

Tim and Susan Lee,

as you probably have heard, are two-thirds of a band called the Tim Lee 3, which formed in the fall of 2006 when Susan woke up one morning and realized Tim had been doing it all wrong for twenty-five years (or something like that). Since then, the TL3 has played about six thousand gigs in clubs and bars and on festival stages from Knoxville, where the couple lives with a dozen or so basset hounds at any given time, to Austin, Albuquerque, Atlanta and Los Angeles – and every town in between that has a decent barbecue joint.

Devil's Rope is the name of the TL3's recently released fourth album, which has been much anticipated after the promising notices accorded to the epic double-CD, *Raucous Americanus* (2010). The newer album features Tim on guitars and vocals, Susan on bass and vocals, and the mighty fine drumming of Chris Bratta. The thirteen tracks on *Devil's Rope* were recorded in three different sessions in three different cities at three different studios each with different engineers: Scott Minor (Sparklehorse) at Wild Chorus in Knoxville, John Harvey and Mary Podio (Jimmy Vaughn, John Dee Graham, Beaver Nelson) at Top Hat in Austin, and Craig Schumacher (Calexico, Neko Case, St. Maybe) at WaveLab in Tucson.

Despite the potential for too many cooks spoiling the broth, *Devil's Rope* holds its own both as a collective achievement and a thoroughly engaging collection of handcrafted rock 'n' roll songs. Right from the start *Devil's Rope* is a bona fide, hook-happy ear-grabber.

The tweaked feedback and jangly opening guitar chords of "Signal" perfectly complement the poignant, straightforward lyrics elucidated by Susan's solid, yet softly Southern-tinted, soprano voice. Moving down the playlist, the blues-rocking, gospel-inflected title song represents the TL3 songwriting duo's consistently effective M.O.



Bill Foster

THE TIES THAT BIND

story by
Doug
DeLoach

"Driving through Oklahoma on the way to Tucson to deliver a mellotron to a friend's studio, we kept seeing billboards for the Devil's Rope Museum," Tim recounts. "We were like, 'What is that?' Susan looks it up on her phone and finds out it's referring to barbed wire."

The next morning, waking up in the Motel 6 in Clovis, New Mexico, with a riff and some words in his head, Tim grabs his Gibson and sketches out two verses and a chorus while Susan is sleeping. "When she got up, I played it for her," he says. "She said, 'That sounds great,' and then goes and takes a shower.

When she comes out, she says, 'I've got the third verse.'"

The remainder of the album spans styles and themes ranging from "Judging You," a wildass blues-rocking assault on the religiously intolerant (ably abetted by Craig Schumacher's wailing harmonica), and "Halo Days," a beautifully rendered power-pop memorial to a young man lost before his time, to the best cover of Magnapop's "Open the Door" you will ever hear, and the hilarious country-song-that-isn't, "Cut-Rate Divorce," which was inspired by another series of billboards, this time spied on a trip home from Macon.

The whole thing started out innocently enough about thirty-some-odd years ago in Jackson, Mississippi.

"We met at my brother's fraternity house party at Millsaps College," says Susan. "Neither one of us was attending the school, but some friends and I went to see the Occasions, which was Tim's band."

Before the end of the following year, the couple was married. Tim's father, who was then a preacher in the Methodist church and is now a retired bishop, performed the conjugal ceremony.

"When you know, you know," Susan says.

Meanwhile, Tim had established another kind of bond following an encounter with aspiring musician Bobby Sutliff on the front row at an Alice Cooper/Suzi Quatro show (so the legend goes). Discovering they shared an affinity for pop harmonies, catchy melodic phrasing and other nerdishly musical componentry, the kindred spirits formed the Windbreakers.

Meet the Windbreakers, a largely DIY seven-inch EP, was released in 1982. A year later, *Any Monkey with a Typewriter*, produced by Mitch Easter and featuring Richard Barone of the Bongos, sent a noticeable ripple through the swelling indie music sea. Two years later, the Windbreakers released *Terminal*, a full-length album with special guests the Rain Parade. With the support of label owner Danny Beard, who met Tim and Susan when they moved to Atlanta for the first time in 1984, the Windbreakers released a series of singles and albums on DB Recs including *I'll Be Back* (1986), *Run* (1986), *A Different Sort...* (1987), *At Home with Bobby and Tim* (1989) and *Electric Landlady* (1991).

