



DARRYL STERDAN

Music

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Back on the Bus

Winnipeg's Weakerthans get in gear again with long-awaited Reunion Tour CD



Outstanding in their field (from left): Weakerthans Smith, Carroll, Tait and Samson.

Plenty of musicians travel by bus. But usually it's not a city bus. And they're not behind the wheel.

Then there's John K. Samson. When we last caught up with the Weakerthans frontman, he was sporting blue Transit Tom togs and working the business end of an orange Flyer in the South Osborne Street bus garage.

"See, you work the turn signals with your feet," Samson explains, offering us an obliging demonstration. "That's pretty cool."

No, the 34-year-old Winnipeg singer-guitarist hasn't changed careers. He's shooting a Caelum Vatnsdal-directed video for the song *Civil Twilight*, the first single from the band's fourth CD *Reunion Tour*.

And it's no accident that the song — another one of Samson's wistful indie-rock anthems set in wintry Winnipeg — is voiced by a busman whose route takes him by his ex's house.

"I actually spent a lot of time on the bus when I was writing these songs," says Samson a few days before the shoot, nursing a glass of merlot in an Osborne Village cafe near his Arbeiter Ring publishing house. "Three days a week for the past few winters, I would take the bus down to the library. I would sit near the bus driver and kind of stare at him. I kinda like their uniforms."

"And a lot of bus drivers hang out at the library — it must be one of their stopoffs where they change buses — so I would see them sitting there."

Samson wasn't just stalking city workers. The articulate songwriter was commuting to the library to force himself to work on lyrics, researching everything from the dot-com bust to Bigfoot to the paintings of Edward Hopper — all of which inspired songs on *Reunion Tour*, which arrives in stores Tuesday.

"Two of the songs are actually based on Hopper paintings — *Night Windows* and *Sun in an Empty Room*. I was going to write a whole album about Edward Hopper paintings, so I spent a lot of time reading about him. I only got around to two before I wandered off into other subjects. But all the research ended up contributing to the album. A lot of the songs are based on real people and events."

Some, like the experimental soundscape *Elegy for Gump Worsley* or the metaphorical

curling love song *Tournament of Hearts*, are self-explanatory. Others, like the title cut inspired by the Great White tragedy, may be less obvious. But Samson says they all have something in common.

"In almost every song, there's this longing for reunion or reconciliation. It's always about what might have been. So *Reunion Tour* kind of seemed to fit as a throughline." Plus, he admits, it's an in-joke about how long it takes the meticulous tunesmith to craft his songs.

"I have real trouble letting go of them," he acknowledges. "I'm always real resistant. I like walking around

"I was hanging out in New York City with Craig Finn (from The Hold Steady) and he said to me, 'You know, I've made three records since you made your last record.' It was kind of like, 'Get to work.'"

with them. They're good company. But this is a long time, even for me.

"A while ago I was hanging out in New York City with Craig Finn (from The Hold Steady) and he said to me, 'You know, I've made three records since you made your last record.' It was kind of like, 'Get to work.' And I needed that."

So, in March, Samson and the Weakers — drummer Jason Tait, guitarist Stephen

Carroll and bassist Greg Smith — reconvened with longtime producer Ian Blurton in a St. Boniface warehouse. Unlike the lyrics, the music for the album was still a work in progress — which ended up working to the band's advantage.

"It was a case of us having enough but not thinking we did," says Samson. "We thought we would just go in and record what we had. But after eight days, Ian said, 'I think there's a record here.'"

And he was really happy with the way it was going.

"Because the songs were less carved in stone than last time, we felt like we had room to play with things and incorporate new ideas. So everyone was more comfortable with their contributions. There's more musical conversation this time."

