JD McPherson  
*Let the Good Times Roll*

Track by Track



1. LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

“I think there are at least six or seven charted songs with that title. Shirley & Lee did a *woooonderful* song called ‘Let the Good Times Roll.’ But mine is influenced by Eddie Cochran. This is the song where we discovered electric bass, which is a new thing for us. I know it seems strange for a band to say ‘Yeah we’re writing around electric bass now. It’s like a new instrument,’ but Jimmy Sutton is such an adept acoustic bassist, and that’s his wheelhouse — that’s what he was put here to do. But getting that electric bass out has been so fun. Sometimes you have to pull yourself back a little back, because your urge is to go totally Dee Dee Ramone with it and just go as fast and hard as possible, so you have to finesse it a little bit. But man, there’s something about tambourine on top of that bass. That, to me, sounds like rock & roll.

“This is one people really respond to live. But this song only exists because of expired Tylenol PM. I was sick in bed, and took this expired cold medicine, and it was the worst thing ever. Time slowed down, and I was having trouble breathing.

Meanwhile, I was watching this Frasier episode where they were remembering a childhood Shakespearian production, and I’m seeing Niles holding this skull, saying ‘Alas, poor Yorick.’ And I just started thinking about high school Shakespeare, and I wrote this song about one of his plays. I don’t know if I want to give that part away. The thing to carry away is that this is maybe the strangest song I’ve ever written.”

2. BOSSY

“That song is just about stories from past relationships, you know? Until now, I’ve always been really uncomfortable in relationships, and sometimes I can’t figure out human behavior. That’s basically what that song’s about. Musically, I was listening to Mississippi Fred McDowell. That riff is just a nylon-string acoustic run through an electric guitar amp. All the acoustic instruments were recorded and then re-amped through this old ‘50s Magnatone. And in this case it almost makes it sound like a thumb piano or some weird steel instrument.”

3. IT’S ALL OVER BUT THE SHOUTING

“It’s just an R&B rhythm we call a stroller. I had this obsession with this piano part that’s just an octave played over, and the band moves around that. The root of that song is very New Orleans rhythm & blues, but with the treatment it gets, it almost starts to turn psychedelic. There’s a lot of distortion and a ton of delay on the vocals. And the solo section is really weird, with these looping guitar and saxophone stacks that are happening in stereo. It’s like a psychedelic Coasters thing. That’s something I actually talked about with (producer) Mark Neill at the beginning of the record: ‘Let’s make a ‘50s psychedelic record!’

“Lyrically, I completely rewrote that song four or five times. The first time, it was so scathing, I couldn’t let anybody see it. It was like, ‘Wow, what is going on with me? I’m really getting some stuff out here!’ So you start to kind of refine it a little bit and mask some things. It’s just about extreme frustration with a person.”

4. BRIDGE BUILDER

“Dan Auerbach did an amazing job helping me with ‘Bridge Builder.’ I had this lyric ‘Bridge builder, draw a straight line on the water,’ and I had fleshed it out a little bit, but it wasn’t ever becoming a song. It just was a line. And Dan came up with the chords and a couple of lines for the chorus. I remember being really uncomfortable because I was thinking, ‘this isn’t what I’m used to. These chords are out of my comfort zone.’ And Dan was just like, ‘Well, do you like the Everly Brothers in the ‘60s?’ I'm like, yes. He goes, ‘Then what are you talking about?’ So I said, ‘You’re right. Okay.’

“And I love the sounds on that song. The big fuzz guitar comes in, and there’s the weird drum breakdown in the middle of it, which comes from watching James Brown’s drummer during a live performance. It’s like he is like busy, busy, busy - but it’s not falling apart. Jason Smay and I worked together on figuring out a part where the drum was the featured instrument in a solo. Drum sounds and rhythms actually inform a lot of my songwriting and help spark ideas.”

5. IT SHOOK ME UP

“That aggressive drumming is Jason’s bag. We’re always asking him, “Pull back a little bit. This has gotta be minimal, minimal, minimal.’ But man, sometimes you’ve got to let the thing out of the cage, you know what I mean? You’ve gotta let him play the drums! He’s a punk-rock Gene Krupa, with all those jazz chops, but he the loudest, hardest-hitting traditional grip player I’ve ever seen. I love playing with him. It’s like the perfect mix of finesse and raw power.

“The song is just about being fragile — and about feeling lonely, and leaving things unaccomplished. Disguised under a rock & roll tune! ‘Why am I dancing and crying at the same time? I don’t understand.’”

