

Leah's Song

A troubadour's song reopens doors to Oklahoma's Red Dirt scene.

Paul Rossler's first foray into recording Red Dirt music came in the mid-'90s, when Tom Skinner and Jeff Parker each recorded one of his compositions for producer Bob Kline's *Red Dirt Sampler*. The artists and songs on that CD helped further define the Stillwater-based musical style known as Red Dirt – an unequivocally Oklahoma sound blending folk, rock, blues and country elements with intelligent, close-to-the-soil lyrics that recall both the social consciousness of Woody Guthrie's populist anthems and the joyous escapism of Bob Wills' western swing.

Now, some 20 years later, Rossler and an eclectic group of musical associates, known as Diffident Rebel, have thrown another ingredient into Red Dirt's bubbling musical stew. The band's new disc, *Red Dirt Reggae*, puts a distinctly Jamaican twist into songs written and sung by Rossler, creating something that's even a bit outside the generous parameters of the Red Dirt genre.

According to Rossler and musician-engineer Heath Ham, *Red Dirt Reggae* was born on a summer's night in Sapulpa in 2013. Rossler was jamming with his friend Roger Johnson in a room at Johnson's Over Edukated Music and Arts when Ham, who had his studio in the same building, came by

and asked if he could sit in.

"What Paul and Roger were doing was folky," Ham recalls, "and I just started adding a little reggae groove to it. It easily transferred over; he was able to do the same things vocally that he was doing with just his acoustic guitar. So I figured if we could take that Red Dirt sound and kind of change the groove, we could get some people dancing to it, maybe."

"The more we talked about it, the more I realized they [Red Dirt and reggae] had a lot in common," adds Rossler. "I'm probably not saying this the right way, but reggae is a takeoff on the pick strum – you just don't have the pick. It's got the strum on the two-and four-beat. It seemed to just fit."

Rossler, who grew up in Detroit, began strumming guitar in the late 1980s – around the time Ham was born – while doing graduate work in engineering at Virginia Tech.

"That's when I first began hearing that mountain sound, that Appalachian folk music, and started digging it," he remembers. "I just liked that folksy, rootsy sound. I got a guitar, learned my first three chords and started writing songs."

After earning his doctorate, he came to Oklahoma State University to teach, and that's when he became involved in Stillwater's Red Dirt scene.

"There was something about the land, the people and the sounds," he says, that began taking him and his music in a new direction. Just starting his Cimarron Sound Labs (since moved to Tahlequah), producer-musician Jeff Parker was the first Red Dirt figure to take an interest in Rossler's songs. Others soon followed, including Skinner.

"Tom Skinner told me I needed to go out there and start playing," he says, "but I just didn't. I didn't think I was good enough."

Then came what he describes as "some of the twists and turns that you get in life." The Red Dirt roads receded in his rear-view mirror when he returned to Michigan to live. And his guitar – a Seagull S6 Original he'd purchased at Daddy O's Music Company in Stillwater – remained in its case, unplayed and unacknowledged. Rossler didn't even get it out when in 2000 he returned to Oklahoma, settled in the Tulsa area and began working as a patent attorney.

Then came the emotional evening in 2012 that he visited a friend and co-worker who'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

"I saw how she and her husband interacted with one another," he adds. "We were looking over Riverside Drive, and he reached out and held her hand and told her everything was going to be okay. I was deeply moved by that. Then, a couple of days later, she came to my law firm to pack up her belongings. She was resigning from the firm. I walked back to my office, shut the door, and wrote the words to 'Leah's Song.'"

"When I got home and pulled out my guitar, it was trashed. The braces were broken on it. My kids had jumped up and down on the case. And I had the old strings on it. But



Diffident Rebel has recently released *Red Dirt Reggae*.
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the case. And I had the old strings on it. But I wrote 'Leah's Song' on that guitar and played it for her a week later."

"Leah's Song" broke the dam that had been holding back his music for more than 15 years, and the songs began cascading out. Since then, Rossler estimates he's composed more than 75, including all the tunes on *Red Dirt Reggae*. And in classic Red Dirt style, the members of Diffident Rebel who came together to play them did so in a manner that Rossler terms "really organic."

"The first song we recorded was 'Leah's Song,'" he remembers. "We put a reggae beat to it, and Heath said, 'You know, I think this would sound good with horns in it. Would you object to me putting a trombone in it?'"

The trombonist was Steve Ham, Heath Ham's father and a well-known Tulsa-area bandleader and musician. Soon, Steve Ham's contemporaries Mike Bennett (trumpet) and Gary Linde (saxophone) were adding their own ingredients to the mix. Meanwhile, Ham was programming all the drums and some of the bass tracks, with Antjuan Robinson playing the rest.

"He's kind of my mentor as a producer, and his mentor was Wayman Tisdale," says Ham of Robinson. "He played some of the real good, funky-sounding bass, and he let us go over and cut vocals in his studio, the Kontracktors Music Group."

The main background vocalist is Teddy Soliday, whom Rossler describes as "a musical savant." Ham was passing out flyers for his studio when he first encountered Soliday, who was working his regular job at Reasors Foods in Sapulpa.

"He said, 'Yeah, man, I play a little bit,' and I said, 'Well, come on by and check it out.' He came by, and he shredded guitar – just ripped it," says Ham. "Then he sang for me, and I was blown away. He has one of those real smooth, really in-pitch voices. I was like, 'Dude, we need a background voice for the record.' So he just stepped in there and did it."

Guest artists on the disc include trumpeter Dave Johnson, cellist Cathy Radd, ukulele player Mike Schmidt and background vocalists Jeremy Carlock, Dusty Dobson, Addison Johnson and Rossler's jam partner Roger Johnson.

Diffident Rebel is now in the process of going from studio group to live act, planning several appearances in support of the disc. Meanwhile, both Rossler and Ham want people to know that gravy-training the popular Red Dirt scene is not their ambition at all.

"By calling it *Red Dirt Reggae*, we just want to let you know that here's a reggae album organic to Oklahoma," says Ham. "We're not trying to tag along with anybody. That's not our intent. We wanted to make some authentic Oklahoma reggae, and it just flew out that way."

■ JOHN WOOLEY

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