"I really liked Tim's music, but the decision to work with him was propelled as much by his personality as anything else," Beard says. "He has so much integrity and he's committed to what he's doing. He's very engaging and enjoys life, and his enjoyment is infectious."

The Tim Lee 3, On the Road and At The Track

In the mid- to late-Eighties, Tim toured and played with a number of Atlanta-based bands including Swimming Pool Qs with Jeff Calder; Homemade Sister with Linda Hopper and Ruthie Morris (which would eventually morph into Magnapop); and alt-honky-tonkers Slim Chance & the Convicts. He also co-founded the short-lived Cosmonecks with Dave Weil who would move on to front the still extant Blacktop Rockets.

"As a man-of-the-people, Tim would like you to think he's completely untutored, that he's never even picked up an instrument," says Swimming Pool Qs founder Jeff Calder. "The truth is, he's a great musician who can learn anything in a couple of passes."

Calder recalls "a Swimming Pool Q's crisis situation" in 1989 when the band needed a bass player for a string of East Coast dates "up to Maine and back." After getting the call and driving over from Jackson, Calder says Tim learned the bass parts for two sets of "pretty difficult material" in less than a week, adding that Tim's skill set went beyond his onstage contributions.

"Tim knew every side street

in every weird backwater on the map." Calder says. "He could drive you into a Mississippi jungle to locate an obscure folk artist, then, on a Sunday, haul you across the border into Louisiana where you could get a frozen daiquiri at a drive-thru window."

Around the time of the release of what is arguably his finest solo album to date, *Crawdadd* (1991, DB Recs), which features members of the Coolies, Swimming Pool Qs, Lava Love, and Right as Rain, Tim felt his mojo dissipating. The thrum of innovation and discovery was being superseded by the blunt, inevitable juggernaut of commerce.

"The whole scene had gone from being this cool music thing to everybody fighting over record deals," Tim says. "I pretty much spent the '90s not paying much attention to music."

Once again, the Lees pulled up stakes and headed back to Mississippi, this time to Oxford. "It was all about leaving everything else behind and going back to school," says Susan who, as a photographer and freelance designer, had always handled the graphical side of Tim's musical endeavors.

Once in Oxford, "not paying much attention to music" naturally failed to prevent Tim from participating in a few projects with locals like Blue Mountain, Wilco bassist John Stirratt, Garrison Starr, and Neilson Hubbard. And yet, without practicing, recording, touring and songwriting piled up on his plate, Tim had to find something else to feed his restless nature. That something was racing.

More specifically, Tim and Susan immersed themselves in the world of dirt late model racing. This type of automobile racing takes place on small dirt-surfaced oval tracks located by the hundreds in outlying metro suburbs and small towns across the country. Think of dirt late model racing as the old school, acoustic Americana analogue to the highly commercialized and globalized, raging computer age complex represented by NASCAR or Indy Car. Today, Tim and Susan are the editor and art director, respectively, of *Late Model Illustrated*, which is published in Murphy, North Carolina.


"Neither of us is very good at standing on the sidelines," says

Tim, which brings us to the fateful day in 2006 when the soon-to-be Tim Lee 3 was born.

"One Saturday morning, I woke up and the first thing out of my mouth was, I want to learn how to play bass," Susan recalls.

The next thing she knew, Tim had procured a pawn shop bass and started teaching her how to play it. Six months later, she was onstage at a club in Knoxville, and from there to a show with Mitch Easter, a benefit concert in Oxford backing Amy Rigby and Vicki Peterson (of the Bangles), a Windbreakers reunion set in LA, and a pop festival in Chapel Hill.

"I was scared to death at first, but now I'm totally addicted to it," she admits, and that's a very good thing.

Inspired by a shared commitment to their art and audience, the Tim Lee 3 represents that rarest of combinations: a husband and wife team that writes and plays formidably good rock 'n' roll music. 

The Tim Lee 3 play the Hummingbird Stage and Taproom in Macon on Saturday, March 2nd.



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