

MANDO SAENZ-STUDEBAKER

Mando Saenz has made a career out of watching people, haunting places, and asking questions. *Studebaker*, his third studio album released June 4, 2013 by Carnival Recording Company, is propelled by his self-deprecating wit, careful observation, and empathetic ability to make heroes out of outcasts. Recorded in sessions that began late last fall and spilled over into early 2013, *Studebaker* is a 12-song deep trek, the longest of any of Saenz's albums thus far.

Mark Nevers (Lambchop, Bobby Bare, Jr., Andrew Bird) produced *Studebaker* in his home studio, Beech House Recording, in Nashville. Nevers helped Saenz assemble an ace core cast of players, while Saenz also called on friends including Kenny Vaughan, Pete Finney, Jedd Hughes, Kim Richey, and Bobby Bare, Jr. for cameos. The studio environment was raw and relaxed, prompting Saenz to feel both reinvigorated and nostalgic. "I felt like I was back in Houston or somewhere in Texas, where I recorded my first album," he says. "It felt far away from Nashville. I'm not knocking Nashville. It was just a nice change for me."

While it's been five years since the release of his critically acclaimed second album *Bucket*, the path to *Studebaker* has been even longer. Born in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, Saenz moved to North Carolina at just two months old. Another move in fourth grade took his family to Corpus Christi, where his father, recently retired from the U.S. Army, set up a medical practice. Corpus Christi became home.

Before pursuing music professionally, Saenz earned an MBA in San Antonio, and when he sighs and tells you the white collar trophy was a nice get but a misguided one, it's not a humble brag. "I was just kind of lost," he says. But even after his soft-spoken brushoff, it's easy to imagine Saenz, who is somehow simultaneously loose and precise, as a top student.

MBA in hand, Saenz found the call to create music too strong to ignore. When he chose a move to Houston over Austin because his brother set up a studio in the former, he was exposed to another world. "It was a good time to be a musician in Houston. A lot of us, like Hayes Carll and John Evans, were there together. I was in inner-city Houston, and it was just so cool—huge and unlike anywhere I'd ever lived."

The pace, faces, sticky beauty, and musical camaraderie of Houston stayed with Saenz. And while Nashville has surely offered plenty of inspiration, characters and experiences from Corpus Christi and Houston take their turns on *Studebaker* as well.

Dabbling in pointed folk, hushed pop, honky tonk, and rock-and-roll, *Studebaker* combines the acoustic pensiveness of 2005's *Watertown* and the full-bodied bravado of 2008's *Bucket*. Saenz's tenor, which has always been arresting, has

assumed a full, rich timbre that can still deliver lines delicately, but can also howl like a freight train.

Saenz's first two albums were often sharp-eyed studies in wanderlust and self, and while *Studebaker* picks up the torch, it carries it differently. His need to keep moving is now its own safe haven, and the fluidity or even duality of identity is a salve instead of a threat.

"I've been happy, I've been sad, I've been lucky, I've been unlucky. I've been spoiled, and I've also been whatever the opposite of spoiled is," Saenz says. "Maybe I'm just getting to the age where I feel more comfortable talking, indirectly, about what I've been through."

As he snarls, "Where's my Studebaker / I'm nobody's pocket change" in new album track "Pocket Change," it's clear that Saenz is not only comfortable, he's enjoying himself. "I've been playing 'Pocket Change' for a few years now," he says. "One of the reasons I decided to call the album 'Studebaker' is people ask at shows, 'Hey, what album is that 'Studebaker' song on?'"

In addition to touring heavily, Saenz spent the years between recording *Bucket* and *Studebaker* further developing what many already recognized as his greatest strength: his songwriting. A natural solo writer, he stretched by writing with and for an interesting variety of other artists. Saenz co-wrote every track save one on Stoney LaRue's 2011 album, *Velvet*—which scored three No. 1 singles on the Texas Music Chart—along with all of the songs on Shelly Colvin's recently released *Up the Hickory, Down the Pine*. Wade Bowen's recording of "Bottle into Gold," which he wrote with Saenz, hit No. 1 on the Texas Music Chart. Another *Studebaker* track will grace another co-writer's collection: Kim Richey cut "Breakaway Speed" for her new album, *Thorn in My Heart*. Eli Young Band, Whiskey Myers, and more also joined Saenz's growing list of collaborators, while others such as Lee Ann Womack have rediscovered and recorded his solo-written work.

The songwriting on *Studebaker* shines because Saenz took the time and the chance to evolve. Five co-writers—Richey, Colvin, and Bowen, along with Ryan Beavers and Justyna Kelly—contribute to five songs, while the other seven songs are all Saenz.

"Breakaway Speed," co-written with Richey and featuring her harmonies, beautifully chronicles a breakup with a toe-tapping pop melody. Fiddle in tow, "Tall Grass" swings through a classic boy-begs-girl-for-a-chance storyline, with a twist. "It kind of has a criminal element," Saenz says. "I feel like there's a little of that in me. I've never broken the law or been in jail, but I think there is a little bit of that criminal element inside of a lot of people."

“Colorado” is an elaborate narrative that transports listeners to John Ford’s West. “Hard Time in Tennessee” is a character-defining list of things the hero wishes he could do, but just can’t. “Nobody” and “Battle Scar” grapple in different ways with the concept of identity, while “Sweet Marie” and “Smiles at the Door” are tender love songs.

“The only time I speak out is when I sing,” Saenz says. “I am more comfortable musically now, but in a lot of other ways, too. Maybe that comes through in the songs.”