

GREG HAWKS

It's been more than three decades since Greg Hawks picked up his first instrument, kicking off a career that has found the critically-acclaimed songwriter, frontman, and multi-instrumentalist leaving his mark on everything from alt-country to bluegrass music.

He casts a wide net with 2018's *I Think It's Time*, an album inspired by the twang of classic country, the hooks of 1970s pop/rock, the rhythmic soul of old-school Stax records, and Hawks' own roots in the American South. With influences that veer from Big Star to Buck Owens, *I Think It's Time* shines new light on an enduring, eclectic musician who was making Americana music long before the genre had a name.

"The album is a culmination of all my influences, thrown into a big pot as separate ingredients and turned into something cohesive and new," says Hawks, who recorded *I Think It's Time* at his home studio in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He produced the album himself, playing most of the instruments — from finger-style acoustic guitar to keyboards — along the way. He then turned to Chris Stamey (the dB's, Whiskeytown, Alex Chilton), who had previously mixed Hawks' debut album for YepRoc Records, *Fool's Paradise*, back in 2001. Stamey reprised that role for *I Think It's Time*, resulting in a DIY album whose songs mix Hawks' sharp, melody-driven songwriting with plenty of social commentary.

Written during the early years of Donald Trump's presidency, *I Think It's Time* holds a mirror to the modern world, reflecting a swirl of partisan politics, social media debates, and the maddening echo chamber of America's 24-hour news cycle. Throughout these songs, Hawks struggles to find his own place in a country that's become increasingly divided. He's torn between his desire to speak out in defiance of our leaders — as he does during "The King of Hate," one of the album's most sharply-worded tracks — and his need to preserve his own sanity by focusing his attention elsewhere. That push-and-pull between activism and purposeful unawareness adds a unique twist to these songs, turning *I Think It's Time* into a record aimed at anyone who's become disenchanted with the noise of the late 2010s.

"The right and the left have moved so far in their own directions that it's hard for anyone to be in the middle," Hawks says, pointing to the frustration that spawned the track "Living Between the Extremes." He adds, "This country was founded on the principles of compromise, but everything now is about digging in your heels, and vilifying the other side."

While the album tackles thorny subjects, *I Think It's Time* also marks the most musically inclusive album of Hawks' career. A diverse music fan who grew up on country music, discovered punk during his teenage years, and helped spearhead the early days of alt-country's mainstream emergence during his days as a Yep Roc recording artist, Hawks makes room for multiple genres throughout his new album's tracklist. The sunnily-strummed "Hope I Never Know" evokes Tom Petty's award-winning work with Jeff Lynne, while "Nothing Matters Anymore" channels the dark, impactful work of Johnny Cash's final albums. On "Pretending," Hawks croons his way through an oldies-worthy song like a reincarnated Roy Orbison, then stacks his voice into layers of gorgeous harmony on the Beach Boys-influenced closer, "It's All Gonna Be OK." Together, the songs on *I Think It's Time* do more than examine the personal and political struggles of a divided country — they show the full range not only of Hawks' interests, but his songwriting abilities, too.

The record's most enduring lesson, perhaps, can be found in "One Light," a track that sidesteps politics together. Influenced by the passing of two instrumental figures in Hawks' life — his father and first wife — that song offers grace and reprieve during grim times. The song's title comes from a dream Hawks experienced not long after his father's death, in which a desert-like landscape brought him to a tree "with a warm, beautiful light behind it." Upon waking, Hawks related the dream to his wife.

"She said, 'You know what that is, right?'" he remembers. "'That's your dad, telling you that he's alright.' I had been in a grieving stage, but that dream and that image made me feel good. Sometimes, while living in the worst place you can find yourself, there are unforeseen moments of grace where you feel yourself lifted up."