

Turnpike Troubadours

The Price of Admission



photo credit: David McClister

The Turnpike Troubadours have never followed any script. Breakthrough albums have been followed by breakups. Triumphant reunions have overcome insurmountable odds. And live shows have been thrilling, once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

Now, just two years since their comeback album, *A Cat in the Rain*, the Tahlequah, Oklahoma, band delivers yet another helping of the unexpected: the surprise release of *The Price of Admission*, the group's most vibrant, piercing album since 2010's career-defining *Diamonds & Gasoline*.

Reteaming with Grammy-winning producer Shooter Jennings, who oversaw *A Cat in the Rain*, the Turnpike Troubadours crafted and recorded 11 new songs for *The Price of Admission*, reminding fans and peers alike just

how it's done. Songwriter and frontman Evan Felker rises to the occasion, cementing his status as country-rock's version of Bruce Springsteen. He writes and sings openly and poetically about his sobriety, about loss, and about lighting out in search of something, anything, to fill the void.

For Felker, it's his band of brothers in Turnpike Troubadours: fiddler Kyle Nix, multi-instrumentalist Hank Early, guitarist Ryan Engleman, bassist RC Edwards, and drummer Gabe Pearson. All of them are at the top of their games on *The Price of Admission*, refusing to hold on too tightly and letting the music guide them.

"We made these songs intentionally very band-friendly, like if we were going to play them in the backyard,"

Felker says. “We got back to how we did things, and it really was a lot of rediscovering who you are. Because somewhere along the way, we forgot we were an independent band and that can we do whatever the fuck we want to. We remembered that there is nothing stopping us.”

Where does this album’s title come from? What, in fact, is *The Price of Admission*?

There’s a saying that “pain is the price of admission,” often to consciousness. I was going through different options for the title and that particular line stuck out to me as having some weight, being captivating, and not misrepresenting anything on this record.

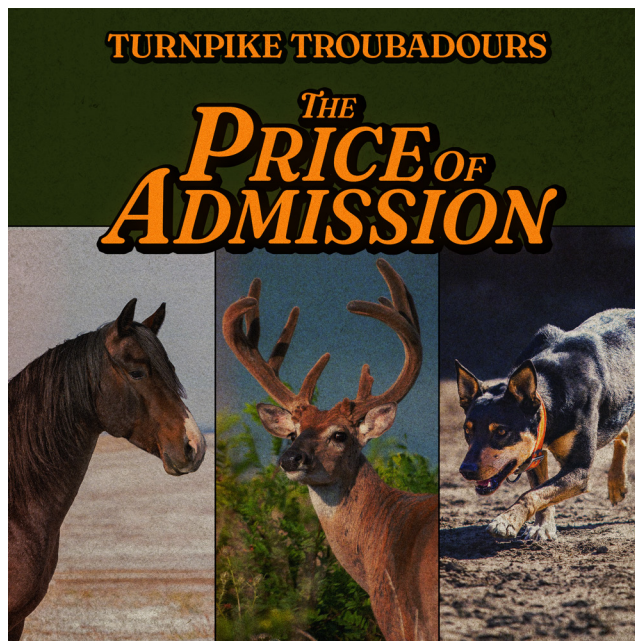
It’s also a phrase used in recovery, right?

Correct. I try not to harp too much on the AA stuff, because I think that people find it dull outside of the recovery community. But it’s such a neat line that can be applied to life in general. I was thinking of it in terms of doctoring calves, in a sort of animal husbandry way. “Pain is the price of admission to consciousness” for these beasts that you’re stuck with trying to keep alive.

How does *The Price of Admission* build on *A Cat in the Rain*?

It’s a very standalone record in a lot of ways. I was really trying to find who I was and what my narrative voice was as a songwriter on *A Cat in the Rain*, because it was the first one I’d ever done sober and clear-headed. Some

stuff manifested itself a little more surreal than I typically would write, but on *The Price of Admission*, I felt a lot more comfortable in my own skin. It felt a lot more like being 20-something in a room when I was writing *Diamonds & Gasoline*.



album artwork

Was there less pressure this time?

There was zero pressure. We did this because we wanted to and we set a pretty arbitrary date that, hey, we want to get in the studio and be ahead of the curve. We try to not get too far from the studio in general, in our daily lives, so that we don’t get too rusty. Unintentionally, we went six years in between *A Cat in the Rain* and our album before that, and it was tough to get back in the studio and figure it out again.

Is it fair to say that *A Cat in the Rain* was over-planned or even overwritten?

