we used to play in clubs,” the guitarist says, “and I tried to get it on the first two records but never got the track right. This album was finished, but then Drakoulis said, ‘We really oughta do this song.’ Matt was gone, so Steve helped us out.”

Ferrone has been playing shows with the band in recent months and will be there, Campbell says, when he and the Dirty Knobs take *Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits* on the road: “When Steve came in to do that song, he said, ‘Can I have my seat back?’ ‘Yeah, man, you’re in the band.’ Fans love it when they see Steve up there. It means a lot to see some of that old connection.”

But, Campbell insists, “When we go on tour, a major portion of the set will be the new album.” The guitarist will be out there, playing for the greatest. On *Vagabonds, Virgins & Misfits*, he’s bringing them his best.

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