

LOADING IN (left to right): Bassist Joe Pacheco (Isleta Pueblo), lead guitarist Chuck Hawley, drummer Izell Garcia (Santo Domingo Pueblo), keyboard player Douglas Bellen, and songwriter J. J. Otero (Navajo/Hopi) on lead vocals and rhythm guitar.



## To the Rescue

Saving Damsels is the soundtrack of J. J. Otero's own rock'n'roll salvation.

**AS DRUMMER IZELL** Garcia assembles his setup at the start of the Saving Damsels' practice session, the familiar strains of "Long Cool Woman (in a Black Dress)" blare from keyboardist Doug Bellen's phone. The band begins riffing along, and, with the drum kit complete, a full-on jam takes over the rehearsal space strewn with instrument cases bearing stickers that tout KTNN—VOICE OF THE NAVAJO NATION.

This loose approach has served the Albuquerque band well: Its song "Protected (Beauty All Around)" emerged from a jam and went on to win a 2013 New Mexico Music Award for Best Native American Song. The album it appeared on, *Find My Way*, took home the 2013 Native American Music Award for Best Rock Recording, a win that transformed the band into one of the most respected in the state. The journey to discovering its singular sound has been a gradual one for the band, but found it they have—at the crossroads

of classic rock, soul, and Native American influences, united by the lyrics of songwriter, founder, and lead singer J. J. Otero.

Otero (Navajo/Hopi) grew up in Torreón, 50 miles southeast of Albuquerque, listening to AM Rez Radio, which broadcasted classic stuff like the Beatles and Creedence Clearwater Revival and, we can only assume, the Hollies. Otero's uncles nicknamed him Radio Station because they couldn't pull him away. Later, in 2007, at the age of 35 and after he and his longtime girlfriend had separated, Otero returned to the guitar, an instrument he'd started playing at 17. Strumming the chords of his youth and songwriting hardly seemed a choice—it was an inexorable need to express his pain. (His forearm is inked with the word *create*.) Broken open, he wrote with remarkable honesty and bravery about his heartache and addictions to drinking and gambling. He also wrote about trying to rise above that and become a better man. His first composi-

tion, "Kiley's Song," dedicated to his then-five-year-old daughter, became a track on *Empty Rooms* (2010), Saving Damsels' first album: "Don't you worry baby, because I'm the man I say I am."

Producer and sound engineer Bill Palmer, who worked with the band on *Find My Way*, says, "J. J.'s a rare bird. He has a really distinct, original sound to him. He's the poet laureate of the Native rock scene." Otero's lyrics aren't bubblegum, and his delivery isn't either. He sings in a declamatory style, with the heft and touch of reverb he gained from being a traditional powwow singer. Despite some latent Morrison/Doors undertones, he's devoid of rock-star bravado, and has been sober for nine years. It's Otero's authenticity that's won over band members and audiences alike.

The band's lineup has shuffled several times. Bass guitarist Joe Pacheco (Isleta) is an original member; lead guitarist Chuck Hawley and keyboardist Bellen joined in 2009; drummer Garcia (Santo Domingo) completed the set in 2013. The band collaborates on arrangements, using its various inspirations from hip-hop (Garcia) to Metallica (Pacheco) to create a song's vibe. The heart of each track, however, remains Otero's direct, vulnerable lyrics.

"Coming from the rez, alcohol, drugging, abusing—these are not things that are new to me," drummer Garcia says. "Some in the Native community look at what he's talking about in a negative way. But what J. J. has to say is just his own words and life experiences. You also hear him fighting to live a better life. And some people really catch that positive message."

Otero's Rez experience, however, doesn't strike a chord with all Native people. "I'm an urban Indian," Pacheco shrugs. "For me, it's just about the music."

Hawley grew up in Las Cruces and

Socorro; Bellen has lived in Albuquerque for more than 15 years. Both connected with Otero's confessional songwriting. "It's universal. It transcends," says Bellen. In adding their talents to Saving Damsels, Hawley and Bellen, both on the Albuquerque music scene for years, pushed the band to new heights. It was Hawley who suggested Otero sing in Navajo on "Protected." At first, the front man hesitated.