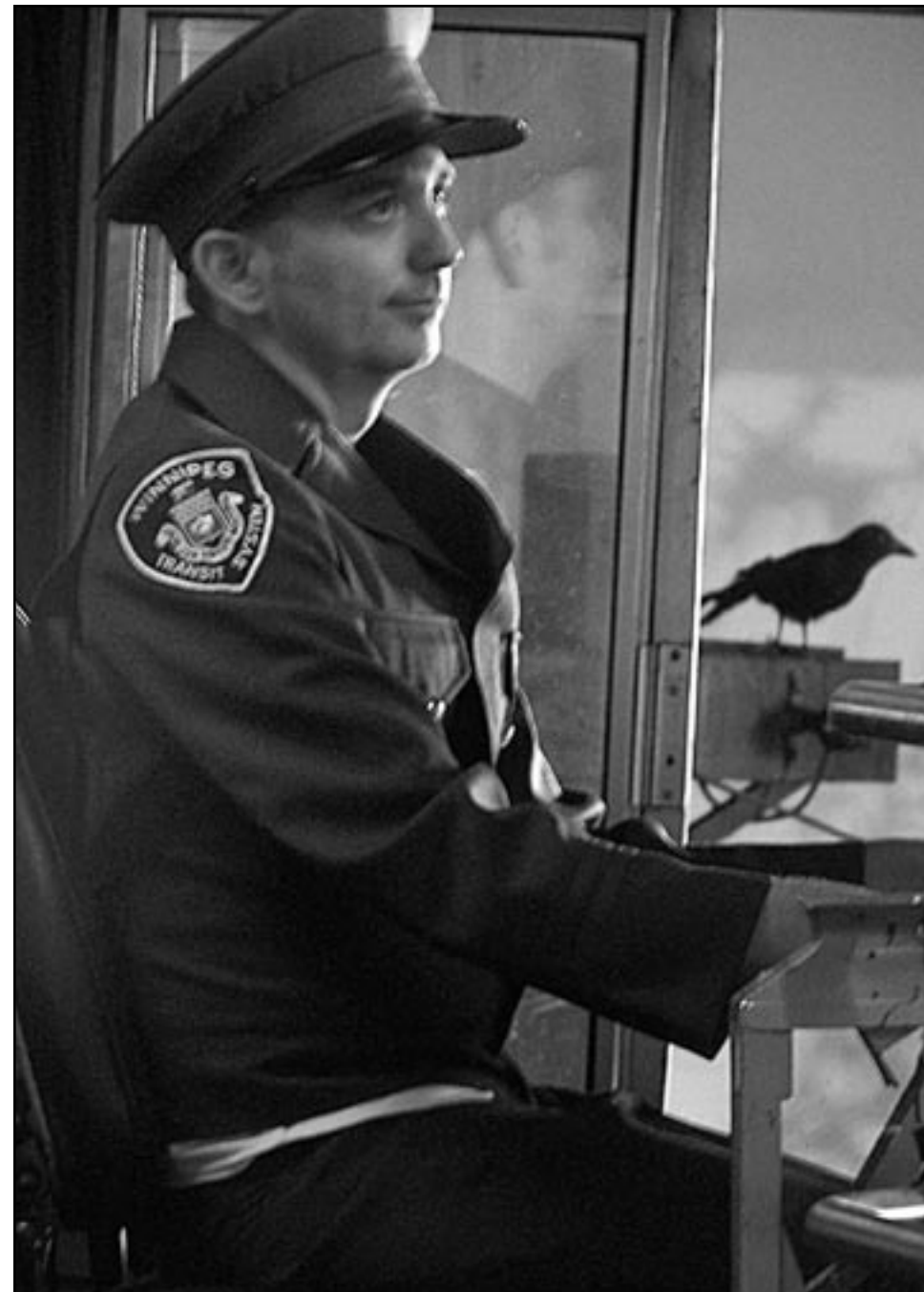
It shows on the disc, which has a looser, more immediate feel than the decade-old band's heavily conceptual

2003 CD *Reconstruction Site*.

By contrast, *Reunion Tour* — released on the influential punk label Anti-Epithaph — is also the mellowest, moodiest and most mature Weakerthans disc to date, with a wintry feel that reflects the season it was written and recorded.

