



J.D. Souther

AT LONG LAST, ONE OF AMERICA'S BEST SONGWRITERS
BREAKS DECADES OF SILENCE.



By Stephanie Stephens

PHOTOGRAPHY: RODNEY BURSIEL



IT'S ABOUT TIME, SAY FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES of singer-songwriter, actor, and multi-instrumentalist J.D. Souther. They had waited for way too many years for the release of Souther's new CD; after various delays, it seemed like the record might never come out. And then last October, lo and behold, *If the World Was You* (Slow Curve) was finally released. Souther's previous record, *Home by Dawn*, came out in 1984. That's 24 years of waiting for something new from a guy whose iconic songs have torn up the charts for mega-artists including Linda Ronstadt, George Strait, James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, and the Eagles. Just last year, a Souther song, "How Long," netted the Eagles a Grammy. While he's never stopped writing and has performed on a dizzying list of musical tracks since 1969, it's been a long journey back to a solo project.

And it's been a long musical career. A Detroit native who loved the music of Texan Roy Orbison, John David Souther moved to Los Angeles in the late '60s to cast his musical fate. There he met fellow Detroitier Glenn Frey, then a struggling guitar player who would go on to fame with the Eagles. The two became bandmates and roommates, sharing a love of country and R & B music and a small apartment where their downstairs neighbor was Jackson Browne. Souther and Frey collaborated as a one-album folk duo called Longbranch Pennywhistle; Souther next went on to play with the two-album Souther-Hillman-Furay Band (with Chris Hillman and Richie Furay).

In 1979 Souther scored his big solo hit with "You're Only Lonely," which climbed to No. 7 on the Billboard charts. But his

He sings, he plays, he writes. J.D. Souther also acts. His roles include John Dunaway in the third season of *thirtysomething* (1989-90), Ted in *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), and Jesse James in the TV movie *Purgatory* (1999).



Born in Detroit and now living in Nashville, J.D. Souther spent most of his adult life in Los Angeles. But he considers himself to be from Amarillo. "Amarillo attaches itself to people," he says. Palo Duro Canyon (above) is one of his favorite places—"one of the most ethereal and breathtaking places on earth."

great contribution to country rock has been the songs others have taken to the top of the charts: Among the best-known are "Best of My Love," "Victim of Love," "Heartache Tonight," and "New Kid in Town" for the Eagles; and "Faithless Love" and "White Rhythm and Blues" for Linda Ronstadt.

If those songs keep the royalty checks coming, the new CD's jazz-inflected stuff is riskier. "[J.D.] writes with a lot of attitude and bravura. The record is very adventurous," Linda Ronstadt says of Souther's latest musical outing. Author and friend Thomas McGuane votes for Souther's record, too: "It'd be very easy for him to be complacent, for him to work the same old West Coast groove he's made famous. This is pushing into new territory and it's very courageous."

We think maybe the urge to explore courageously comes from Souther's having spent formative time in Amarillo, Texas, where we caught up with him for a conversation about his music, his influences, and his affection for the West.

Cowboys & Indians: *You live in Nashville now, but where are you from?*

J.D. Souther: Make no mistake about it: I am from Amarillo only, despite being born in Detroit and living most of my adult life in Los Angeles. Amarillo attaches itself to people. You have

to be there for a while, but it's extraordinary in its beautiful desolateness—empty in a fantastic, risky kind of way. There's something about that big, flat land that makes you want to draw up a lungful of air and get ready to do some walking.

C&I: *Any particular place you like?*

Souther: Palo Duro Canyon outside Amarillo is my old stomping ground and one of the most ethereal and breathtaking places on earth. When I was in high school, my buddy and I used to trailer our horses to the end of the road, pack our colts, load out, saddle up, and ride as far as we could before pitching camp in the dark: saddles for pillows, cheap sleeping rolls, and all the holy stars in the sky—no ambient light. Best days of my youth, maybe my life. We'd rise at first light, shake the scorpions out of our boots, and ride till dusk the next day and do it again. That was my West.

C&I: *Just what is it about you and the West?*

Souther: There's something about it I can't live without. The West by its sheer vastness reduces you to the elemental. It's so enormous that you become a thicket, a blade of grass, a tree, or a tumbleweed. It's too big for you to act the way you act on a

crowded street in the South Bronx. What's great about the West is that things are so few and far between.

C&I: *What inspired you musically in the early days?*

Souther: My dad was a big-band singer. I was a jazz nut when I was young, and then I had those Texas rockabilly maniacs nearby: Waylon Jennings, Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly. I was flooded with their music, which was so mathematical. It all worked out syllabically with lines that are great to sing.

