

Susan Tedeschi's appreciation of the blues

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY CANDACE HOGAN

usan Tedeschi walks into the Fillmore Auditorium in Denver in late November 2011 with her 1993 Fender Telecaster slung over her shoulder in a gig bag. She and husband Derek Trucks, whose album with the Tedeschi Trucks Band. Revelator, was nominated for a Grammy award for Best Blues Album, are off doing a short tour. While Trucks and the rest of the band (nine players, including Trucks' Allman Brothers cohort Oteil Burbridge, plus Trucks and Tedeschi), start a soundcheck and jam out on several songs, Tedeschi heads down to her dressing room underneath the Fillmore's floor to relax a bit and drink some water. Her soaring vocals are an integral part of the band's sound.

The previous month, the two had completed their longest tour together ever, a 21-day stretch that took them away from their two children, Charlie (named after Charlie Parker) and Sophia (named after the John Coltrane song), the longest they had ever been away from them. It is one reason why even though Tedeschi has shared the stage with her husband numerous times over the last 11 years, they don't go out on the road together often.

"Now that we're both gone, it's really hard for the kids," says Tedeschi as she gets comfortable in her dressing room. "They just want us home, and sometimes they come out with us for the summer, but when they are in school I just can't take them out on the road. They have to be at home. They're lucky though; Derek's mom is pretty much like a full-time caregiver to them when we're not around. She'll just move into our house and take them to school, take them to baseball, take them to horseback riding or violin lessons or whatever they have. She'll just pick up where we leave off. I was home yesterday, but now I'm back out on the road, and I'll be home Sunday. It's not too bad; we'll go away for a few days at a time, but we talked to them every day, and technology helps a lot. You can see them or talk to them."

Family has always been important to Tedeschi, who grew up in a large Italian Catholic family in Norwell, a suburb of Boston. Massachusetts isn't exactly a fertile ground for the type of gospel, blues and soul-infused music that has defined much of Tedeschi's musical journey. Her father, who played an acoustic guitar and harmonica, introduced her to early rock and blues artists like the Everly Brothers and the Staples Singers.

"For me, it was whatever artists were available in my little town in Massachusetts, which at the time was people like Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, people like that, and artists like Johnny Cash, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Elvis," says Tedeschi. "It was whatever they had in the stores is what I would listen to. I liked everything. I listened to a lot of Beatles, rock and roll like Zeppelin, and I didn't really know about artists like B.B. King even, or John Lee Hooker, until later. I knew about them a little bit, but not to the extent I did in college. I didn't even know about them that much in college. I was in college and knew more about gospel artists even, people like Shirley Caeser."

Tedeschi's musical education began on the clarinet in the fourth grade; she also took piano lessons. Her father had a Martin 00-18 guitar and taught her some basics, and later gave her the Martin for Christmas (she still has that Martin). With her new instrument, Tedeschi began experimenting with writing songs and playing around with some different tunings.

"I would write protest songs," she says, laughing. "I was really into John Lennon as a kid, so I kind of liked the idea of just writing about all the problems in the world, one of those things. I've always been trying to sneak those in there; they don't always get through, and it's funny because I have to fight the label on songs like that. I think they're important because it's what people relate to. People relate to natural disasters, they relate to politics, they relate to religion, and they relate to things that are definitely facing us right now."

Previous Spread and Opposite: Susan Tedeschi plays her well-loved Telecaster at the Fillmore Auditorium in Denver, Colorado, on November 18, 2011. She bought the guitar in 1994 when it was just a year old for \$600. It continues to be her main instrument. She also often plays a reissued D'Angelico archtop.



Though Tedeschi went to public high school at Norwell High, she still attended the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and got confirmed. Christmas Eve at her great-uncle's house turned into a large affair with a private mass for up to 150 of her relatives. Despite that strict Catholic background, Tedeschi found herself drawn to Baptist choirs as a budding teenager.