6. HEAD OVER HEELS

“That song came about because I had been watching all these videos of Wilko Johnson, who is the guitar player for this band called Dr. Feelgood, and who also played with Ian Dury and a bunch of punk bands. He’s this insane person who paces back and forth frenetically, and just punches his strings over and over again. It’s a minimalist approach to blues finger style playing. He has all this bendy note stuff, but there’s no finesse in his right hand at all. It’s like just like punch punch punch punch punch! That is beautiful to me — the juxtaposition of finesse and brutality. And I started applying that to this song and it clicked as something really cool. We kept saying ‘What would electric bass sound like on this?’ — as we did with ‘Let the Good Times Roll’ — and Jimmy was always game to give it a shot.”

7. SHY BOY

“I had that line ‘this thing trips on the shortest of lips’ because I was pushing my amp over a door threshold and I actually said those words. And then I was reading an article about the Winchester House, and that line popped back into my head.

I can’t explain how it directly references that idea of this woman who was so afraid of ghosts and kept building a house so that it would never stop. But if you read the lyrics, knowing that, it makes sense a little bit — just about doing something completely irrational because of a very small initial anxiety.

“That’s a Hammond. Ray Jacildo, our keys player, opened up a whole world to us when he joined the band. I’d never thought about having an organist in the band. —and I mean, why not? Ray Charles is the obvious example, but there are so many cool references with the Hammond organ: You can do Bill Doggett, Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff — all the jazz organ stuff. Organ can take a song to church or it can take it to the garage.”

8. YOU MUST HAVE MET LITTLE CAROLINE?

“I thought ‘Caroline’ was a a great name. The line about ‘You look like a child, crawling out to the hall when his folks are asleep and his hands along the wall’ — you know when you’re a little kid, and you want to go to your parents’ room and you’ve got your hands on the wall to find your way? I was just thinking that that would be a really desperate lyric for being hurt, lost, and heartbroken. So there it goes: another rock & roll song with all this desperate stuff. I don’t know what was going on in my head at that time, except that that song was directly influenced by the European winter, when we were on tour in the UK in January, and your joints hurt because that wet winter goes right through you, and you can’t get warm because your bones are wet and cold. I just remember wearing layers of clothes in the bunk of the van and writing that song out.”

9. PRECIOUS

“Jimmy Sutton, the bass player, had an idea for a song called ‘Precious’ that would have been more upbeat. He didn’t have any lyrics but the title, but he’s like, ‘I don’t know, man, it just sounds like a Chuck Berry song! You could be singing ‘precious’ over and over again.’ I’m so glad that Jimmy had that idea to have that song, even if I ended up writing it completely differently. That’s a very joyful, spiritual song for me.

“It feels like it’ll be a really fun, transcendent thing to perform. Tremolo guitar is like a tonic. It’s like the go-to sound for me. It always sounds good, especially when you can get the band to synch with it. Pops Staples and Johnny Marr — all those references to me mean tremolo guitar.

10. MOTHER OF LIES

“It’s a tongue-in-cheek celebration of blues writing. It’s almost like celebrating the silliness of the “dark blues lyric”. It occurred to me how full of like superstition that is, like the leagues of blues guitarists that write songs about black cat bones and devil at the crossroads, when they’re living in the suburbs. But you’ve got to put that stuff in there, because it’s it’s the language. Frequently I find myself laughing at things that are incredibly bleak.”

“It’s one of the nice saxophone breaks on the record, though there’s a lot less saxophone on this record. It’s another excuse to use Ray’s organ playing. The entire band sounds amazing during the solo section of that song. When that kicks in, that’s the purest example of R&B on the record.”

11. THE ALL-AMERICAN

“That was definitely a rock & roll song. It has some punk-rock guitar in it. If I do sound like Little Richard there, it’s because we’re definitely both singing from the throat, which is the wrong thing to do. But you’re also hearing saturation from the tape and you’re hearing tubes being pushed a little too hard. Grit is good. I love grit, and especially tube grit. It’s almost always like: ‘Can we make this a little grittier? Can we slam the tape a little harder?’

“That song is about a guy named Nick Curran who was a friend and contemporary of ours. Nick probably had more to do with me singing and playing the way I do than anybody else, even though he was even a little younger than me. He was an amazing singer and guitar player, and a real rock & roll guy, and he passed away not too long ago. So that song was about him. The last record he made was called ‘Reform School Girl,’ and it did really well on satellite radio; Little Steven’s Underground Garage played it all the time. When the Black Keys played on Austin City Limits, they wore Nick Curran T-shirts on that show, because Dan was into Nick. ‘Reform School Girl’ was when he finally did what he was supposed to be doing all the time, which was taking R&B and rock & roll plus the Ramones. Musically we tried to kind of have that Nick flavor in the song as well as dedicating it to him in the liner notes. Everyone should listen to him. He was incredible.”

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