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After years underground, fingerstyle guitarist Matthew Schneider’s longtime project Moon Bros. appeals to a wider audience with These Stars, an album which showcases his acoustic virtuosity, textured compositions, and unique interpretation of Americana.

By Emile Menascé

Musicians’ bios generally have more bubbling adjectives than a Harlequin romance, and they can be just as fantastical. As Frank Zappa famously noted, it’s hard to describe music in words. Yet the description that came with the Moon Bros. new album, These Stars, summed up the music and the man behind it in a single fitting word: idiosyncratic.

A veteran of Chicago’s jazz-rock underground, Matthew Schneider spent his early career in bands like the Exciting Trio, Toe, and HiM. Then he decided to retreat to his rural roots and refocus his attention on fingerstyle acoustic guitar, honing his formidable technique while exploring the textured and eclectic compositional approach that defines his evolving project known as Moon Bros.

The Illinois native considers These Stars to be the fifth Moon Bros. album. But with its predecessors not readily accessible to the public, it serves as a de facto debut for many listeners. Schneider says it’s also the first Moon Bros. album to feature a full band: Matt Lux (bass), Sam Wagster (pedal steel), and Dan Bitney (percussion). Recorded in three days with everyone playing together, the music has a live feel. It’s also free of the sweetening you’d expect from an album circa 2016. Instead, Schneider and company draw unusual textures from familiar instruments to give These Stars a distinctly emotional sound that rewards repeated listening.

On the title cut, Schneider’s high tenor voice and delicate guitar deliver a plaintive ballad that’s underscored by Wagster’s pedal steel. “Pitch” starts with folky harmonica (played by Schneider) over a guitar bed driven by some breathtaking picking. That’s followed by the upbeat instrumental, “El Conejo,” which somehow recalls both Leo Kottke and Frank Zappa. Songs like “Wool Blankets” and “Oh So Cold” offer a nod to country-folk.

Schneider’s dynamics on “Corrido” give the song power, while the use of steel guitar and percussion offer an interesting contrast (or is it compatibility?) between Spanish and American sounds. Similarly, “Blues” evolves beyond the genre of its title. The final cut, “AC/DC,” may be the most emotional of the bunch, as Schneider again creates a guitar foundation of fast arpeggios and tremolo for his voice and the sobbing steel guitar.

Perhaps it’s fitting that we spoke to Schneider while he was riding in a car, occasionally interrupting our chat to give directions to an unnamed driver. If the music on These Stars is anything to go by, the person behind the wheel was in for an interesting ride with plenty of sudden turns.
The songs on *These Stars* sound very organic and unfiltered. Was that the goal? I wanted to make a live band record that really sounded like us. We basically just went into the studio and tracked it as is. Even the vocals are the scratch vocals. There are no dubs or anything like that. This particular band came together when we did a residency at a place in Chicago called Analogue. I wrote the material and rehearsed it with the band during that residency.

Did you arrange it with them or develop it on your own and teach them the parts?
The music is pretty simple, so they just ran with it. I didn’t really conduct them very much at all. Maybe more so when we got into the studio, but that was more for time because a lot of those tunes in “real life” are a lot longer than they are on the record.

I’ve been playing with everyone in the band for years and years in the improvised music scene in Chicago, so it had more to do with the players being themselves than me telling them what to do.

The music is very textured. The vibe is Americana, but doesn’t seem to be especially traditional.

Thank you for noticing [laughs]. You can have an acoustic band, and the music can be a bit more than meets the ear. A lot of music I like falls under that category. Just writing for other instruments—I kind of got into that sort of thing. Like, “Oh, you know, we have a trumpet, a bass player and a drummer—but don’t sound anything like a trad jazz band.” Would you say this music is rooted in a folk vein?

I was really just going with the flow instead of thinking, “This is supposed to be a folk song.” The way I view music these days, after playing and being interested in a lot of different styles, is they all just seem to be one thing to me now. I can’t really pick apart the small stylistic differences between one record and another. There’s so much overlap in the world now. And the more you learn about music history, the more you see that one style or genre comes through the other.

Your guitar obviously plays a prominent role in the songs, and the band lends a lot of the texture. Did you compose with that in mind?

Necessity is the mother of invention, I guess [laughs]. I’m a guitar player, and I’ve thought about the guitar in a lot of different ways over the years. I wanted it to be more clear and unaffected—like a piano or something like that. Learning to play the guitar, I grew up playing stuff like Chet Atkins when I was a kid. That’s what I was totally into.

