



CONFEDERATE RAILROAD

Few acts have carved as distinctive a niche in modern musical history as Confederate Railroad. With their high-energy combination of honky-tonk rockers, sensitive ballads, and offbeat humor, they have created a unique identity that has brought them chart success, multi-platinum sales, and continued popularity as a road band. Versatility, likeability, and a willingness to stretch boundaries are all part of the mix, but if there is a formula, not even they can put their finger on it.

"I don't think I have any more of a clue now than I did when we started," laughs founder/frontman Danny Shirley. "I know that if you start thinking, 'Is radio going to like this'" or 'Is this going to offend anybody?' that it really waters things down, so I don't try to second-guess anybody. What I do is look for songs I like--that seems to work best."

Nearly five million albums later, there is no doubt that it works. Songs like "Queen Of Memphis," "Trashy Women," "Jesus And Mama," and "Daddy Never Was The Cadillac Kind" became major hits and established Confederate Railroad as a key part of country music's landscape during the genre's expansion of the '90s. The accolades kicked off with the Academy of Country Music's Best New Group award in 1993 and have included a Grammy nomination, and a host of nominations from the Country Music Association and the British Country Music Foundation.

For guys who started as a Georgia bar band, it was the stuff of dreams. "I remember saying when we got our first platinum album," says Shirley, "'At this point, our success has pretty much surpassed our talent, and from this point on, everything else is just icing on the cake.'" The latest swirl of icing is the band's new Audium Records CD, *Unleashed*, a microcosm of everything Shirley and company do best. There is sensitivity, hard-driving honky-tonk, and a generous dose of pure fun, not to mention good-natured new assaults on decorum and political correctness. The rollicking "I'm Diggin' It," as well as "White Trash With Money" and "That 'R' Word" have attitude to spare, and show that time has not dulled the edge of the band's skewed and witty worldview. Likewise, "That's What Brothers Do," "Wasted Time," and "Between The Rainbows And The Rain" show the band's flip side, its ability to capture life's poignant and tender moments. "Body Like A Temple," a duet with country legend and longtime friend George Jones, brims with honky-tonk fire, and "Still One Outlaw Left," finds the band and David Allan Coe, who share a great deal of road history, teaming up for the first time on record. "Borrowed Time" shows the band's way with a pure Southern rocker, and "Thick As Thieves" celebrates the camaraderie that has marked CRR's long road history.

Jones and Coe continue a CRR tradition involving guest artists. Steve Earle and Charlie Daniels are among those who have sung on the band's earlier projects, and this time, songwriters have joined the chorus. Bob DiPiero and Craig Wiseman sing backup on their "Diggin' It," Anthony Smith on his "What Brothers Do," and newly signed Mercury Records artist James Allen Otto on "Borrowed Time."

This album also showcases Shirley's writing skills. He is a co-writer on "White Trash With Money" and "Wasted Time," both based on real-life events. Confederate Railroad's current line-up includes, along with vocalist/guitarist Shirley, Mark DuFresne on drums, Wayne Secrest on bass, Gates Nichols on steel guitar and vocals, Jimmy Dormire on lead guitar, and Cody McCarver on keyboards and vocals. The quintet's love of the give-and-take of live performance is such that they still perform a hundred dates a year, and their legions of fans are as appreciative as ever.

"There's nothing profound about this," says Shirley. "We've been playing music in one form or another for 20 years, and we still enjoy it. One reason is that we do material we like. We do what we want the way we want, regardless of the consequences." It is a strategy they have employed since the band's early days in the 1980s. Then, Shirley and his cohorts were splitting their time between a regular stint as house band at Miss Kitty's in Marietta, Georgia, and roadwork backing up David Allan Coe and Johnny Paycheck. The strategy, while effective in the long run, was not a quick ticket to the top. "I knew eventually we'd get a label deal and a real shot at it," says Shirley, "but we had a rougher image than what was the going thing then. When other club acts around us--people we were often out-drawing--began getting deals, I questioned myself for a time. 'Do I need starched Wranglers and western shirts? Should we try to be a little more mainstream and play the game?' We made a decision back then that we would be ourselves."

