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By Derek Halsey

Interest in the Civil War, the most deadly time in American history, ebbs and flows as the years go by. As 2013 began, however, the movie *Lincoln* became a hit around the world, focusing new attention on the War Between the States.

In February, Rural Rhythm Records introduced the first of a new series of Civil War-themed albums called *God Didn't Choose Sides*. While the timing of the release may seem opportunistic, this impressive project was three years in the making.

What is special about the *God Didn't Choose Sides* album is that it is not a rehash of Civil War-era songs, or even a collection of tunes that were popular back in the 1860s. Instead, it features an all-star cast of bluegrass musicians performing newly-penned compositions based on true, well-researched stories from that horrible conflict. The songs reflect all sides of the War; some are about those who fought for the South, some about those who fought for the North, about slaves who fought for freedom, and about unusual characters who left their mark on the era.

The idea behind "God Didn't Choose Sides" came from Sam Passamano II, president of Rural Rhythm Records. A Civil War history buff, Passamano freely admits that this album quickly took on a life of its own. As the venture unfolded, great new songs written by inspired songwriters appeared, and equally inspired performances by the bluegrass community flowed out during the recording process.

"When I decided to actually take a stab at putting a Civil War project together, music-wise, I was really open about it," says Passamano. "I thought, you know, there have been so many movies and books and records done on the generals, the politics and the war, we need to come up with something really unique and different. So, one thing led to another, and I started calling a lot of the songwriters that I thought could help and contribute to the project. I started getting songs (sent to me), and one song in particular came my way from Paula Breedlove and Brad Davis, and that was "The Legend of Jennie Wade." It immediately clicked, "Ok. Why don't we do a real album of true stories about real people?" That is a different twist, and I think it is a lot more compelling."

"The Legend of Jennie Wade," wonderfully performed on the album by the Lonesome River Band, is about a resident of Gettysburg, PA, who was the beau of a Union soldier named Jack Skelly. Skelly was wounded in the Battle of Winchester (VA) and while in the field hospital, he came across an old friend of his, Wesley Culp, who was fighting for the South. Skelly wrote a

letter to Wade and asked Culp to deliver it. But, weeks later, Culp lost his life at Gettysburg and his body was never identified. Wade never learned of the letter, and she never knew what happened to her love Skelly. As she baked some bread for the troops during the fight, with Culp and the letter living out their fate somewhere nearby, a bullet found its way through her doorway and she became the only civilian to die at the Battle of Gettysburg.

With an array of similarly intriguing songs collected, the task of matching them with the right musicians and singers was given to the album's producer, Steve Gulley.

"To put it bluntly, this took about two and a half years of my life to put all of this together and to make this record," says Gulley. "Between me and Sam, we really took the time to make a wish-list of people that we wanted on the record, and then find songs that fit those people."

This project became special to Gulley for a lot of reasons.

"I was a History Major in college and I've been a big Civil War buff and it was right in my wheel house," says Gulley. "I live in Cumberland Gap, TN, where I was born and raised, and I live here next to the National Park. Nearby Kentucky was a border state, and Virginia and Tennessee were Confederate states. Yet, there were pockets of Union resistance all up and down through here. So, there are a lot of old stories about people who would go up to a door in a Confederate uniform, thinking everything was cool, and somebody would meet them with a shotgun and kill them. And, that may be your relative.

"It was a crazy time," continues Gulley. "From a writing standpoint and a musical standpoint, there are so many little stories that get lost in the shuffle. That is one of the main reasons that we made this record, to let people know about real people who lived day-to-day, not knowing if somebody was going to come home or not. And, not knowing who they were going to face, if it was going to be a neighbor or relative on the other side. Six hundred and thirty thousand Americans lost their lives in that war. It is staggering."

The lead singers that bring these songs to life include Gulley, Brandon Rickman, Russell Moore, Dale Ann Bradley, Tim Stafford, Ronnie Bowman, Rickey Wasson, Dwight McCall, Bradley Walker, Brad Gulley, Carrie Hassler, Marty Raybon, Don Gulley, Vic Graves and the standout newcomer Dave Adkins. The backup musicians are a "Who's Who" of bluegrass session talent.

The songwriters include Gulley, Stafford, Davis, Terry Foust, Ray Edwards and Mike Evans. Writing or co-writing 10 of the 13 songs on the album are Paula Breedlove and Mark "Brink" Brinkman.

One memorable song co-written by Breedlove and Brinkman is "Old John Burns," a true story about a feisty old timer in his 70s who snuck his way onto the Gettysburg battlefield, ready to fight for the Union side.

"I really like "Old John Burns" because I think he was just an old coot," says Brinkman, laughing. "His whole personality was, "I've got my gun. Here's my bullets. Let me at it. I can still shoot." That type of thing. I like the fact that when he was shot, and of course he had his civilian clothes on, he told some Confederate soldiers that he was just trying to get home to his wife. He was actually brought to safety by some Confederate soldiers after getting shot by them. He made up a story, with the irony of it being he was shooting at Confederate soldiers,

then he got shot, and then he was saved by Confederate soldiers.?

There is a common theme that surfaces when talking to the creatives that put together the *God Didn't Choose Sides* album, and that is they believe this collaborative venture is special, and will stand the test of time.

?I've been writing songs for 33 years and I believe that when I am dead and gone, this is the project that I want to be remembered by,? says Breedlove. ?They took each song and matched it to an artist and every one of them is a perfect fit. It is like it was just meant to be. The other writers and I are thrilled with the results. We're really thrilled with the feedback we're getting about it. We've heard people making statements about the album that are so complimentary. I'm just amazed and so happy that it's doing so well. And, if anybody wants to read about the stories in the songs and get more information, the album has its own website at goddidntchoosesides.com.?

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