

American

SONGWRITER

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the craft of music

FEATURING
BRYAN FERRY

MIRANDA
LAMBERT

SCOTT
STAPP

KELSEA
BALLERINI

KACEY MUSGRAVES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

"It can be really
intimidating to put
your most intimate
thoughts out there"





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**THE MUSIC
NEVER STOPS**

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AMERICAN SONGWRITER

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EDITOR'S NOTE

GUEST EDITOR: JACKSON DEAN

Music is the closest thing to time travel that we have. Music can make time go faster or pass slower as you savor the moments. A great song can take you back in time—or get you thinking about your future and alter your life's course. It is powerful enough that within a few bars, it can move a man to tears or heal something we didn't even know was broken. Music is the score of our lives, and it (and creating it) is my lifeblood.

Songwriting is when my heart finds all the real words that my head can't comprehend. It's making sense of thoughts and feelings and transforming them into something tangible that can be shared with the world. It's addressing the notions swirling in my head—from love to wrath and everything in between—putting them into lyrics and relying on instruments to say everything else that cannot be confined by the written word. It's how I navigate the complexities of this mad, mad world and keeps me grounded and tethered to the rest of humanity. It's one of the greatest connectors.

My band and I have traveled the world, playing hundreds of shows over the last few years, and music truly is a universal language. We've witnessed music's ability to connect people, oftentimes without ever having been on the same continent before—it's truly something to behold—and it drives every decision we make.

We just released a song (which I never thought would see the light of day) called "Heavens To Betsy" as a studio single because I played it once (just to kill time), and it brought a grown man to tears. Since that day, countless people have come to me (of-

ten in tears), sharing how this song has helped them make some sense of something in their lives they thought never could. To get to help anyone heal or feel like that is why I do this. It's why

I crack my chest open every night and bare it all on stage, pushing my team behind me to produce to the best of their abilities. I aim to introduce beautiful things into the world, but the impact we make on others is the true legacy we leave.

Like the songs and albums that have inspired me, I hope my new album, *On The Back Of My Dreams*, sparks something in others and that they enjoy the journey it leads. Many years of love and life were put into those 13 songs, and I'm grateful I've been able to have enough experiences alongside people I love to create a soundtrack to my last few years... I humbly hope I get to continue to do so for many years to come.

I don't know what the future may hold, but I do know I will never stop writing songs and traveling. My only other option is exile.

Until I see you again,

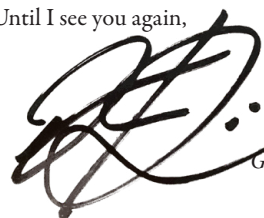

Jackson,
Guest Editor



Photo by Sean Hagwell

Bourgeois
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A man with a beard and glasses is sitting in a recording studio, playing an acoustic guitar. He is wearing a dark, patterned shirt. The studio is filled with various pieces of equipment, including a large mixing console, a rack of audio gear, and a Yamaha speaker. The background shows a window with blinds.

MAC MCANALLY

FINDING MUSIC IN EVERYTHING

The acclaimed musician reflects on his journey and his bond with Jimmy Buffett.

BY CILLEA HOUGHTON

For singer, songwriter, and longtime member of Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer Band, Mac McAnally, life is a symphony. "I hear music in everything," he shares with American Songwriter. "I hear melody in nature. It's always sounded like music to me."

Born in the same doctor's office as Tammy Wynette near Red Bay, Alabama, McAnally recalls the prophecy his grandmother bestowed upon him moments after his birth. "My grandmothers came by and my father's mom took one look at me and said, 'He's got the call to preach,'" McAnally says, a sentiment affirmed by his other grandmother.

Growing up in Mississippi, the singer's home was filled with neighbors who would bring their instruments and sing gospel hymns and bluegrass songs. "We entertained ourselves with music," he says. He'd often accompany his mother to church services three days a week, sitting next to her on the piano bench while she played. "It would feel funny to me to not hear music in my head," he notes. "Even though I've heard melodies in my head all my life, I didn't think of that as writing music."

One night after curfew, the young McAnally sauntered into the local church where he wrote his first song, "People Call Me Jesus." "I didn't have the nerve to call that songwriting because there was no effort involved in it. I just played it like I learned it out of a book," he explains. While that particular song "fell out" quickly, McAnally's songwriting process is anything but

happenstance. "I don't relent on songs," he says. "I always want them to be born of inspiration. There has to be some light that turns on for me. I don't ever really start from scratch and say, 'I'm making something out of nothing today.' I always like life to give me the initial nudge. I like the magical element of it too much to give up that. I don't mind applying the work ethic to the magic."

