

Sept 16 Thursday Two Tons of Steel

If there's one thing Texans love, it's a good party. But if you ask self-respecting Lone Star carousers what turns a bash into a blast, they won't say beer or barbecue. They know it all comes down to the music. And there's one band that can rouse revelers like no other: Two Tons of Steel. Two Tons' rambunctious brand of country-rooted rock has been inspiring listeners in the great republic — and far beyond — for more than two decades, and with its 10th album, NOT THAT LUCKY, the band is ready to throw its weight around even more.

NOT THAT LUCKY, which reached #4 on the Americana Music Charts in Sept/Oct 2009 is the band's first studio album since 2005's VEGAS (which ranked among the top 20 Americana albums for 2006) is its fourth helmed by Lloyd Maines, Texas' most in-demand producer (the Flatlanders, Dixie Chicks, Pat Green, James McMurtry). Explaining why he always clears his schedule for Two Tons of Steel, Maines simply declares, "They're one of the best bands in Texas." And beyond. Already familiar to fans of the Grand Ole Opry, where Two Tons has performed some eight times, and to visitors at Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame, where it appears in a documentary about country music, Two Tons tours Europe regularly and in 1997, became the first U.S. act in 37 years to perform in the national theater of Havana, Cuba. It's so beloved in its home state that Two Tons of Steel is featured in the IMAX film, "Texas: The Big Picture," and is considered an institution at the state's oldest, most revered dance hall, Gruene Hall, where its annual Two Ton Tuesdays summer series has been selling out for 14 years (and can be witnessed via the 2006 CD/DVD release, TWO TON TUESDAY LIVE!).

Lead singer-acoustic guitarist Kevin Geil does the heavy lifting when it comes to describing the San Antonio-based band's sound. "Two Tons is two tons of steel," he says. "We're kind of in your face, almost punk rock at times."

It's high-energy, that's for sure. Inspired equally by Elvis Presley and the Ramones, Two Tons combines the talents of the kinetic Geil with Dennis Fallon on electric guitar, Chris Dodds on drums and harmony vocals, and Chris Rhoades on upright and electric bass, joined in the studio by regular contributor Danny Mathis on pedal and straight steel. B3 player Riley Osborne, fiddler Brian Beken, acoustic guitarist/vocalist Tom Gillam and vocalist Drew Womack also played on NOT THAT LUCKY along with producer Maines, who added some acoustic guitar. Gillam, in fact, wrote the closing track, "Bottom of the Bottle," and sings the second verse.

The album was recorded over the course of a month at The Zone in Dripping Springs, outside of Austin.

"It was really nice, because VEGAS was done in six days straight, including mixing, so there wasn't a lot of chance to sit back and listen," Geil says. Recording a few days at a time gave the band the luxury to change a line here and there, or try new approaches — often based on Maines' suggestions.

"Lloyd is a master at taking what you have and making it better, but it's still the same," says Geil with a laugh, "like on 'Alcohol and Pills,' which is a Fred Eaglesmith song. When we went in, we were doing it as almost a train beat, and when Lloyd listened to it, he said, 'Try this. Boom-chichidom.' So that right there changed the whole feel of the song. The train beat was just too busy. It would have been a good song, but when you listen to it — when we listen to it — it's like, that's right. It's all about the feel.

"We push the envelope of our abilities every album," says Geil, "and this album, Lloyd just really did a great job pushing us even further."

The new disc also contains the debut recording of "Without Your Love," a song by hit-making tunesmith Monte Warden (co-writer of George Strait's "Desperately") penned with Two Tons of Steel in mind.

Geil, who wrote the other cuts on NOT THAT LUCKY, until recently had a second career as the San Antonio Express-News' award-winning senior photographer. A massive round of layoffs gave him the opportunity to concentrate on the band fulltime. With the kind of work ethic that already has the band performing 200 dates a year, consistently earning top honors in San Antonio music

polls and backing by its new label, Smith Entertainment Records, Two Tons is chomping at the bit. The band is itching to get out and pump up new audiences with its Two Tons cheer and its now-classic countrified version of the Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" (a take so popular, other bands have covered it), not to mention its new tunes.

"We're primed right now," says Geil. "We're ready to go." Ready to ladle out some hot molten steel, that is.