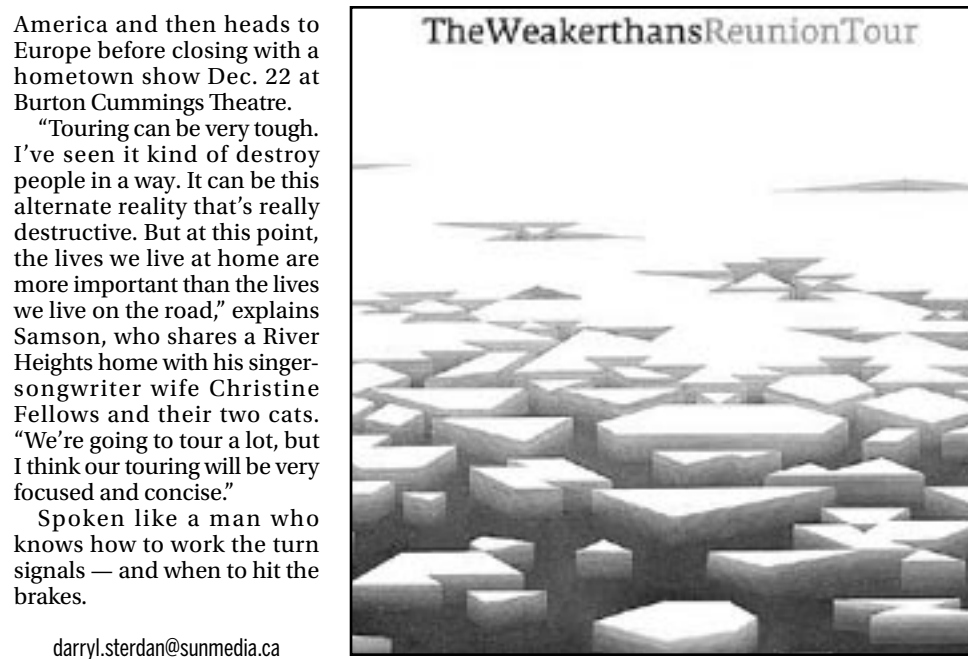
Former Propagandhi bassist Samson adds it's also "the most realistic record we've made. It's the closest we've come to a record that actually sounds like us, for better or for worse."

Also for better or worse, the band is embarking on its *Reunion Tour* tour, which kicks off in Minneapolis Tuesday, winds through North



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All aboard: Samson gets his Transit Tom on at the band's video shoot; the new album, below.



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Weakerthans head to new places on Reunion Tour

When is a reunion tour not a reunion tour? When it's The Weakerthans' *Reunion Tour*.

For one thing, it can't be a reunion because the band never split up. For another, it's not a live album, it's the fourth studio disc from the beloved Winnipeg indie-rockers. And finally, it's not the soulless, self-serving cash-grab of your typical reunion tour.

Rather, this 11-track set is another stellar offering that captures the next stage in the band's creative evolution. Taking leave from the high-concept unity of 2003's *Reconstruction Site*, singer-songwriter and guitarist John K. Samson offers tunes inspired by everything from Edward Hopper paintings and the dot-com bust to Gump Worsley and the Great White club fire. Despite their diverse origins, however, these bittersweet odes to lovelorn

curlers, brokenhearted bus drivers and runaway kitties are united by Samson's articulate prose, emotional honesty and understated whimsy — qualities that have established him as the most gifted Winnipeg songwriter since Neil Young.

The rest of the Weakers — guitarist Stephen Carroll, drummer Jason Tait and new bassist Greg Smith — prove the perfect musical foils for Samson and his literary lyrics. Threepeating with producer Ian Blurton, the musicians seem to have a greater hand in the proceedings. And they stretch their sonic wings accordingly, employing more keyboards

and horns while experimenting with ambient electronics, loops and effects. Most impressive? They do so without sacrificing the human interaction and immediacy of their sound. For all its deliberate craftsmanship, this is a living, breathing work of a functioning rock band.

