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Tomahawk Actually Starting To Sound Like An American-Indian Band

Group consumed buffalo and whiskey 'to get in the mood,' guitarist Duane Denison says.

By Chris Harris

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Several years ago, while touring the nation's casinos and reservations with honky-punk hellion Hank Williams III, Tomahawk guitarist Duane Denison discovered American Indian music. And no, he wasn't impressed with what he heard.

"I got to see a lot of current American-Indian bands, and to be honest, I was usually just sort of disappointed at how normal they sounded," explained Denison, best known for his work with the now-defunct Jesus Lizard. "They were playing like, country or country rock, Southern rock, blues, and it seemed just far more mainstream than what I'd hoped. I figured there must be native music somewhere that was more aggressive, spookier and more kinetic."

So, Denison began doing research on ancestral music created by North America's indigenous people. Eventually he came across some books — dating back to Theodore Roosevelt's presidency — that contained transcriptions of several American Indian tunes, but no information concerning the songs' composers.

"When we were throwing concepts around for the third Tomahawk album, I liked the idea of taking older music from unknown sources and putting our own stamp on it," he said. The forthcoming Tomahawk LP, due in stores June 19, is appropriately titled *Anonymous*. "It sounded like an interesting, unusual and different idea, and I didn't feel we were plundering anyone. It wasn't like we were stealing from some blues guys or something, because as far as I know, this stuff's never been recorded. I brought the idea to the rest of the guys, and there was no warming up to it. It was pretty immediate. [Frontman Mike] Patton flipped over it right away. It wasn't a stretch for us — after all, we *are* Tomahawk."

The question is, who'll dig *Anonymous*, an album of rock songs constructed from the foundations of melodies that are more than 100 years old? "Tomahawk fans, I think they'll like it," Denison said. "It's a bit different from the previous two albums, which are fairly straightforward modern rock. But really, this album's not so different for us. It's still a rock album, and people who like what Patton does expect him to continually do different stuff. So, some people might hate it and think it's a stupid idea, that it's pretentious crap and ask us what we were thinking. Other people will like it because it's different and well done. We'll just have to see."

Anonymous contains 13 tracks, including "Totem," "Mescal Rite 1," "Song of Victory" and "Long, Long Weary Day," and while the band was recording it in Nashville, Denison claims it "tried as much as possible to eat buffalo meat and drink whiskey, to get in the mood." He said Tomahawk have no concrete touring plans around the release, with their members all involved in other projects: Patton has Peeping Tom, drummer John Stainer is in Battles and Denison recently launched U.S.S.A.

"The hardest thing about making this record was finding the approach for each tune," he said. "Most of these, as they were transcribed, were pretty bare



Tomahawk's Mike Patton
Photo: Karl Walter/ Getty Images

"Maybe we'll do an album's worth of Vietnamese music. Who knows?" — Tomahawk's Duane Denison

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bones — simply a melody with a rhythmic pattern to it, which was maybe played on a nose flute with clapping as the simple accompaniment. So, we took a lot of liberties, and filled in a lot of space. The majority of what you hear is more written by us than what's originally notated. So, we just had to pick an approach for each song and take it from there."

U.S.S.A., a band Denison said falls somewhere between Motörhead and Radiohead, was formed about a year ago, when the guitarist started working on songs with ex-Ministry bassist Paul Barker. The pair eventually recruited Gary Call to front the outfit, along with drum wizard Johnny Rabb, and in time, they had a full-length record in the bag. Now, he said, they just need to find a label to release the thing — until then, they plan to tour the U.S., letting people know they exist.

On June 5, the first-ever Jesus Lizard DVD will hit record store shelves. "Live," which was recorded during a gig in Boston back in 1994, features the band's original lineup, along with some exclusive interview footage.

But for now, Denison is focusing his energy on Tomahawk. So, just how does he plan to follow up *Anonymous*? Well, while the band hasn't begun thinking about its fourth album yet, the guitarist does have a few ideas.

"Tomahawk goes ancient Greek," he laughed. "Maybe we'll do an album's worth of Vietnamese music. Who knows?"

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