Tedeschi recalls, "I was trying to get them even to open up a little bit in the Catholic Church and they were just like, 'No!' Everyone was like [singing in serious, solemn tone] 'Ave.' It's never like [stomps her feet and claps her hand] 'Yes, get it out!' You're supposed to be celebrating God, not in prison. That's kind of how I felt. I'd get in trouble for asking questions. I'd ask, 'How did Mary get pregnant if she didn't have sex?' 'Tedeschi, sit in the corner,' and I'd be like [in mock tears] 'Why? I don't understand. I'm just asking questions. It just doesn't make sense to me.' They kept saying it was all faith-based, and I'd ask, 'What is faith?' I'd ask all the wrong questions and they'd get mad at me. That's when I started putting it in my music. I just started asking the questions there. I tried not to be too controversial, tried to be open, and a lot of the things I write about, I try not to get too specific because I want people to relate them to what they want to, because I think music can be a good healing tool in that way. People definitely find what they need to find in music, if that makes sense.

"It's kind of funny, because my husband, when we had kids, I was like [in mock horror], 'Don't they need to be baptized? They have to be baptized; I'm Catholic.' He was like, 'They'll be fine.' I was like, 'What do you mean they'll be fine. I'm going to go to hell.' [laughs]. So raised Catholic, and then I have a husband who just doesn't believe in religious systems. He believes in religion and spirituality, but more on a personal level, a spiritual level, than on a community-based level. Like, he doesn't think you have to go and donate your money to a church and be part of a church society and do that whole thing. For him, it's more the way you act toward other people and the way that you carry yourself and be a good human, which ultimately in the end, it was like, that makes sense."

By the time she was in high school, Tedeschi

found herself listening to a wide variety of music, everything from jazz and gospel to classic rock like Led Zeppelin, Bad Company and Aerosmith. "The first concert I really went to was in '83 at the Manning Bowl in Lynn, Massachusetts, and I saw Aerosmith backstage; I've been friends with Brad (Whitford) since '83, and then we did the Hendrix tour together and it was like old homecoming. It was really fun. He was like, 'I've known you since you were 13.' I'm like, 'I know. Shut up!' Honestly though, I think all that plays a role, because you know kind of what people like and what's explosive onstage and what gets across to an audience, and there's a lot of different styles that I didn't necessarily love, but at the same time I could appreciate them. I was never really a music snob in the way that I would be, 'Ugh, only jazz, or only gospel,' or only this. Some people are very strict about that. I mean, I hate to call my husband out, but he knows what he likes and what he doesn't like, and he'll be the first one to be like, 'No, that's shit,' or baloney, or whatever. But for me, I try to look at the positive side of everything. Like, our daughter likes Taylor Swift, and he's like, 'Ugh, she's horrible!' I say, 'Hey, she's a girl and she plays her own music and people like her and she writes stuff that kids relate to.' I try to think of what's positive about her."

It was at this time that Tedeschi got involved with some local bands, though she rolls her eyes and laughs that "my bio has been wrong for years." She started out singing in a band with some friends from the nearby town of Scituate, then hooked up with a band that included Andy and Matt Thompson and Mike Witte that played more country-style music. Tedeschi says she still runs into Witte around Nashville.

By the time she was 17, Tedeschi had decided to go to Berklee College of Music to study voice, and it was then that she immersed herself in the blues. She also joined a band called the Smokin' Section that had a weekly gig at a club called the Medfield Café, and Big Al Anderson from NRBQ lived across the street and would frequently sit in and jam with the young group, which included a hard-partying drummer named Ted Larkin.

"I met some people; they heard me at a country show where I was singing, and they said, 'You sound like Delaney and Bonnie,' and I was like, 'Who's that?" she says animatedly. "I didn't even know who Delaney and Bonnie were; I didn't even really know who Bonnie Raitt was. People would say, 'You sound so much like Bonnie Raitt,' and I was like 'Who's that?' and then I heard her and it was like, it's because I've been listening to Linda Ronstadt records trying not to sound exactly like her, taking it from more of a blues angle, and it's funny, because we recorded a lot of the same songs."

After finishing her schooling at Berklee, Tedeschi played with local Top 40 bands and did odd jobs on the side, such as waitressing and working in an electronics store. It was during this period that she started her first band under her own name with Adrienne Hayes and Annie Raines. The band went under Tedeschi's name because she was managing and booking it. Tedeschi also started playing the electric guitar in the band.

