

ROCKY MOUNTAIN

Gothic



Megan Willhite

LOCAL SINGER-SONGWRITER TENSAS ON RACE, RELIGION AND THE SICKNESS

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IN MUSIC, THE TERM SOUTHERN GOTHIC has been applied to a who's-who of artists who are anything but Southern, ranging from Australia's Nick Cave and L.A.'s Gun Club to Colorado favorites Slim Cessna's Auto Club and 16 Horsepower.

Derwood Willhite, who writes and records under the name Tensas, has a geographical edge on the aforementioned artists. Before moving to the hills outside Colorado Springs, he grew up in close proximity to Louisiana's least-populated parish and one of America's poorest towns.

It was there that he learned about trapping and fishing, which he enjoyed, as well as racism and religious intolerance, which he didn't. He dreamed about living somewhere more open-minded, somewhere in the great outdoors, preferably the mountains.

So he followed in the path of the countless musicians who've left the rural South to find a more hospitable environment up north. But first he took a detour and joined the military, as had his father and his grandfather before him. After getting out of the service, he joined a reggae-rock band called Oakcrest, and played up and down the East Coast. Then gradually, Tensas made his way to the Colorado Springs area, where he's spent the past decade.

While making his living building websites and selling merchandise online, the songwriter decided it was time to resume his musical interests by renting a cabin to record his solo EP, *The Sickness*.

A collection of stark folk-blues originals delivered in a high lonesome tenor with sparse guitar accompaniment, its title track and accompanying video (see sidebar) drew inspiration from the emerging virus that was just beginning to make headlines at the time.

Another highlight, "Let the River Speak," includes post-Pentecostal lyrics like "Swim through the blood so thick with sin / To earn a little gold just to do it again / Cut 'em all down when they look my way / All you lucky sinners kneel down and pray."

Since then, Tensas has released additional singles, including a surprisingly aggressive cover of Tom Petty's "Mary Jane's Last Dance," recorded with members of his former band. He's also continued to put out music by fellow indie artists on his Tall Tale Records label, and is currently building a house on an acre of land up in Divide.

Over the course of an hour-long interview, the musician discussed his rural background, the events that brought him to Colorado, and his reasons for writing songs about caged demons and lucky sinners.