

## Mack Starks Biography

Though his former band was once referred to as the “Pink Floyd of alternative country,” Mack Starks now traffics in the more immediate if introspective pop-rock terrain familiar to fans of Death Cab for Cutie or Josh Rouse. His latest effort, *Blind Spot*, is by turns pleading and resigned, triumphant and despairing, laidback and dead serious. Featuring nine original compositions and one Neil Young cover (“Depression Blues”), the album introduces a cast of paranoid lovers, each fumbling in the dark for clues like sorry mixed-up detectives.

From whence did Starks derive this theme? The concept of the “Blind Spot,” which all humans in relationships must accept in themselves and their other? No place unusual. Drivers Ed, if you must know.

“When I was 15, my driving teacher told me about the blind spot,” recalls Starks, “which was not covered by any of the car’s mirrors. It seemed preposterous to me that there should be such a thing, considering all our scientific advancements. Until I started feeling comfortable behind the wheel, I was obsessed with the idea that there was a car in my blind spot. How would I know?”

Which brings us to the album’s title track. “In the song ‘Blind Spot,’ our hero is paranoid that the one he loves is lurking in that place of mystery,” Starks continues. “Because not all of her is seen, he doesn’t really know what her intentions are.”

The motif weaves its way through the new LP, which was produced by fellow Nashville artist Neilson Hubbard at his home studio. Hubbard co-wrote five tracks on the album with Starks, while Dire Straits founder David Knopfler co-wrote the penultimate cut, “America.” Also appearing is Starks’ former bandmate Richard McLaurin, with guest backing vocals by Kate York and Charlotte Avant.

“Even though it’s technically a ‘solo’ album,” Starks explains, “it was also collaborative. I took a bunch of partially written songs to Neilson and we finished them up together. We did it quickly without stewing over it. We took a similar approach to the recording process itself, which was all about getting the feeling right for the band to just perform the songs live.”

With *Blind Spot*, Starks has formed a top-shelf band, with Hubbard on guitar and keyboards, Brian Bequette on bass and Kirk Yoquelet on drums. “Everybody’s playing parts that they came up with naturally,” explains Starks. “As a singer-songwriter, I’m lucky to get to experience an almost band-like give and take.”

Having said that, Starks is also prepared to perform a series of dates alone in support of *Blind Spot*, armed only with voice, guitars big and small, keys and other noisemakers.

On playing solo, Starks enthuses, “I get to use dynamics more dramatically, because I don’t have to communicate my next moves to anybody. I can go from a whisper to a shout and all points in between without warning. Many singer-songwriters miss the chance to do more with less. It doesn’t have to be just strum strum strum, sing sing sing.”

Starks, who was raised in Nashville but not on country music, gravitated in his teens in the 1980s toward bands like Firehose, The Minutemen, R.E.M., Dumptruck, Love Tractor and Miracle Legion, as well as more psychedelic music like dub reggae. Later, it was the roots movement that caught his ear, from J.J. Cale to The Jayhawks. It wasn’t until Starks left Nashville for college in Colorado that he embraced the likes of Hank Williams, George Jones and later Waylon Jennings. “I guess I learned there are only two kinds of music,” says Starks. “Good and bad.”

This bank of influences contributed to the unique sound of Farmer Not So John, Starks’ breakout band in the late 1990s. The Nashville-based group toured extensively, released two albums internationally, and received glowing press in *USA Today*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Boston Globe*, *Guitar Magazine* and *Pulse!* Following the amicable dissolution of Farmer Not So John, Starks released *Elsewhere*, which *The Tennessean*’s chief music scribe Peter Cooper included in his Top Ten Discs of 2003, calling it a “captivating, layered, smart but viscerally satisfying song set.” Online magazine puremusic.com, meanwhile, hailed *Elsewhere* as “deep but effervescent pop from Nashville – a beautiful album.”