

If you were remotely invested in the roots music scenes in Oklahoma and Texas in the early 2000s, you knew who The Great Divide was and likely had seen them play a time or two – whether it was their own show or as part of a festival lineup. The band was playing 200 shows a year and released five albums together; they eventually signed a record deal with Atlantic Records in Nashville and garnered some chart success. Garth Brooks even recorded one of their songs.

When frontman Mike McClure left for a solo career in 2003, marking the end of the band as its original lineup—McClure, bassist Kelley Green and brothers Scotte and JJ Lester on rhythm guitar and drums—the break seemed definite. McClure moved on, releasing nine albums on his own, and for anyone who knew of their turbulent end, it was assumed the band would never reunite, let alone restore faith in one another.

Fast forward a decade, and The Great Divide found themselves playing shows together again, a starting point in moving past the chaotic time surrounding the band’s breakup. Fast forward another decade, and they’ve added a new member, keyboardist Bryce Conway, and are releasing their first new studio album in 20 years.

Providence, set for release in fall 2022, looks at how far the band has come, as a group and individually, in the time since their last albums—and spends even more time looking ahead. “The overall arc of the record is dealing with time; it asks how much time we have left in our lives and how we want to spend the remaining years,” McClure says. “It’s about admitting the areas where work is needed and putting in the effort to do something about it.”

It is, of course, imperative when discussing the momentous occasion that is this new album’s release to understand the road it’s taken to get here and the mark The Great Divide made on a scene. In all fairness, saying they made a mark is putting it lightly—if you were to talk to virtually anyone making music in the Red Dirt scene in the early 2000s, The Great Divide was on their list of influences. They weren’t just one of the first bands to forge their way down this path; in many ways, they were some of its originators.

“Few chapters in Red Dirt history are as important as The Great Divide’s...” Josh Crutchmer’s 2020 book, *Red Dirt* asserts. “The band blazed a path out of Stillwater that artists still follow to this day...multiple generations have come and gone without realizing the significance of the four-piece ensemble.”

“There are musicians playing tonight...who are marketing their show as Red Dirt—a label that can instantly multiply attendance by factors of two, three or ten—without realizing that the rock they’re leaning on was placed there with the blood and sweat of The Great Divide,” he continues.

"If anyone ever cares to study the lineage of Red Dirt music, it will need to be separated into two distinct eras: pre and post-Great Divide," fellow Red Dirt pioneer and Oklahoman Jason Boland says. "Their impact on the alt-country scene cannot be overstated. They continually blazed up in the halls of convention, and hurled bottle after bottle at the mainstream monolith."

Within the 10 tracks on Providence, The Great Divide leans on pillars the band was built on 20 years ago: a reverence for masterful, relatable songwriting and a lack of interest in following the rules—though this time, the rules they're circumventing seem to center more around the idea that anything and anyone outlaw-adjacent can't also be happy, seek balance and want more from their lives and legacies.

"[Back in the 90s], we would talk about how we miss good country music—not the line dance stuff that was coming out of Nashville at the time," JJ Lester says. "We decided we would try to save country music."

"When we started the process of recording this album, we would run through a song and we would all just look at each other; it felt like 1997," he continues. "When I listen to these songs, they are the story of the last 15 years."

Providence begins with "Wrong Is Overrated," a direct conversation between McClure and the rest of the band. "I'm asking them if they still have it in them to give this thing another go," he says. "We've been technically re-united since 2012, but it hasn't necessarily felt that way until recently when we decided to make this record."

"'Wrong is Overrated' is a call to arms. It's also an admission of my part of the blame on what led to the break up in the first place. I made a mess of things – too much booze and too many drugs mixed with ego and frustration. The classic combination of downfall for so many musicians. Luckily though, I have a new lens of sobriety to look through, and I'm coming from a place of healing, forgiveness and rebirth."

"I Can Breathe Again" is a tried-and-true love song, hinging around the idea that love has this transformative power that can lift you up and out of whatever it is that you're going through.

"The Good Side" began with a simple chord progression, evolved into a melody, and in its final form, is an invitation to find a silver lining, some joy and a lighter spirit. "Set It All Down" follows, a continuation of sorts. "What if everybody came together and we all tried to do a little better and we set the blame

down, let go of all the negativity that is so prevalent. Love can transmute all of that into joy," McClure says.

"Slipping Away" is a relatable take on days, months, and years moving forward, seemingly in an instant; "Infinite Line" follows a similar theme, a pondering of how quickly 20 or 50 years can pass by.

"There is a coming full circle aspect for us as a band; as performers and people," McClure says about Providence. "Everyone is bringing their best to the table for the first time in years, and when that happens, The Great Divide is a force," he says. "This album brings with it a certain hope."