



An Interview with Jason Shannon on 1/8/09

By: [David de Young](#)



On Friday at the Varsity Theater, Jason Shannon releases his debut, self-titled release at the Varsity Theater on a terrifically strong bill with The Wars of 1812, Molly Maher & Erik Koskinen. During a busy week leading up to the show which is getting a lot of media attention, he took time out to answer a few questions from HowWasTheShow.

HowWasTheShow: You used to play in a band called Dear Machine which released one pretty stellar disc engineered by Ed Ackerson a few years ago. What have you been up to since then besides recording this new album?

Jason Shannon: To speed up time a little, here is what happened: **Dear Machine**, [Editor's note: the comma is part of the band name] played a release show, the bass player moved to NYC the day after, I went to **Louisiana** to visit family, **Hurricane Katrina** hit, I came back, we started hiring gigging bass players, the sound became too erratic and inconsistent, we played our final gig (ironically, at the **Terminal Bar**), I got in a car accident and totaled my car, I used the money from the crash to buy recording equipment, went from living in my practice space to living in an apartment, got a regular job, convinced my work to let me build a studio at their place, started writing and recording demos in attempt to evolve my lyric writing, fell in love, battled with my then-lover about my commitment to music versus her, we broke up, I tried to get back together with her and

failed at that, I went spiraling into Sad Land and as a result, wrote a million +1 songs musing on lost love and broken hearts, re-connected with my old friend and Dear Machine, bandmate **Eli Amerson**, began writing and recording with him, had a random gig at the **Turf Club** which spawned the beginning of my new band, started playing all around town, decided I needed to make an official album, took 30 of 100+ songs I had, brought them into the studio, tracked them, picked the ones that fit, did overdubs, mixed them, went to **New York City** for mastering, came back, remixed, re-mastered again, spent three weeks on the album package design, moved back into a practice space, started rehearsing my new band until they couldn't take it anymore, made a lot of phone calls, stayed up past my bedtime, drank coffee, booked a gig at the **Varsity Theater** on January 9.

I've basically been working on growing up, staying young, working hard at my craft, and trying not to run red lights.

HWTS: How will this solo disc differ from what we got with Dear Machine?

JS: Dear Machine, was more of a rock group that occasionally ventured into hard rock and jam-band sensibilities. The new album explores a few different styles and has a greater emphasize on lyric writing, arrangement, the merging of acoustic and electric sounds, horn arrangements, strings, and slower tunes. In Dear Machine, I was the primary songwriter but wasn't the sole decision maker when it came to what actually made the live set. So this time around, I have that control, and my experience with the band led me to understand that I work best in a setting where I maintain primary control of the vision but am still willing to be receptive to input and ideas. So the disc is an outgrowth of those learned lessons combined with my growth as a listener and total fan of music and as a creative artist who finds inspiration in lyric writing and singing.

HWTS: In your release notes for your self-titled debut release, you refer to the music you are making as "American soul". Would you elaborate on that?

JS: Yes, I'd love to elaborate because I feel it's misunderstood. In fact, I read a recent **Onion** blurb which stated my description, "in the annals of poorly chosen descriptors," takes the cake for nonsensical nomenclature.

Here's the story of how I came up with the name: I was being interviewed by **Rake Magazine** for a live show review. The interviewer asked me how it felt to be a soul singer. I said, "A soul singer? A soul singer?" I didn't know what to say. I had never thought of myself as such. She said, "Well, to me, you're singing from a place of soulfulness and meaning so that makes you a soul singer." She was referring to the feeling and not the label. And I thought, "Well, yeah, I guess that's true. I do feel what I sing. I mean, damn-it, I better feel what I sing!" So I responded to her by saying, "Well, I would say we play American music. So how about we call me an American soul singer?" And we both had a laugh about that.

Also, we'd be playing gigs and the venue would name the music and often times it would say silly things like "Live Tonight! Jason Shannon's Sweet Soul Jams!" or "The Soulful Singing of Jason Shannon".

For me, I feel like I'm a songwriter who is a part of tradition of extending the song forms inherent in the tradition of folk and blues. But the tributaries than run close to these two genres are country, rock, jazz, rhythm and blues, reggae, Americana, etc. Come to a show and tell me you don't hear those kinds of songs with a singer who is delivering the tune with everything he has and I'll give you your money back, a free album, and I'll catch a one-way ticket to the end of the line and tell everyone on the Annals Channel that this is American soul music, circa 2009. And you can throw tomatoes at me too. I'll just squish 'em down and make a pizza.

HWTS: Tell me about the 7 piece band you are working with and how that came together.

JS: It would be too long an explanation, but basically the band just sort of happened. I didn't systematically go out and look for anyone to join my band. That's probably why we have sort of an odd mixture. I mean, do you

know any other bands that have a trumpet/violin ensemble and a midget on glockenspiel?

In all seriousness, the band was corralled through the making of the album. And some of those people I knew and some I didn't. For instance, on the record, there are four songs with strings by **Wendy Tangen-Foster**. She was a hired studio player. And while she was in there, I asked her to join because I liked her vibe and I thought she would be good in a live setting. And lo and behold, she has exceeded my initial vision for her. The same goes for the members. I'm glad to have them on board.

HWTS: What musicians did you grow up listening to and who do you feel has most influenced the music you are making today?

JS: I was born in **Paris, Texas** in 1978. The only radio station in town was KBUS. As you can imagine, the only thing they played was country.....**Merle Haggard, George Jones, Johnny Cash, George Strait, Randy Travis**..... My first record was "We Are The World" and then **Duran Duran** and then **Huey Lewis & The News**. My parents didn't expose me to music as means of intentional education. They just had it on. So I was sort of subject to whatever my mom chose to buy at the store. We had **Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms*, Creedence Clearwater Revival, George Harrison's *Cloud Nine*, Robert Cray's *Strong Persuader*, Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*, and Bruce Springsteen**. Oh, and of course, MJ's *Thriller*.

But the tape that started it all for me was the **Traveling Wilburys, Volume One**. My mom got it at a local record store where my little brother used to take piano lessons. I still have the tape! We used to drive from Texas to Minnesota to visit family and only listen to that tape. As you can imagine, I got to really listen on those long drives. And the person who I liked the most on that album was **Bob Dylan**. He'd be singing "Tweeter & The Monkey Man" and I knew all the words. I used to ride bikes and sing that song to myself. I asked my mom one day who that was on the tape and she said, "That's Bob Dylan. He's had a hard life." I thought, "What the hell does that mean?" I think she was referring to his voice and the way he looked. But I don't think she really had any idea what he would do to me in terms of inspiration and creative modeling. I mean, after all, his work is

truly remarkable and inspiring and I listen to it everyday and never quit learning about singing, phrasing, spontaneity, persistence, risk, humor, wit, wordplay, and overall songwriting. Of course, I listen to many other writers/bands that fall down this line, but he is sort of the Nile.

HWTS: For those of us coming to your CD Release show at the Varsity on Friday night, what can we expect?

JS: A good time. Good music. Good bands. Happy people. Blood. Sweat. Cheers. And at least one rock and roll allusion/surprise....

I love all the groups that are playing with me. I'm really looking forward to having them perform. Whatever the outcome, I'm grateful to be in a position where I have a band, I made an album, I have friends and family that support me, and the Varsity Theater trusts a relatively unknown artist to get people through the door!

HWTS: Anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask about?

JS: Let me die in my footsteps.

Jason Shannon's Record Release is Friday January 9th at the Varsity Theater with The Wars of 1812, and Molly Maher & Erik Koskinen - doors 8:00pm, 18+, \$8/\$10