The payoff took awhile, but it came. "Our first single, 'She Took It Like A Man,' went to #26," says Shirley, "and management and the label were bummed out, but I was thrilled." He had reason to be. The next two singles, "Jesus And Mama," and "Queen Of Memphis," shot to the top of the charts, and three more--"Trashy Women," "When You Leave That Way You Can Never Go Back," and "She Never Cried," gave them an even half-dozen hits from their first album, which has sold nearly three million copies. They were named the Academy of Country Music's Best New Group in 1993 and earned a Grammy nomination. Their million-selling second album's "Daddy Never Was The Cadillac Kind," "Elvis And Andy," and "When And Where" further established them as among the most versatile acts in the business. Their long history as club mainstays and road warriors had given them a noteworthy stage presence, and they drew both kids singing along with "Trashy Women" and grandparents touched by "Jesus and Mama." Other highlights were more personal. "There was the time I was lying on the floor at George Jones's house watching the Tennessee-Georgia football game in 1992," says Shirley. "He turned to me and said, 'You sang real good on that 'Jesus and Mama' song. That comment was like getting a blessing from the pope." Jones also told the band that watching "When You Leave That Way" was the first time he'd ever cried watching a video. That was indicative of the band's wider success with videos. The cool combination of humor and emotion that marked their recorded work made their videos among the industry's most interesting. They consistently reached the top of the video charts--the drag sequence in "Trashy Women" still comes up as a conversation topic among fans--and were nominated for Best Country Video by the CMA in 1996.

The road warriors may be a little tamer these days ("We can get as wild as we always did, just not as often"), but they're still providing both poignant moments and pure fun, and enjoying all of it. "You start playing music in your bedroom because it's fun, an enjoyable part of your life," Shirley says. "Then as you start to become successful at it, it becomes a business. If you're fortunate, and you're around long enough, it gets to be fun again, and that's where it is for me."

Unleashed, produced by Barry Beckett and co-produced by Danny Shirley, continues the Confederate Railroad tradition of making music that can be fun as well as poignant. As Danny Shirley states, "I don't try to second guess anybody. What I do is look for songs I like – that seems to work best." What he found for the new album are songs by such prominent writers as Dennis Linde, Bob DiPiero, Craig Wiseman, Jess Brown, Anthony Smith, and Rivers Rutherford. Danny also contributed two songs to the project.

Here's what Danny has to say about the songs:

STILL ONE OUTLAW LEFT--I really wanted to do something with David Allan Coe. We even talked about writing one together, but our schedules just didn't work. We could both really relate to that, not necessarily because of the content of our music so much as just the willingness to go against the grain. If there's any outlaw left, it's still David.

THAT'S WHAT BROTHERS DO--I was visiting a writers' night in Nashville and heard this performed. My youngest kids are four and two, close to what this song is talking about, and it really hit me because of them, the way my four-year-old will teach the two-year-old all the stuff he knows. In fact, I told my wife Jenni about it when I got home. Then, both guys who were helping me look for songs, Al Cooley and John Dotson, brought it to a song meeting at my house. I knew that had to be a sign.

SHE TREATS HER BODY LIKE A TEMPLE--When we were pulling this album together, I thought this would make a great duet if I could get George Jones to agree to do it. A lot of us can relate to this song, but I knew for sure he could.

DIGGIN' IT--I've known Craig Wiseman and Bob DiPiero forever, and I've recorded many of their songs, and I couldn't resist this one by the two of them together. It's just a fun, uptempo, lighthearted song.

WHITE TRASH WITH MONEY--When things first started going well for me, I bought a nice house in a nice part of Chattanooga. The neighbors were all concerned that with an entertainer moving in there'd be parties and Harley-Davidsons and naked women at the pool, not realizing that since I entertain for a living, all I want when I get home is peace and quiet. Eventually, one neighbor told me, "Hey, you're the most laid-back person in the neighborhood." I had to write this song anyway.

WASTED TIME--My ex-wife and son lived in Atlanta, and I went down to one of his football practices one day. It was a two-hour drive each way, and I got there just as a two-hour practice started. Afterwards, I walked him to his mother's car for just a minute, and drove home. Out of six hours, I got to spend about a minute with him. I got to thinking about all the time I'd missed through the years, and that's where the second verse--and the song--came from.

THE "R" WORD--I hate political correctness in every form. I don't like someone telling me what to think. I thought this song tied in very well. It's by Dennis Linde, a guy who has a knack for capturing the offbeat--"Bubba Shot The Jukebox" and "Goodbye Earl" are both his, and I think he's done it again here.

BORROWED TIME--I've calmed down a lot in the last ten years, but this kind of took me back to those days where you knew deep down it was all going to catch up with you someday but you didn't really care yet.

BETWEEN THE RAINBOWS AND THE RAIN--That song was pitched to me three or four years ago, when we were doing the "Keep On Rocking" album, but we didn't have room for another ballad and I had to pass. Then, I thought about it again for this one. It had stuck with me all that time. It's about as close as I come to a love song.

THICK AS THIEVES--I liked that one because it made me think of my relationship with the band and crew. We'll have differences between us, but we'd all back each other up if somebody picked on one of us.