Oh, absolutely. The thing was, I couldn’t figure out what I was doing. There were parts of that record that I felt like, “Hey, I’m writing some pretty good stuff here,” but I was looking at it through the wrong lens. I was trying to write lines to impress a songwriter, or to try to show

people I was smart or try to impress somebody — which is the complete wrong way to make art. This time, I focused on finding things that were captivating, and that’s my number one thing now: trying to find something that makes me feel strongly one way or another, whether it’s nostalgic or sad or makes me laugh.

How do you find those things now?

I’ve got small children, so I get to see the world through their eyes quite a bit. It’s an interesting lens to view the world in, and it makes me think a lot about my own childhood and how my parents felt when I was a small child.

I was trying to empathize with that and the situation that we were all in then. My kids have jarred a lot of memories and emotions loose, just watching them go from being tiny babies to kids.

You released *The Price of Admission* over a very special weekend in your home state: The Boys From Oklahoma concerts, headlined by your band and Cross Canadian Ragweed, at Boone Pickens Stadium in Stillwater.

We’re marketing geniuses! [*Laughs*] It made a lot of sense to get it out by then because it’s really nice to have new songs to play for everybody. If you slow

that ball from rolling or stop it from rolling, it feels like you can get in a spot where you're not very creative very quickly. We finished writing these songs around Christmas, and now we're able to throw them out here to everybody just a few months later. It makes me feel as though we could go in the studio in another eight to 12 weeks and make some more music. Momentum makes momentum.

You embraced co-writing for this album, with collaborators like Ketch Secor from Old Crow Medicine Show and Dave Simonett from Trampled by Turtles. What about that process appealed to you?

I love Ketch. He's one of my favorite writers and favorite entertainers, and it's always been that way, since the first time I heard and saw Old Crow Medicine Show. Working with Ketch, for me, is bigger than working with anybody. I was trying to get the ball rolling, and that's kind of what I like to do with co-writes. If I feel like I'm not quite ready to pour out these songs, then I try to get with people and start bouncing something around. It's more fun that way. The song I wrote with Ketch is "On the Red River," which is based around some real people and some composite characters. It's about stuff that I am heavily into now, like working dogs and cowboys.

How did you meet Dave Simonett?

I met Dave through Steve Rinella, hunter and host of the outdoors show *MeatEater*. I came and did

Steve's podcast and he invited me to his birthday party in Bozeman, Montana. That's where I met Dave, who it turns out is an avid bird hunter. We got to be buddies over that, and on top of it all, we've liked his band for a long time. They're great people, songwriters, and musicians, and it's a blessing to get to work with him and become friends.

Together, you wrote "Leaving Town (Woody Guthrie Festival)." Can you describe the imagery of that song?

That was the first song to get things rolling, where I was thinking about writing again. He had some lines and I applied the idea of a story to it. We asked how can we make it captivating? How can we draw somebody in? Dave and I were bird hunting in the Texas Panhandle, staying in this little farmhouse, and I was chatting with him about it and I said I'll give it a setting. So, I set it in this old bar in the town that I live in because I knew it well. It's not very often you get a chance to give a romantic character a happy ending in these songs, but here we did. I wrote about somebody running back into an old flame and it possibly working out for them.

"Be Here" is about your sobriety and is built on a sea shanty structure, with the band shouting the chorus behind you. What about sea shanties appealed to you?

At some point in time, I became thoroughly obsessed with them. My wife and I were riding around in Spain, back when I was drinking, and I was just obsessed, annoyingly so, with understanding

the song structure, because it is such an interesting idea to have that call and answer thing. It came to me one day while writing, and I thought, this is cool. I was toying around with the idea of going on a journey with somebody whose life was changing, and I pursued it. I think it came out in a nice way.

Is it a personal song?

It's very autobiographical. It's about the treatment center I went to.

Why did you choose to wrap up the album with the song "Nothing You Can Do?"

Kyle Nix, our fiddle player, wrote that one, and it's his first solo write. The music the song ends on is really cool and it wraps the record back around. It feels like a band playing a song where the singer could walk off the stage at the end. It feels like the end of the show.

Red Dirt music is booming right now. But Turnpike Troubadours are much more than that genre: they're a rock band, a country band, even a folk band. Where do you think Turnpike fits in?

We're just happy to exist. We like that we get to make music. The guys in the band are still my best friends in the world and it just doesn't get much better. Life is really good, man, and for *The Price of Admission*, we leaned into being proactive and doing our thing. Don't think about it — just do it.

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