Interesting: Atkins played classical guitar as well as country. This music has an almost classical approach in the way the songs move through different textures. Is that just from his playing?

Aside from Chet, I’m influenced by Malian kora player Toumani Diabaté; his music saved my relationship with fingerstyle guitar. I also love Clarence White, his legato stuff—also his B-bender playing—but the legato shit is really crushing. Johnny Smith, too: I’m super into those big-ass arpeggios he used to do. I love that stuff.

There was no specific influence I was trying to draw from for this album. But...
there were non-musical influences for sure: language- and communication-based influences. Taking an idea, and searching around for it like you were writing prose.

In what way?
Like if you have a jazz tune and it has a 12-bar form or a 32-bar form, and everyone plays the head and then improvises over the changes—I was trying to think of that kind of experience, creating that sense of dialogue for the listener or the performer. When we play this material live, the songs are usually a lot longer and go so many places. A lot of it sounds free composed in some ways. But there are a lot of sort of trap doors in unexpected places, so it’s not just like “we played the head, now we’re going to blow through the changes.” The tune can change. I was more influenced by communication than a musical style.

Did you sit down and “write” or did you improvise your way into these pieces?
I used to write for the guitar and other instruments—you know, notate it and stuff like that. A few years ago, I got into just playing the guitar for what it was, so these tunes just came about. They were all done on the guitar or harmonica enough to show to the band, and then we developed them onstage to accommodate communication between four people and not just me. Enough of that material was there to say, “Here’s the tune, let’s flesh it out.”

When and how did you mate the lyrical ideas to the music?
They came about as all of one thing—I came up with words and music at the same time. I avoided singing for such a long time. I just wanted to be just an instrumentalist forever. But eventually I found myself really digging singing, and I figure it’s something that you do. So for the last few years I’ve been incorporating it. It’s not so much about story time, or narrative songs, but just thinking of the voice as another instrument, I guess.

Interesting that you shied away from singing. Your voice and guitar are so well integrated on the album.
Well, they have spent a lot of time together [laughs].

You’re known for using alternate tunings. Did the tunings influence your composition process?
Oh yeah, totally. The tunings take you out into a totally different space. It turns the fretboard into a totally different thing. Nothing is where it should be—you’ve got to look around for stuff. Muscle memory isn’t as applicable—you don’t automatically reach for the solid intervals. You have to work around it.

I used three tunings on the record: standard, a D–G–D–G–B–B tuning, and

Fingerstyle guitarist Matt Schneider uses two acoustic guitars—a 1960s Harmony and a Martin D12-20, with a Radial Engineering Tonebone PZ-Pre acoustic preamp, and no effects.
Do you always play fingerstyle?
All the time. I don’t even have an electric guitar. I haven’t played with a flatpick in ages. I used to do a straight-ahead gig when I played with a flatpick, but that was a long time ago.

Let’s dig into the tunes for a bit. What inspired the title cut?
It’s a pretty old song. I wrote it eight or nine years ago. That was a pretty heavy time I was going through. The shit was kinda hitting the fan and I was trying to make sense of it all. At the time, I wasn’t writing much stuff lyrically, and I felt the need to do that. It was wintertime—I was on crutches. It’s a nice ballad with a little bit of a story.

One thing that stands out on “Pitch”—and across the whole album—is the range of textures you’re getting from acoustic instruments. It’s an expanded sound palette without sounding processed or electronic.

That’s something I thought a lot about as I was making the record, and it’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. I don’t know if you want to call it an “approach” or “concept,” but it was definitely one of the ideas behind this record.

Some of your syncopations remind me a bit of Leo Kottke—especially his early work. Was he an influence?
Not really. When I was younger, there was a place called the Woodstock Opera House [in Woodstock, Illinois]. I saw him and other solo acoustic players, and there was something about that scene that made me decide to move to the city and not be that solo acoustic guitar guy. It all seemed really flashy, narcissistic, and lonely.
Tell me about the relatively gentle piece “Oh So Cold.” What inspired it?
I wrote that song with my daughter. She’s about 8. It’s just a simple tune. I wanted to put down the guitar pyrotechnics and focus on something else. Songwriting … I’m definitely trying to figure out how this stuff fits together. But on “Oh So Cold,” it’s a simple little voyage, nice room for steel guitar to articulate—a minimalistic approach.

How did “Wool Blankets” come about?
I’ve always been obsessed with the tune “Gentle on My Mind” by John Hartford, but I never learned it. [Editor’s note: Both Hartford’s original and Glen Campbell’s cover of the song won Grammys in 1968.] So I wrote my own tune that was sort of like it, just for my own entertainment.

