

THE HACIENDA BROTHERS

WHAT'S WRONG WITH RIGHT

The Hacienda Brothers, led by cult heroes Chris Gaffney and Dave Gonzalez, introduced their wood-smoked blend of stone country and old-school R&B on their self-titled 2004 debut album, helmed by legendary writer/producer Dan Penn. The record was made in Tucson, where both of the principals, who now reside in Southern California, have roots, so people took to describing the group's sound as "western soul." The term not only stuck, it proved to be inspirational when the Haciendas and Penn reconvened in the picturesque Arizona city for the follow-up effort, *What's Wrong With Right* (Proper American Records), because the album vividly captures the new/old genre brought about by the pairing of Gaffney, Gonzalez and Penn.

The drop-dead gorgeous title song—one of the record's several instant classics—marks the second time Gonzalez and Penn have written together, following the first album's soulful "Looking for Loneliness." Dave has known Penn since 1998, when they met at a European festival between sets by and Penn and partner Spooner Oldham and Gonzalez's Paladins, and they share a love of everything automotive, but the guitarist remains in awe of Penn as a songwriter. Before their first collaboration, Gonzalez recalls that Penn told him, "I got three rules: I don't do nothin' over the phone, I don't do nothin' over the mail and I don't do nothin' over the Internet. I'm into hangin' out." It turned out that Penn was particularly into hangin' out in Tucson, which was one of the attractions of working with the Haciendas. The meeting of the minds amid mountains and desert proved to be fruitful for all concerned.

Western soul couldn't be defined any more clearly than it is on the timeless opener, "Midnight Dream," with David Berzansky's sighing pedal steel Gonzalez's crisply stroked Telecaster cruising along over a simmering Stax/Volt groove laid down by drummer Dale Daniel and bassist Hank Maninger, and a Gaffney vocal that sounds like it was cut late at night in the back seat of Hank Williams' Cadillac. The song was a three-way collaboration between Gonzalez, Gaffney and Jeb Schoonover, the guy who brought them together and now manages the band. The impression deepens with each successive song. While "What's Wrong With Right" would seem to bring out the Alabama-born producer's inner hillbilly, it isn't hard to imagine this country heartbreak ballad becoming its R&B equivalent if Penn were to hand it to a soul man like Bobby Purify. Gonzalez then shows that he's no slouch as a soul singer himself as he takes the lead vocal on "Keep It Together," another gem from the Gonzalez-Gaffney-Schoonover partnership.

From there five more originals, including the Gonzalez-penned honky-tonk tunes "The Last Time" and "The Warning," and Gaffney's elegiac "If Daddy Don't Sing Danny Boy," are interspersed with an equal number of inventive takes on some of Gaffney and Gonzalez's favorite oldies—the Penn-Spooner Oldham classics "Cry Like a Baby" and "It Tears Me Up," Charlie Rich's "Rebound" and "Life's Little Ups and Downs," and Gamble & Huff's "Cowboys to Girls." It doesn't get any tastier, or more heartfelt, than this stuff, which reveals a couple of utter pros at their most committed.

Gaffney split his time between Dave Alvin's Guilty Men and his own band the Cold Hard Facts before becoming a Hacienda Brother. The veteran, who cut his teeth on the eclectic fare spun by Wolfman Jack on XERB before getting his start backing the likes of Webb Pierce and Ferlin Husky in a Toronto bar, explains that, "I was always a big R&B fan, and I

also like steel guitar, so I couldn't see why the combination wouldn't work." Gaffney is a colorful character who throws out one-liners the way he once threw left jabs as the 1967 L.A. Golden Gloves champ. Talking about his partner's prolific output, for example, he quips, "Dave will write songs about his toenails if you give him a chance." Discussing Gonzalez and Penn's mutual passion for working on cars, Gaffney offers, "They're both greasers. They'll spot some ol' pile of shit in the middle of a field and act like they've seen a girl for the first time." Although he plays the accordion and acoustic guitar, Gaffney is a closet hard rocker. "Our drummer," he notes, "has a bunch of songs on one of those Pod things that he's labeled 'Gaffney's Choices'—AC/DC, UFO and the Pogues." But when this inveterate wise-ass steps up to the mic and opens his mouth, he can break your heart in the first four bars.

Gonzalez is the yang to Gaffney's yin. The longtime Paladins bandleader and studio rat practically vibrates with sincerity and good vibes. "I knew Gaff for a long time and really admired him," Dave explains. "He was one of the best singers I'd heard in the Southern California area, and pretty much in the whole roots scene. He also wrote some good songs and put out a couple real nice records. At first we didn't really plan on havin' a band—we just dug hangin' out with each other and had a mutual respect for a lot of the same music. But every time we got together, somethin' good would come out of it—we'd write a song or play a good gig—and we'd have a ball just hangin' out. Then Dan Penn heard the demo of our song 'I'm So Proud,' and he dug it. He got involved because we weren't signed to a big label and we were doin' it on our own terms. It was a refreshing sound to him, and it was a refreshing thing for Gaff and me, too, to just have new blood and new ideas. It still feels that way. We played 300 gigs in the last two years, and that really got our sound together. We also took a big step with our songwriting. We're really proud of our new record."

The Hacienda Brothers took shape in the most natural way imaginable. While working as a roots music promoter, Tucson resident Schoonover formed a friendship with Gonzalez, whose guitar playing he'd long admired, and the two got together whenever Gonzalez was in Tucson to spin obscure platters they'd picked up in thrift shops and talk about music. "On one such night of nonstop record listening," Schoonover recalls, "we started off with the saddest of sad honky-tonkers, only to end up at about 2 a.m. listening to a string of down-and-out soul singers. Dave and I looked at each other and said, 'Man if only a band could play what we've been listening to tonight, and how cool would *that* be?' Of course, the next question was 'Who would be the singer?' In unison we answered, 'Chris Gaffney.'"

The dream became reality at Schoonover's 40th birthday party, which both Gonzalez and Gaffney attended. "Little did I know it was Gaffney's birthday on the same day," Gonzalez says with a laugh. Both eventually stepped up for the inevitable jam session, and the spontaneous experience made them want to work together. "They were immediately joined at the hip musically," Jeb remembers. "It's probably because they are total opposites that they fit together so perfectly. But once they got together in Tucson to write songs and record them at my house, it was all so natural. It was if all of their years of performing had led them back to this place. Chris had gone to junior high and part of high school in Tucson, and Dave's family on his father's side was from Tucson, so in a sense, both of them came home to form the Hacienda Brothers."

Who would've thought that Country Road and Soul Boulevard would intersect out in the Arizona desert? You won't find this crossroads on any map, but it's right here in the grooves of *What's Wrong With Right*.

Bud Scoppa