"Two years after college, there was this teal blue green Strat that my ex-boyfriend had, and he had started teaching me because he was a guitar player," she says. "I also had a blonde 335 dot neck reissue that I played on. I mostly learned how to play electric by sitting in on blues jams at Johnny D's in Somerville, Massachusetts. I had friends that were running the blues jam and needed singers. I saw how it was run, and I was like, 'I should get up and learn how to play electric here; this is a good opportunity for me.' I started with 12 bars, getting up with different scrap bands and experimenting, and it was a good opportunity to do both at the same time, sing and play guitar. Singing and playing guitar at the same time is a whole different ball game than just singing or just playing. It was very instrumental in me doing what I do now, that's for sure."

Tedeschi and her band won a Boston Battle of the Bands competition, then moved on to Memphis for a similar competition, where they placed second. That led to gigs at festivals, so she and her band decided to make a record, Better Day, "Just to have something to sell off the stage," she says, and they ended up selling

close to 60,000 copies that way. That led to interest from Tone-Cool Records, which put out Tedeschi's national debut release, 'Just Won't Burn, which went on to sell 600,000 copies and garnered her a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist in 2000. "I was up against Kid Rock, Macy Gray, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears or something; it was just ridiculous. I was like, 'Why am I here? All these people have sold millions of records."

Though she was playing electric guitar in her band's early days, Tedeschi shied from playing lead guitar, letting Hayes take those duties. "I actually didn't even want to play lead; I just wanted to play rhythm and sing," she laughs. "I really wanted to help support her [Hayes] so that when she started taking a lead, it wasn't an empty pocket. I learned a lot from her, and also from Sue Foley. From them, I learned that women really could rock and play guitar and step outside the box of folk and country and just playing chords, so for me, that was huge. I think Adrienne and Sue both inspired me to break out a little bit. After about a year or so of playing guitar and playing rhythm, then I started to take a solo here and there. People encouraged it, actually. They were like, 'C'mon, solo!' So even at blues jams, they were like, 'Take a solo,' and I was like, 'I don't want to.' [in a mockscared voice]. I'd be scared, I didn't know what was going to come out [laughs]."

Deciding to work up her solo skills, Tedeschi honed her lead chops by playing along to records by Freddie King, Magic Sam and Otis Rush, playing out on scales before moving on to using her trained vocal chops to inspire her lead playing.

"I learned the pentatonic scale, which you use a lot in blues, and the difference between major and minor, which is really just the major third or minor third, so if you switch those two things up, you can pretty much get by in whatever song you are doing. You can kind of work around stuff in relative minors. After I learned that, I wanted to learn how I could play what I sing. Whatever melody I sing in my head, I wanted to be able to play, so I practiced doing that. I realized that it's really fun to experiment and make melodies of things you hear in your head, and I think