C&I: *You initially played violin, clarinet, saxophone, and drums...then?*

Souther: Some fool left an old gut-string acoustic guitar unattended in 1969. I picked it up, began to coax things out of it, and I had a knack for turning that instrument I'd never touched before—didn't have a clue about—and poetry into some kind of art...a song. I've got hundreds and hundreds of notebooks full of writing.

C&I: *If the World Was You contains subtle "jazzy" influences and it's strong on horns. Not the expected J.D. Souther sound...*

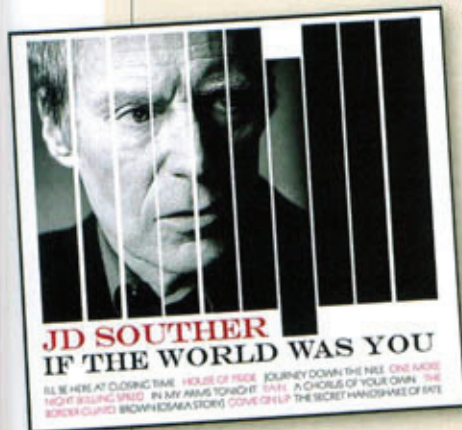
Have A Listen

If *the World Was You*, J.D. Souther's new CD, is a departure from his well-known West Coast country-rock sound. Jeff Coffin—saxophonist, composer, and member of the Grammy-winning Béla Fleck & the Flecktones—plays on the record and has an idea about how best to enjoy it. "J.D.'s songs are classics full of twists and turns that come from a mind that is at once brilliant and surreal," Coffin says. "Serve me up some more J.D. Souther. I'll bring a nice port wine, and, I promise you this, it will be a night to remember!"

As for early J.D. Souther, we asked him to compile a list of some his favorite versions of his songs. It was apparently a hard assignment. "I couldn't think of every take of every song that everyone else has done, and there are three new songs out as I write this. I like them, too," Souther says. "I should end with 'best

I could do,' having been asked to shake it up a bit. But bear in mind that the most beautiful voice I know is that of Linda Ronstadt, and I could have made up an entire album with her recordings of my songs. My favorite album of mine is the new one, *If the World Was You*, but the best previous is probably *Black Rose*, I suppose. But who chooses between their children?"

—S.S.



Souther: Yes, it's a somewhat difficult-to-categorize album. You write what you write, and you play it the best you can. I'm just trying to make it sound good. I want everybody to feel what I feel about it. It's pretty long at [almost 60] minutes. It's also probably the work of a lifetime. I've got a big stake in it artistically and it's been a big deal to me. I've been so completely immersed, overcommitted—I may have forgotten to eat last week. My brain can barely sleep.

C&I: *You did this record with a five-piece jazz ensemble. Were you worried about what critics would say?*

Souther: Critics are equipped to describe their own experiences, not to tell an artist how to behave. I expected to catch some buckshot. The whole trick to writing is to keep the critic out of the room till you're done, then let him in as an editor. You can't let him be present for the whole process. At some point in my life I realized I'm not Sam Cooke. I've got to be J.D. Souther. Mixing this record—and I mixed and mixed and listened and listened—I thought, No matter what we do, it's still going to sound like me. And there's not anything we can do to prevent that, is there?

C&I: *Your manager has called you "legendary, mystical," and your writing behavior is clearly intense, but how would you describe yourself?*

Souther: I'm an immensely and uselessly complicated person most of the time, happiest sitting back on my heels and haunches looking at sunsets in the West, having my dogs jump on me. I'm in desperate pursuit and eventual immersion of the remorseless adoration of experience. The only coin of life you can trade with any confidence of its value is experience. ★

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C&I J.D. Souther Mix

- BEST OF MY LOVE:** Eagles
- RUN LIKE A THIEF:** Bonnie Raitt
- PRISONER IN DISGUISE:** Linda Ronstadt
- TALKING TO THE MOON:** Don Henley
- HEARTACHE TONIGHT:** Eagles
- THE LAST IN LOVE:** George Strait
- HEART AGAINST THE WIND:** Diamond Rio
- HER TOWN TOO:** James Taylor
- FAITHLESS LOVE:** Bernadette Peters, Linda Ronstadt, or Glen Campbell
- YOU'RE ONLY LONELY:** Raul Malo
- I'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU:** Dixie Chicks
- LITTLE TIN GOD:** Don Henley
- NEW KID IN TOWN:** Eagles
- BEST OF MY LOVE:** Rod Stewart, Brooks & Dunn, or Aswad
- THE HEART OF THE MATTER:** Don Henley or India Airie
- SILVER BLUE:** John David Souther with Stanley Clarke

To download this mix, go to www.itunes.com and search for C&I J.D. Souther Mix.