



Dan Cutler – vocals/stand-up bass | Sam Doores – vocals/guitar
Riley Downing – vocals/guitar | Cameron Snyder – vocals/percussion
John James Tourville – fiddle/pedal steel

The Deslondes are a New Orleans-based band, whose raw, stripped-down sound springs to mind a country-meets-Southern-R&B hybrid rooted partly in the Texas singer/songwriter tradition, partly on the weathered floor of a Louisiana dance hall.

The group, comprised of Sam Doores (vocals/guitar), Riley Downing (vocals/guitar), Dan Cutler (vocals/stand-up bass), Cameron Snyder (vocals/percussion) and John James Tourville (pedal steel/fiddle), is a true democratic collective.

“Even before we started this group,” says Doores, “when I was just playing with Cameron, we always had the idea that it would be fun to be in a band where there were multiple singers and multiple songwriters, and where everybody had a voice and can play multiple instruments — a true collaboration that’s greater than the sum of its parts and is still cohesive.”

The Deslondes is the band’s self-titled debut on venerable New West Records. This freshman effort has already picked up pre-release praise from the likes of NPR’s resident critic Ann Powers, who spotlighted their first single, “Fought the Blues and Won,” and called the fivesome “deft assemblers of a sound that traverses decades and style with humble grace.”

“A creative balance between five different people is naturally a precarious one,” says Cutler. “There’s a lot of push and pull going on at all times. The Deslondes are more democratic than any band I’ve ever been in, and most bands I’ve witnessed out in the world. There are many benefits though and from an audience perspective there is plenty of variety and a lot of things to pay attention to. It also adds a bit of healthy competition to the mix, which is a good motivator for the band.”

“One of the major pluses of being a collective,” Snyder notes, “is that we always have a lot of material to work with. And with five songwriters and four singers, we are able to reflect a lot of influences in our sound.” Adds Downing, “I feel like we’re all open to anything, if it feels right, whether it’s a slow, sad country song or a fast barnburner of a rock ‘n’ roll song.”

“We all have different strengths,” continues Downing. “I didn’t even know how to harmonize when I joined this band, but Dan taught me how by playing me a whole bunch of Swan Silvertones, and old a cappella gospel stuff, pulling out the different parts, till it all kind of started making sense. Cameron and Dan are definitely the top harmonizers of the band. I’m lucky that I get to sing somewhat naturally, almost talk-singing, and those guys come up right underneath you and make it sound more powerful and really help your voice sit right.”

Referencing the piano-fueled style of album opener “Fought the Blues and Won,” which recalls Jerry Lee’s bluesy Nashville period of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, Downing says, “That’s definitely Sam.”

As you might expect with a group made up of multiple front-people, The Deslondes’ history is a delightfully tortured one to recount. Doores met Snyder while attending college in the state of Washington, and all northwestern bets were off once Sam read Woody Guthrie’s autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, and became so subsumed with it that he quit school to head to New Orleans with Snyder and another friend. Along the way they formed a band, The Broken Wing Routine, and attended the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival in Oklahoma, where

they met Missouri native Downing. In New Orleans, Doores met Cutler and formed The Tumbleweeds, while Snyder and Tourville met on tour with The Longtime Goners.

Listeners won't mistake the creativity of The Deslondes — named after the street in the Holy Cross neighborhood in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward where the band formed — for any other major city's creative hub. "Behind my house on Deslonde Street, there's the old Holy Cross High School, which has been abandoned since the flood," Doores explains. "There's a lot of open space, and since it's the last house on the levee right on the Mississippi River, it's kind of like being in the country. We've got chickens in the backyard and a whole lot of space, it's peaceful here."

Except, of course, when the band is in the house and making the kind of racket they do on a song like "Less Honkin', More Tonkin'," which Downing came up with based on his love for George Jones' seminal, fast-driving Starday Records period. Which raises the question: What is this strong a strain of country doing in New Orleans? Even with NOLA being its own nation — especially musically — country twang still seems a little out of place there. It won't if The Deslondes and their pedal steel-playing friends have their way, though.

"I think we all learned a lot in this city," says Tourville. "That's probably the strongest thing that comes through, us all honing our skills here."

"When I first moved here, I didn't see or hear about a lot of country bands," adds Cutler. "Now they seem to be everywhere! There's always been country music in New Orleans though. Jimmie Rodgers had a little old home down here, as did probably a thousand other yodeling hobos over the years. And of course Willie and Waylon and Merle and Hank all spent time here and sang about New Orleans. There's also a lot of homegrown country over the years, in town as well as in St. Bernard and the West Bank and of course Baton Rouge and western Louisiana. Even a lot of old jazz songs were borrowed from old country songs. Anyone who tells you New Orleans is not a country music town is dead wrong."

"We're definitely influenced by the old '50s and '60s R&B of New Orleans quite a bit, from Huey 'Piano' Smith to Fats Domino," says Doores. "But the city also has a huge history of country music being around, even though, when I first came to town, there wasn't a huge country scene going on." The Deslondes and some of their friends and affiliated acts have been a part of that shift back. For a city that already had a healthy jug-band scene, why not add a thriving country scene, too, right?

Whatever you call their music, one thing is for certain: It has the transformative power to turn clubs into dance halls and bars into honky-tonks. "Whenever we play a show in New Orleans, the whole floor is filled with people dancing ... whereas in other towns, people nod their heads and smile," Doores laughs. "Dancing is the focal point of the whole trad-jazz scene here and the Cajun music scene *and* the country music scene. The dancing culture in New Orleans definitely influences us."

While most music buffs will come to the album without any preconceptions, there may be a sense of anticipation among fans of Hurray for the Riff Raff. Doores and Cutler were part of that estimable group for years, pulling double-duty as The Deslondes evolved into what they are today. "We were sister bands and traveled on the road together for a long time," says Doores. "There was a period of time where it worked out wonderfully, and Dan and I were able to play two sets a night. But there came a point where the bands were fighting over our time and we had to decide to just be in one. It felt right to focus on the one that we started and that reflected our creative vision the most. It was sad, because I enjoy the role of being a backup musician, too, and loved playing with them but Riff Raff is very much one person's voice and vision. It being the brainchild of Alynda (Lee Segarra) is part of what's amazing about it."

The Deslondes then is a very different vision, one where five individualists can come together and create something they couldn't possibly do without each other. "We're constantly trying to sound more and more like ourselves all the time," says Doores. "Every band wants to say that they can't really be categorized, but we really do try to combine all the elements that we love, most of them older American traditions. Along the way, there've been certain songs where everyone could say, 'That song sounds like a gospel song' or 'This one sounds like a country song' or 'This one sounds like New Orleans R&B.' Eventually we want it to have it be more of a cohesive sound where every song just kind of has elements of all of those and it's less piecemeal. Hopefully we're getting closer all the time to 'That song sounds like a Deslondes song.'"