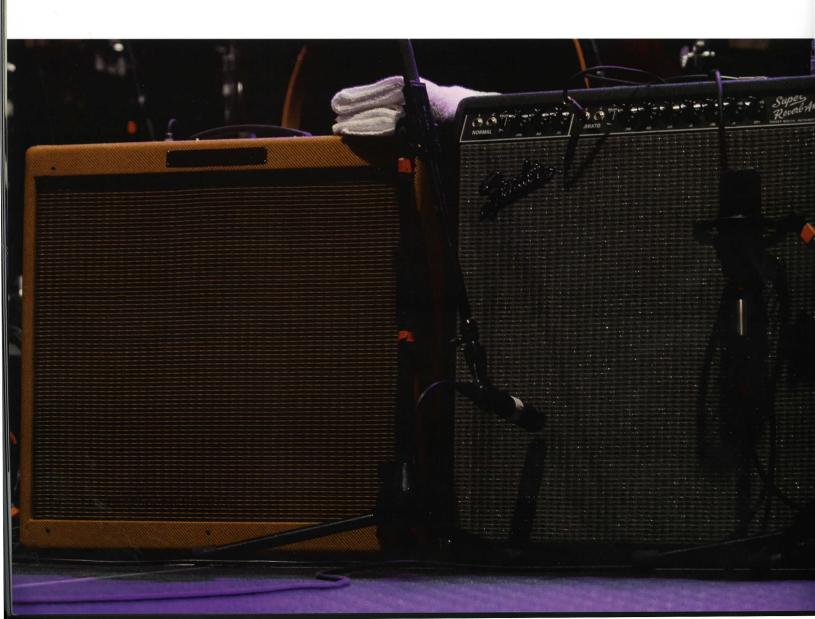




Tedeschi has a few amplifiers, including a Victoria and a Fender Deluxe Reverb, but her main amp is a trusty Super Deluxe. that's why people like B.B. King, when he plays, it's an extension of his voice. I always liked the idea of people like Muddy Waters, Otis Rush and Freddie King, people who would play the heck out of beautiful rhythm and then slay it on lead. Someone else like that is Jimi Hendrix. He's such a great rhythm player, and then he'll rip out a lead. Everybody always tries to solo and riff all the time, and I think the great thing about someone like Jimi Hendrix is he was writing great songs, and he wouldn't solo for hours like some of these kids that just get going and don't shut up [laughs]. Everything he said pretty much had a beginning, a middle and an end. Even someone like Derek, everything he does, he builds it and it's melodic and it says something and it moves you, and that's what soloing should be. It shouldn't be about who plays the fastest riffs and who can do things like trickery and whatnot. I was never really impressed by that; I was impressed by the melody and being moved by someone saying something."

Since the guitars she learned on belonged to her ex-boyfriend, who took them back after they broke up, Tedeschi acquired her first electric guitar, her iconic teal Fender Telecaster, in 1994, buying it used from Cambridge Music in Somerville at Porter Square for \$600. Ironically, Tedeschi doesn't generally like Telecasters.

"I had a dream about the Tele," she recalls, "so I went back and bought it, and I've had it ever since. That Tele is different than other Teles, because I don't really like Teles in general. I think they are too bright and thin, but that one, the way that the pickups are wound, they sound fatter. I don't really like thin; I like fat tone. I have this guitar [points to the gig bag in her dressing room], but I also have a D'Angelico that I love, and it's more like a Les Paul, so it has humbucker pickups and a fatter tone, which is nice. In my band, I play the D'Angelico and supplement with this one a little bit, but with this band, Derek uses humbuckers with his SG all the time, so to get a different tone, he



likes it when I use the Tele. Personally, though, I think my tone is better with the D'Angelico and I'd rather play with that, but I can't in this band because they sound too similar, so they would blend, whereas it's nice to have two really different-sounding guitarists, just for the overall sound."

Anyone who has seen Tedeschi play the Telecaster knows that she has signatures on the body. She got her first one in 1997 or 1998, from Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, whom she was playing with.

She laughs as she recalls, "Clinton was in office, and he decided to have a birthday party for his secretary at the place we were doing our gig, so everything got thrown up in the air. It was on Martha's Vineyard, and Carly Simon and James Taylor owned the place where we were supposed to be playing, so she kicked out our band and put in her band, and 'Gat' was playing afterward. I was still allowed to go, because it was supposed to be my gig, but I didn't get to play, so I hung out with Gat the whole day, and he took me in. He was like, 'You're like my new granddaughter.' We hung out the whole day, and meanwhile he's smoking weed out of a pipe with Secret Service around. I was like, 'This is awesome!' He was really sweet and gracious, and I asked him to sign my guitar and he said, 'Sure!' So he signed Clarence [Gatemouth] Brown and dated it 1998, and that was my very first signature.

