Written by Jeff Ignatius
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(Other coverage of River Roots Live 2011 can be found here .)

For its second record, The Apache Relay – which will perform on August 20 at River Roots Live – initially tracked 10 songs in early 2010. But the band sat on the record – preferring a 2011 release to a late-2010 one – and that layoff prompted singer/songwriter Michael Ford Jr. to write new songs.

“I felt like in my heart of hearts that I had songs that needed to be on the record that hadn’t been written yet,” he said in a phone interview last week. “I felt like I had better in me. ... I wanted to write better songs.”

So in the fall they tracked a handful of songs – some new, some different versions of previously recorded songs – and the fusion of those two sessions is *American Nomad*, which *Nashville Scene* called “exuberantly tuneful” and “irresistibly idealistic.”

The final version of *American Nomad* only ditched two songs – “Sets Me Free” and “Lost Kid” took their places – but the band’s decision to hold off on the record is one indication of the The Apache Relay’s maturity. Even though the band is young – Ford is 23 – and has been around just two years, it seems and sounds far more experienced.

On the business end, the band raised more than $6,000 for travel expenses on Kickstarter.com, a reflection of Ford’s music-business major in college. (When we talked, he was a week from graduation.) The band compared the costs of touring with what it was bringing in from shows,

and “we just saw it would’ve put us in the hole,” he said. So it asked for contributions from fans to make up the difference.

More important, of course, is the band’s artistic mettle, and it too is wise beyond their years. *American Nomad* is often anthemic in the roots style of Arcade Fire, and the cover of Springsteen’s “State Trooper” offers another key influence.

But there’s also a sense of wholeness to the album. Near the end is a trio of home-themed songs – the title track, “When I Come Home,” and “Home Is Not Places” – and the rousing bookends are contrasted with the delicate, mournful beauty of the middle song. (The final song in that cycle gives some hint of that irresistible idealism: “Home is not places / It is love.”)

The thematic sequencing, Ford said, was a bit of an accident. “We didn’t consciously discuss ... those songs being back-to-back,” he said. “It definitely seems like a purposeful move. ... [But] it was just how the songs flowed.”

Similarly happenstance was the band’s formation. Ford had been performing in Nashville as a singer/songwriter, and “I never really felt like I got in my comfort zone performing alone like that,” he said. “I was really self-conscious about it.” So he hired a bluegrass trio called The Apache Relay to play behind him for a March 2009 gig, and they joined forces after that.

The transition to a rock band was also abrupt. Ford described the group’s first album – *1988* – as a “stripped down, raw, acoustic, folky pop record.” It was the recording of “American Nomad” and “State Trooper” that pushed the band toward rock music.

“We’re honestly the most accidental rock band ever,” Ford said. “We literally started out as an acoustic quartet playing in coffee shops. ... We [Ford and his bandmates] both kind of just met at the perfect time. Everyone was really open to anything.”

For more information on The Apache Relay, visit TheApacheRelay.com .