



# WOOD & STEEL

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At any given moment there's a good chance that Jason Spooner is a finalist in a songwriting contest somewhere. The Portland, Maine singer-songwriter has been scoring props-a-plenty over the last several years, and understandably so. Honey-roasted voice, check; tasty guitar chops, check; Velcro melodies, check; evocative lyrics, check; tight, groove-laden band.... You get the picture.

Spooner's roots-rich contemporary folk sound stretches far and wide on his latest record, *The Flame You Follow*. He filters through his folk, blues, soul, funk, rock, and even classic singer-songwriter influences, giving them all a place at the table. His songs belie a sharp-tooled craftsmanship on the writing side, yet wash over the listener with fluid finesse. At times, Spooner plays musical sketch artist, conjuring story-song vignettes that balance selective strokes of detail with poetic, open-ended imagery. He leaves enough out to draw listeners in as accomplices to fill in the blanks on our own. And yet, one could easily not follow the lyrics at all and still be drawn to the supple melodies and the organic interplay of Spooner's well-oiled trio (with Andy Rice on bass and Reed Chambers on drums).

To this ear, Spooner's voice calls to mind a richer, more soulful Paul Simon. His phrasing exudes laid-back warmth, and coaxes the listener in with a narrative air that suits the story-song nature of some of his tunes.

That approach perhaps comes across most fully on "All That We Know," an ill-fated convenience store caper, in which Spooner alternates snippets of dialogue on the verses with metaphorical strokes on the chorus that build empathy for one of the characters. The song's vintage rockabilly sound is fueled by churning upright bass and brush-on-snare, while

Spooner's voice and atmospheric guitar twang hang in the air like a bad mistake — a fitting touch, given the story.

In "Spaceship," Spooner taps the longing for escape from the burdens of everyday life through the separate worlds of an empty nest mom and a businessman estranged from his family. In the heavy-hearted "Meant to Be," a son watches his father cling to his dignity as he puts the family farm up for sale.

Elsewhere, Spooner and the band deepen the grooves and the mystery. Electric piano and horns fatten up the vibe on "Fight the Fire," as Spooner drops tidbits from a murder scene and turns the listener into detective. "Simple Life" burns on a sax-juiced soul-funk groove that slips into James Brown and Maceo Parker territory.

Spooner also gets reflective as he ponders the ghostly remnants of spent relationships on "Mirror This Morning" and "Hover," a beautiful, haunting ballad also featuring singer-songwriter Kim Taylor that tries to salvage the good memories.

Spooner even busts out a gospel-tinged cover of the Talking Heads' "Slippery People," giving it an earthy intensity with the help of Taylor's sweet harmonies and the call-and-response vocals.

The great thing about this record, beyond the wonderfully contoured, lived-in sound, is the way Spooner reminds us that, even as listeners, we're all a part of the story, too.

- Jim Kirlin