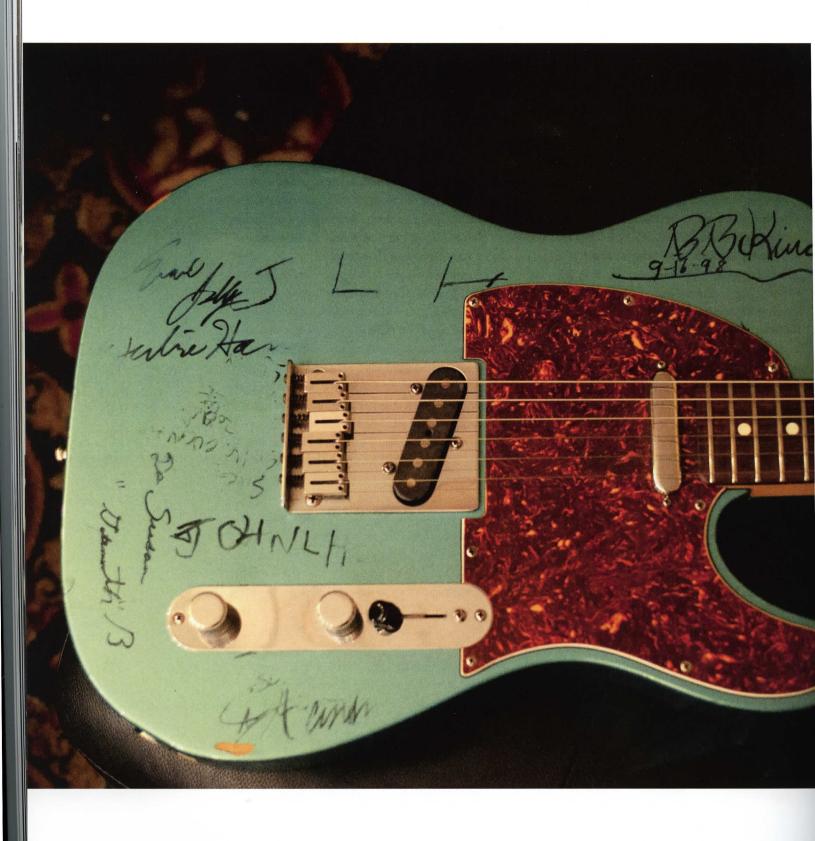
"Maybe it was '97 actually, because then I did the tour with B.B. and Buddy in 1998, and they were the second ones to sign it. Anybody that I played with at that point, I started getting them to sign it. I played with Double Trouble and Jimmy Vaughan came and played with me for a little while, so I had Jimmy sign it. Mostly guitar players I had sign it. A lot of people have come off unfortunately. Like I had Dr. John sign it, but that wore off because it was in a place I play a lot. That's one of the problems; they wear off. Sometimes I try to get out my Sharpie and write over it, because some of them are gone now. Like Little Milton, he signed it, and he's gone, and John Lee Hooker, he's gone, you know, and I sometimes try to touch up the little bit that's left because a lot of it has worn off."

The D'Angelico that Tedeschi also plays is a solidbody that was originally built for Dere, and was the first solidbody the company made when they started up again. "I fell in love with it," she gushes. "The tone was great and the neck was nice and fat, and I was just like, 'Can I have it?' So Derek ended up purchasing it for me. They were going to give it to him for free, but since it was for me, he had to buy it, which was fine, and Derek was sweet and got it for me and I've been playing that thing ever since. I know I had it on *Hope and Desire*. I made that record in 2005, so I've had it since then, maybe '04 or '05.

Tedeschi also acquired a Deluxe Reverb from Cambridge Music that she still loves and uses. "My husband loves it, too," she says with a laugh. "We have a bunch of amps, and that's like the one amp that we fight over. When we're making music in the studio, I'll be like, 'Give it back, it's the only amp I have."

Trucks also bought Tedeschi an original 1960 335 blonde dot neck that is reminiscent of the 1980s reissue she learned on. Tedeschi uses that guitar exclusively in the studio. "I should play it more, but I'm afraid to," she says wistfully. "I used to play a Silvertone a lot too. I had an '87 Silvertone on Just Won't Burn, but there were songs on that record that we didn't release that I recorded using that guitar. I also have other Teles and other guitars. I do eventually want to get a Strat someday. I would love to get a 1970 Strat, which is my birth year. A lot of people like to get their birth year Strat; the only problem is that is the Jimi Hendrix model, and it's like a billion dollars, so I'm never going to get one of those, so that's fine."

