How Dave Matthews Band lost its way, found one another — and made the best music of its career.

Dave Matthews sings the lines in a deep, grainy voice that reverberates like a steam engine in the chilly night air: "Bartender, please/Fill my glass for me/With the wine you gave Jesus that set him free. After three days in the ground."

Behind him, the rest of the band fights the despair in "Bartender," the epic highlight of the Dave Matthews Band's new album, Busted Stuff, with muscular resolve. Drummer Carter Beauford and bass guitarist Stefan Lessard hit a marching-army groove; Boyd Tinsley builds a wall of drone on his electric violin; LeRoi Moore punches the beat with the elephantine honk of his baritone saxophone.

The extended mounting tension — Matthews repeats that chorus like a prayer — finally explodes in the song's bridge. The band veers into a jubilant stomp, Matthews blows his voice out in high hallelujah and a row of white spotlights blazes over the 18,000 fans at his feet — all standing and roaring — in Shoreline Amphitheatre, south of San Francisco.

It is an extraordinary moment, the midpoint summit of a two-and-a-half-hour show, and Matthews knows it. On the video screen overhead, the camera zooms in on his face as he sings and smiles, one eyebrow arched in what looks like surprise, as if Matthews can't help asking himself: How can so many people get so much joy from a song written from deep inside a bottle?

The next afternoon, in the long, grand living room of his suite at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in San Francisco, Matthews talks at length and frankly about "Bartender" — in his estimation, one of the best songs he's ever written. "It's not the happiest idea in the world, thinking about dying and what your life means," he says, sipping coffee, his ruggedly boyish features in dark profile against the gray mist outside his panoramic windows. "And the Jesus thing is an impossible comparison: Can God come out of the sky, take the form of this bartender in front of me and save my life?"

But Matthews notes, "I was drinking a lot." But at the time he wrote those words, Matthews notes, "I was drinking a lot."

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and raised on the run in the New York suburbs, in Cambridge, England, and in Charlottesville, Virginia, Matthews poured a lot of drinks for other people in his early twenties. From 1987 until the formation of the Dave
Matthews Band in 1991, Matthews worked as a bartender at a pub called Miller's in Charlottesville where, he says, "I'd meet people who would shatter your faith in the world. There was one fella whose wife was deathly ill. He spent everything he had, sold his business in New Jersey, because they couldn’t get medical insurance. I watched this man crumble. Years later, I saw him working the early shift at Dunkin' Donuts."

Matthews, now thirty-five, never felt that far. "Materially, I am wealthy beyond my wildest dreams," he states with awe. Since the release of its independent debut, Remember Two Things, in 1993, the Two Things, in 1993, the Dave Matthews Band has issued four RCA studio albums — Under the Table and Dreaming (1994), Crash (1996), Before These Crowded Streets (1998) and Everyday (2001) plus four two-CD live sets that have sold a combined 20.7 million copies in North America. The Dave Matthews Band is also one of rock's biggest touring attractions. In 2000 alone, the group grossed more than $80 million on the road; last year, twenty-one of the fifty sold-out shows on the band's summer tour were in stadiums.

Naturally, there was a lot of celebrating. "To me, the Dave Matthews Band was all about the life of drinking," says Lessard, 28. The youngest member of member of the band by almost two decades (Beauford, the oldest, is forty-three), Lessard joined the group right out of high school. "This is how gullible I was: That line 'Eat, drink and be merry,' in 'Tripping Billies' — I didn’t know that was from the Bible. I thought Dave came up with that.

"But drinking was always a positive thing," Lessard insists. "It never got depressing. And if Dave was going too far, I never recognized it. Coming back drunk from the bar — that’s what we were all striving for."

"I was what they call a joyful drunk," Matthews says. "I'm much more charming with a buzz on than without it. But drinking started to get in the way of things that mattered. It encouraged an indifference in me." He makes a dismissive grunting sound. "You know, those weird noises you make when you don’t give a damn."

That’s how he first recorded "Bartender" two years ago, during the Dave Matthews Band's agonizing, now (TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 208)