

Southern Tenant Folk Union – The Chuck Norris Project

by [ROY SPENCER](#) on 10 FEBRUARY, 2015

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If anyone wanted a concept album that documented the work of American action film star Chuck Norris, they might be excited by the latest from Southern Tenant Folk Union. Riled by a blatantly pro-Republican message from Norris during the last American presidential campaign, the Scottish acoustic septet's chief songwriter Pat McGarvey was inspired to create an album with all of the tracks sharing titles with the actor's films. But the songs do not celebrate the films' plots, explosions or car chases: McGarvey has used his lyrics to deal with contentious subjects from the spectrum of American politics, with most of them pointing – at times subtly – to the flaws in differing ideologies. Taking the idea a step further, the band looked to screen composers for musical cues, blending elements of John Carpenter, Gene Clark and Fabio Frizzi, along with disco and soul arrangers Isaac Hayes, JJ Johnson and Barry White. Despite Hayes' influence, fans of big screen soundtracks from the 70s action heyday might be disappointed to hear that there are no marching snare drums or wah-wah electric guitars. Southern Tenant Folk Union play traditional acoustic folk instruments in an orchestral setting, with the effective addition of Emma Turley's cello and clarinet by Kieran Lambie. The cinematic theme extends to the album's cover art, with regular collaborator Jonathan McClean designing a mocking parody of 1970s action movie posters, showing an unidentified skull-headed man in a variety of typical action poses.

Set to a rattling bluegrass backing of banjo and fiddle, opening song *Walker* gets directly to one of the most controversial issues facing US society and takes us to an Oregon gun show and explores the possible consequences of lax weapon and state border controls. The Hitchcockian tension builds with Katherine Stewart's jabbing fiddle and a mandolin part that evokes Nina Rota's film score work, until Walker does just that and walks away from a scene of potential devastation.

Guitarist Chris Purcell has contributed sublime lyrics to the last four Southern Tenant Folk Union albums and here he considers the parallels

of paranoia on the extremes of the political argument. Running at nine and a half minutes, the two-part song *cycle The Wrecking Crew (Eyes Right)* and *(Eyes Left)* respectively contrasts the fear of losing power through equality and social progress and the ultimate disappointment of Utopian ideals. The rather melancholy backdrop is accompanied to chilling effect by the ghosts of news bulletins and significant political speeches.

Elsewhere in the collection, no political stance appears to be safe from scrutiny. A harsh, jarring dissonant chord introduces *The President's Man* and the possibility of a future female or gay president, noting that the US portrayed on Fox TV is a "Tolerant country but it's still full of hate". Perhaps something for Hillary Clinton to bear in mind, should she decide to run for the position in 2016.

Craig Macfadyen's slow double bass suggests the dark atmosphere of a PI thriller film noir, as *Martial Law* looks at the prospect of a restrictive regime that might be desired by swastika-tattooed far right extremists, before *Slaughter in San Francisco* details the sudden changes in a young survivor's life following an all-too-common school shooting.

Not all of the songs are about violence and hatred though: *Expendable Too* warns against excessive overseas outsourcing of jobs, pointing out that a company's MD and CEO are also expendable; *Delta Force* likens working people to the near worthless Deltas in Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World*, suggesting that they would be more powerful in unison and *A Force of One* imagines the daily routine of a military drone operator who is himself merely a worker drone, blindly accepting instructions from a commander.

With thought-provoking expansive soundscapes of songs that are at the same time atmospheric, chilling and unnerving, *The Chuck Norris Project* is Southern Tenant Folk Union's most ambitious album so far. This is an album that Americans – especially politicians – would do well to pay attention to as it exposes the astonishing array of ills and injustices in the land that likes to claim to be the world's greatest democracy.

Review by: [Roy Spencer](#)

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