In addition to the Deluxe Reverb, Tedeschi recently picked up a Fender Super Reverb that was hand-wired by George Alessandro; she also has a Victoria amp that Buddy Guy gave her that looks like a 4x10 Bassman Tweed amp. In her own band, Tedeschi will often use two amps to beef up her tone, but with Tedeschi Trucks Band, she is just using the Super Reverb. Her effects are minimal: a Vox Wah and a Maloon Overdrive that she got from Doyle Bramhall Jr. "I use that just so I can get extra power," she explains. "It does break up a little more. It's like a louder version of what you are playing, and it just



breaks up naturally because you're pushing extra sound through it."

Though Tedeschi and Trucks have played live numerous times, Revelator was the first time the two sat down to write together. The recording of the album was also assisted by the new studio that Trucks had built in their house in Jacksonville, Florida. Keyboard player Kofi Burbridge did most of the arrangements for the horns.

"The two of us didn't sit down together to write; instead, our idea was to bring a songwriter to us and then the three of us would write," Tedeschi explains. "That way, we knew that as a couple we wouldn't be at each other; that naturally happens when you are with your significant other" [laughs].

Among the songwriters the two collaborated with was Gary Louris of the Jayhawks, whom Tedeschi had written with on the Back to the River album. "Derek instantly hit it off with him," says Tedeschi. "They get along great, and then we sat down and the first song that we wrote was 'Don't Let Me Slide.' It started with Gary saying he'd woken up that morning with this idea, 'You make me want to wake up in the morning.' Like, that was the opening line. He said, 'I think that would be a cool line.' So we started with that and started messing around with chords and before you know it, we'd written a song that afternoon, and as he was leaving, the band was coming in and we recorded it, so it was kind of cool that we'd have that kind of experience with a lot of writers. We would write it and then have the band come in right behind while the song is brand new and just record it, so it was kind of an interesting approach. I personally would normally have waited until I knew the song a little better before I recorded it, just because I think I could do it better, but Derek likes the freshness and newness and everyone in this band is so talented, other than me [laughs], no, at picking stuff up so fast, so for them, it was like you don't even think about it, it's just what your first instinct is."

All of the October shows were multitrack recorded for a live album, which would be Tedeschi's first, though she did release the Live from Austin DVD in 2004. Though she knows that her main job in her

current band is to use her soaring vocals to carry a tune, she does step up and take the occasional solo. At the Filllmore show that evening, she tore into a heavy blues solo on "That Did It," moving to the forefront of the stage with a fierce look on her face while Trucks and the Burbridge brothers smiled and enjoyed it. Tedeschi also finds that she learns a lot from listening to Trucks' playing.

"I definitely don't think I can do what he does, and I don't know if I ever will, but I definitely find myself listening to how he builds his solo, and his approach on a song, whether it's a rhythm part or a lead part," she says self-consciously. "I am also learning from him what it is he wants from me. Sometimes he doesn't want me to play guitar and he wants that space, because there is definitely a limited amount of space musically when you have 11 people on stage.

"I think because we all have different roles in this band, I think that's one of the things we are working on, and I think as a couple it's hard. I try to voice my opinion, but I don't want to be a pain and don't want to be 'me, me, me,' because there are so many great soloists in this band. Honestly, I feel lucky that I get any solos at all, and I get more solos than some of the people who can kick my ass at solos on the stage, so it is a funny situation. If it's my own band, it's a different situation; I can experiment more and I can play solos on anything, but I also know that certain songs are not my strength to solo on. So I don't even want to solo on certain things, if that makes sense, and then on others, it's like I feel this, I want to play on this. Like [in a small voice, 'Honey, I really want to play on this; let me try,' and he'll be like [sighs] 'OK' [laughs]. Then he'll be like, 'Oh that was good,' or he'll tell me, 'No.' He's really honest with me, which is good. I'd rather he be honest with me and help me learn as a player. I definitely learn from everybody in the band, because they are all such great listeners and dynamic musicians. I know my strength is singing, but sometimes my strength can be guitar as well.

"For me, I feel really blessed to have so many talented people around. I still have a long way to go as a guitar player, but I feel blessed that I get to do it."

Among the signatures on Tedeschi's Tele body are Little Milton, Herbie Hancock and John Lee Hooker. Dr. John's signature has slowly been wiped away from years of playing.