If only all reunion tours were so satisfying.

Civil Twilight 3:18

Squelchy synth-like guitar pulses preface the main event, reminding us of an old Who number. What better setting for a song about a transit driver? But this isn't *Magic Bus*; this gently surging and serrated midtempo rocker is a typically Samsonian tragedy about a busman whose route

swings by his ex-lover's house every other hour — including the titular (and romantically metaphorical) hour between sunset and certified darkness. Too much.

Hymn of the Medical Oddity 3:08

Fingerpicked guitars that fall somewhere between folk and classical gently glimmer over a lazy beat. A wobbly keyboard adds melancholy counterpoint to unsettling images of doctors, hospitals and wintry isolation.

Relative Surplus Value 2:38

The disc's hardest, fastest rocker is anchored by a pumping *Lust for Life* beat, topped with guitars that throb

and vibrate like Johnny Marr. The lyrics — about a businessman racing to a board meeting, only to find out his stock has tanked — are an analogy for the dot-com boom.

Call it the Weakers' answer to *Takin' Care of Business*.

Tournament of Hearts 3:35

On their last album, Samson treated us to last call at the Elks Lodge. Here, he moves to the lounge at the curling rink, hoisting a few brown ones in this lightly chugging pop-rock charmer. The tale — yep, another romantic metaphor — is Samson at his most whimsical: "Why can't I ever stop where I want to stay? ... I'm always throwing hack-weight." Can't wait for the video.

Virtute the Cat Explains her Departure 4:09

The pussycat protagonist from *Reconstruction Site* comes back to tell us why she ran away. Built around a lazy brushed-snare beat, plaintive electric piano and guitars that evolve from shimmering waves to Morse code, it's a remarkably tender track — and the only ballad you're likely to hear that features the word "kibble."

Elegy for Gump Worsley 2:43

This hockey-homage soundscape starts off with Tait plunking a backwoods banjo line amid rooty flourishes from acoustic guitars and slide. Samson waxes poetic with a stream-of-consciousness monologue on the legendary goalie's life.

Sun in an Empty Room 4:00

One of two tunes inspired by Hopper paintings, this sweetly smooth pop number has a lightly funky groove and slightly slinky, ringing guitars. Lyrics about a low-income couple moving out of their welfare apartment conspire with an indelible chorus and a hummable keyboard solo to make this one of the most commercial songs in the band's repertoire.

Night Windows 4:36

The second Hopper tune is set to a click-clack tick-tock rhythm and chiming guitars — a musical metaphor for the passage of time. It's a fine foundation for Samson's intimate vocal about a lovelorn guy who finds himself lost in romantic reverie while glancing at his ex's window. Pretty as a painting all on its own.

Bigfoot! 2:23

More folksy acoustic guitars — that fittingly creak and squeak like footsteps on Arctic snow and ice — swirl with tinkly synth flakes and stately northern-light horns. Together, they create a stark, windswept dreamscape that suits this tale of a tundra buggy driver who may or may not have a friend named Sasquatch. His explanation: "The visions that I see believe in me."

Reunion Tour 2:08

Over a sluggish martial-snare pattern and whistling tones, Samson recites a litany of life on the endless road — from the syncopated boom-boom-boom of tumbling roadcases to shiny truckstop food. "I lost the chiming ring of keys to everything safe and safely locked away back home," he sings, expressing a touring musician's disconnection from domestic reality. So much for sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Utilities 4:35

The boys take it home with a gorgeous, forlorn country waltz flecked with percolating organ and weeping steel guitar lines. The slow-burning harmonized solo reminds us a bit of The Hold Steady — but self-deprecating lines like "Got more faults than the state of California, and the heart is a badly built bridge" are pure Samson. "Make this something somebody can use," he says in closing. It already is.

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