Earlier, you talked about the voice as “another instrument.” Does singing change your guitar approach? Do you think in terms of lead versus rhythm guitar?
The guitar, harmonica, and voice follow one another. They’re all one thing. I don’t think of it as a “guitar” part or a “harmonica” part. It used to drive me nuts. I taught guitar for a while, and people would be like, “Oh, that’s a guitar thing,” or “That’s not a guitar thing.” And I’d be like, “You can play a Bartók piece with two guitars and it’s just fine. It’s just the same 12 notes we’re dealing with.” I know there are moments of guitar shredding, but that’s more about the point in the music where the shit’s starting to get intense, and the instrument just happens to be a guitar.

Did you study composition?
Not formally. But I led a lot of bands in the Chicago jazz scene, and I’ve been part of a lot of bands. And the thing that drew me more to music than even the guitar was composers, people like Jimmy Giuffre—that small ensemble stuff he wrote for guitar and valve trombone, that stuff changed my world! It’s about what you can do with the instruments available. Like: “We don’t have a bass player, so there’s no harmonic pulse, but we have a valve trombonist so we’re gonna swing the hell out of an interpretation of a folk tune that the dude learned in Texas growing up.”

Let’s talk some “Blues”—meaning the album cut, not the genre.
I love the blues! That song used that two-note “DAD” tuning. I just thought it would be a fun, kicking tune. It works nicely on the record because it’s a short form. When we play it live we can really do what we want to do with it.

How did you arrive at that tuning?
By experimenting, just trying to figure out things out: “What’s this like? What’s that like? What happens when I do this?” Just trial and error. What usually happens is I’ll find the tuning and then say to myself, “This is interesting, you should stay in this tuning.”
Right now, I’m running around with two guitars, and one of them stays in that G with the B on the top, and the other one stays on the one with the two Ds. And that’s life for right now. I’m not really fishing around with tunings at the moment. I’ve kinda got my mind made up. I have a good amount of stuff to work through with these.

What are your main guitars?
The guitar that stays in that “DAD” tuning is an old plywood Harmony. I don’t know the model number, but it’s a 00-18-sized birch ply and ladder-braced guy that has—not nylon strings, but they’re almost nylon strings. They’re the kind of strings you put on a guitar that’s going to break! [Laughs.] They’re John Pearse Folk strings, where all six strings are wrapped [wound]. These strings make things pop. The thing really rattles its seams, which I’m really into.
I also have a ’67 Martin D12-20. It’s a 12-fret 12-string, with a slotted headstock. And that’s it. The Harmony has taken over the duties of the other flattop I used on the record, which was given to me because I had a guitar stolen not too long ago. It’s a Yamaha from the ’70s that’s really nice because of the fingerboard. I don’t know the model number of it. It was the Bert Jansch-looking guitar [Editor’s note: Among Jansch’s notable guitars was a Yamaha LL11.] I have gigantic hands and I like those wide fingerboards. I kept running into myself on narrow fingerboard guitars.
How about live?
Those two guitars, and I use a Radial Engineering Tonebone PZ-Pre acoustic preamp. It’s just amazing. Soundmen have to try really hard to wreck your night when you feed them with one of those. The Harmony has a stick-on Dean Markley pickup. On the Martin, I use an L.R. Baggs magnetic pickup. Neither has power or a preamp. No other effects.

The record has an unusual sound—not quite vintage, but not really modern.

Where did you do it?
The album was recorded at a studio in Chicago called Minbal. We played everything live. We just ran it down. The drummer was half-isolated, but for the most part we were all in one room.

Did you record to tape or Pro Tools?
Actually we did both at the same time with different mics—which is a nightmare and I’ll never ever do it again. The idea was that some instruments sound better on tape, others might sound better on digital, and we could put them together. But there’s no real rule of thumb; it just seems like whatever the air was like in the studio that day. When I went through the material with Brian Sulipzio, who engineered and mixed the record, it was amazing that there were so many options, but it just got to be too much. Next time, I’m just going to go with one or the other. I don’t really have a preference. I’m not like an analog nut, and I’m not a digital nut. I see the pros and cons of both.

What’s next?
I’m going out on the road and I’ve already started tracking the next record. I want to try to get the tracking done before the touring picks up. A lot of what we’ve recorded so far has been two people at a time or just me. With *These Stars*, we sat down in a room for three days and recorded. For contrast on the next one, I wanted to do a bunch of different sessions in a bunch of different places and then put that together as an album so that it’s inherently physically different than the last one.