"Navajo is a sacred language," says Otero. "Also, singing Navajo lyrics in a contemporary situation, it's very difficult to keep the enunciation correct. The language doesn't lend itself to a modern context." He turned to his father, Chester, to ensure the lyrics were grammatically and philosophically faithful. Both father and son's voices appear on the album version. The chant, laid over searing guitar licks and a driving powwow drumbeat, speaks to the Navajo tradition of rising, facing the east, and praying for life's blessings—especially for others. "I sing that I'm a child of the holy people, that this is who I am," says Otero.

Although the musician worried that audiences would respond negatively to his use of Navajo in a rock song, that hasn't happened. "There's a lot of surprise when people hear it. But when people understand that I'm singing it as authentically as I can, and not just mimicking words, they catch on to that."

As the band's awards acknowledge, the song has gained a following beyond those who speak the language. "Not being Navajo, I don't understand the words completely," says Garcia, "but I understand his message. You feel what he has to say."

The band members tease Garcia, the newest and youngest member of the band, as though he were a little brother—they snarkily describe his day job as "being a twenty-something"—but the members also acknowledge that he's a focused, heavy-hitting drummer who has completed their sound puzzle.

Saving Damsels is a band's band, equally appreciated by everyday listeners and fellow musicians. Eric Owens, a longtime friend

of the group and the bass player for the Jir Project and the Eric Owens Project, says, "Joe Pacheco is really rock-solid. Chuck Hawley will use some wild effects on his guitar, then turn around and play a mandolin. Douglas is a multi-instrumentalist who has added background vocals. It gives them incredible versatility."

These days, Saving Damsels is back at Frogville Studios, in Santa Fe. Palmer's producing their next album, in progress as time and funds allow. Tracks include "Me & the 99," a socioeconomic lament inspired by the Occupy movement and set to a Jamaican dancehall beat and Pink Floyd-esque guitar work. The fusion may seem unlikely, but this self-described "Native soul rock band" revels in being unpredictable.

"I've watched them solidify their musical language," says Palmer. "I really see them getting more creative. They go out on more

limbs now. J. J. is really comfortable with the band and what it does. At first he was driving the band; now he's riding it." ❖

## Listen Up

For information about performances and to hear "Me & the 99," check out [savingdamsels.com](http://savingdamsels.com). Visit [mynm.us/svgdams](http://mynm.us/svgdams) for a playlist of songs on [nmmagazine.com](http://nmmagazine.com).

Other noteworthy Native blues/rock bands hailing from Albuquerque include:

**The Jir Project** Led by Dennis "Jir" Anderson (Cochiti), this Duke City band won a 2011 North American Indigenous Image Award in the category of Outstanding Blues Album for *Sun Child*.

**The Plateros** Front man Levi Platero (Navajo) brings a Kenny Wayne Shepherd vibe to this three-piece blues/rock family band from To'hajiilee that's based in Albuquerque. ([theplateros.com](http://theplateros.com))

# New Mexico

Store

MAGAZINE

## HOT OFF THE PRESS!

# 2015 Calendars



**2015 NEW MEXICO ARTIST CALENDAR**  
ROBERT HIGHSMITH'S  
VIEWS IN WATERCOLOR  
New Mexico



**2015 ENCHANTING NEW MEXICO CALENDAR**  
DESTINATIONS OF DISTINCTION  
PHOTOGRAPHS AND TRAVELERS BY  
LAURENCE PARENT  
New Mexico

2015 New Mexico Artist Calendar:  
Robert Highsmith's  
*Views in Watercolor*

2015 Enchanting New Mexico Calendar:  
Laurence Parent's  
*Destinations of Distinction*

## Order Now & Save 20%

Regularly: \$13.95 Now: \$11.16

Printed in New Mexico

**Order Now** • [shop.nmmagazine.com](http://shop.nmmagazine.com) • **800-711-9525**

Shipping & Handling Extra

Offer Expires 9/1/14