

## SONGS OF VIOLENCE, SADNESS, AND HUMOR

As a youngster, Paul Hunton's musical experiences were shaped by the fairly sedate tastes of his parents, who were "talk-radio people," he says. "My musical experience was limited to like barber-shop and musical theater, I think—parent-sanctioned musical options. A little bit of Mozart and Jim Croce in there." The Albuquerque native seemed destined for a Lawrence Welk gig until one day, at age 10, he stumbled onto a heavy metal station on his clock radio. "I related to it in a way I didn't expect and wasn't prepared for," says the singer/songwriter. "So I became obsessed with Metallica and Ozzy and Soundgarden and all that stuff."

Combine that with his education as a classical guitarist and his vocal and dramatic training, and you begin to get an idea of the provenance of his latest musi-

cal endeavor: Dust City Opera, the band he fronts and which recently released its arresting debut album, *Heaven*. The band includes Jared Putnam on lead guitar, Travis Roark on trombone and euphonium, Justin McLaughlin on bass, Clara Byom on accordion and clarinets, and Greg Williams on drums. Together, they represent a wide variety of musical genres that stretches from experimental art music to Western swing, and the album reflects that variety of style. Hunton credits the band's manager, Sydney Counce, with the inclusion of the horn, woodwinds, and accordion, which gives the band an unusual and distinctive range of textures. "I've been trying to find the right vessel for my songs, and I think this is it," he says.

The songs, for the most part, deal with dark subjects, which, Hunton says, reflect his twisted sense of humor: "Violence and sadness and humor—wherever they intersect," he says, summing up his interests as a songwriter. "I think I said in re-

hearsal one time: 'If no one gets hurt, I'm not interested.' I love violence. I love it. Violence in music is really compelling for me. Violence and suicide and sadness and all that." For listeners, it can be a bit disconcerting to find yourself tapping your foot to a tune about a dead lover ("Heaven") or a love song set in the environmental cataclysm ("*Romance for the End of Days*," which could win Hunton the moniker "the Cole Porter of the Apocalypse").

He brings a different and powerful vocal quality to every song to match the material—from the scorching screams of "I Need a Man" to the breathy softness of the idyllic "A Place." "They ask for a certain delivery," he says.

Some of the songs, he says, come from his journal, and some are just "tall tales." Almost none of them are easy for Hunton to write, and all of them reflect a painstaking approach of one sort or another. "Every couple of months, I'll kind of gather the fortitude to sit down and get something out," he says. Or perhaps inspiration will strike, and he'll spend a week unpacking a song. "It's a struggle—pain and suffering—to compose anything," he says.

As difficult as it is, he feels compelled to do it. "I hate writing, but I want to be a songwriter," he says. "The songwriters I admire—that's the coolest thing you can do: be Tom Waits or Ian Felice or the Handsome Family. I mean, it's magic. I think they have amazing mystical powers, and I want that. That's all that I want."

Looking down the road, Hunton, who also plays bass in the Silver String Band, hopes to make "19 more albums" under the Dust City Opera brand. "I want to have that body of work someday—a stack this high," he says, with his hands a foot apart. "Here's what I have to offer." To that end, he's already got 10 or 12 more songs ready to go.

You can keep up with Hunton and Dust City Opera at [dustcityopera.com](http://dustcityopera.com) or the band's Facebook page. You can reach Manager Sydney Counce at [dustcityopera@gmail.com](mailto:dustcityopera@gmail.com).



Paul Hunton records with his band Dust City Opera, a heavy mix of genres.

Be sure to check out *Musically Speaking*, Mel's online music journal, at [www.melminter.com](http://www.melminter.com).

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