The 10-time CMA Musician of the Year recipient has penned such hits as Kenny Chesney's "Down the Road," Alabama's "Old Flame," and Sawyer Brown's "Thank God For You." His most recognizable achievement is his three-decade tenure as part of the Coral Reefer Band where he played guitar and sang background vocals until Buffett's death in 2023.

The two met after Buffett got a copy of McAnally's self-titled 1977 album he recorded when he was 19. "He wrote me a note and said, 'We're both storytellers. We're both from Mississippi. We're going to be friends,'" McAnally narrates Buffett's words. "Jimmy believed in me before I really believed in myself." That encouraging note blossomed into an enduring working relationship and friendship wherein McAnally co-wrote several songs with Buffett, including "Oysters and Pearls," the closing track to Buffett's 1999 album, *Beach House on the Moon*, which McAnally released a cover of in April 2024.

The song has taken on new meaning in the wake of Buffett's passing from cancer with such lyrics as, *It's something more than DNA that tells*

us who we are / It's method and it's magic, we are of the stars. "He had a more celebratory aspect to [songwriting] and he didn't mind starting blank or with just a line. I saw a whole other world of how it was possible from how he went about it and learned so much from him," McAnally says of his friend. "He was fearless about everything all his life. Jimmy had that love for life. To get to stand to the right of that one-man nebula of talent and positive energy for almost four decades was one of the big blessings of my life."

McAnally will continue to honor the legacy of his late collaborator by making his headlining debut at the historic Ryman Auditorium on January 31, 2025. It was a dream of Buffett's to headline the Ryman and McAnally's setlist will highlight songs from his solo career alongside his work with Buffett.

"I can't even convey how much it means. It probably means way more at this point in my 60s," he says. "The fact that it was more of a dream of his than it was of mine, it's going to be his, too. I'm going to honor us both at the same time. I'm going to give them everything I got."

In addition to the Ryman show, the revered musician is embarking on his headlining All the Way Around Tour that continues into early 2025, and is a guitarist on George Strait's latest album, *Cowboys and Dreamers*, among other projects. The longevity of McAnally's career comes down to the mentality he's harbored since the beginning. "I want to be connected to good work," he says, offering advice to those hoping to break into the music industry. "Don't short-sell dreams. Half of the things that I get to do, I had no idea they existed, and I am so blessed that I didn't discount or discard them before the opportunities revealed themselves. Don't dream narrow—dream wide." ★

**"EVEN THOUGH
I'VE HEARD
MELODIES IN MY
HEAD ALL MY LIFE,
I DIDN'T THINK OF
THAT AS WRITING
MUSIC."**



RANDY ROGERS BAND

Photo by Annie Loughhead

THE FIRE OF MUSIC

BY CILLEA HOUGHTON

Randy Rogers has operated with a specific mindset since his days performing in church to his thriving career as frontman of the Randy Rogers Band. “I like swinging for the fences,” he tells American Songwriter from his tour bus while driving through Yellowstone National Park. “I like taking chances.” This tenacious spirit has carried him through more than 20 years in the music business. The Randy Rogers Band has been a staple in the Texas music scene since 2000, with 11 studio albums (six of which hit the Top 10 on the *Billboard* Top Country Albums chart) to their name.

For Rogers, the church was his first stage. He spent every Sunday performing session music in church before picking up guitar at the age of 10. As part of youth group, he would play guitar and lead his peers in prayer songs, “trying to learn how to make songs come to life. It was always there,” he says of music. “It empowered me. Music always calmed me down, so I would pick a guitar up and play and it would soothe me. It gave me so much confidence. It gave me an identity when I was younger. It allowed me to grow and become the man that I am.”

He wrote his first song at the age of 13, inspired to write in the vein of his ‘90s country heroes George Strait and Willie Nelson. He started to get serious about music as a profession when he wrote a song about his first heart-

break, “Lost and Found.” Describing the song as one that “fell out of the sky” and was “really easy to write,” Rogers played the track for his mentor Kent Finlay, the late founder of iconic music venue Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos.

“After I wrote that song, I thought, ‘I can do this. I can figure this out,’” Rogers affirms of songwriting. “Then I fell in love with the business and [it was] such a challenge and so impossible that I just had to do it. I was so driven to try to figure out how to write a song.” With Finlay’s encouragement, Rogers started writing every week with a particular goal in mind. “I always wanted the songs to resonate,” he says. “My greatest accomplishment in life is to have someone tell me they danced to my song at their wedding. Songs have always been the fabric of my life. I always wanted to create that for people to share. That challenge was what drove me to start the band.”

Formed in 2000 in San Marcos, the Randy Rogers Band scored their first record deal in 2002 and released their breakthrough album, *Rollercoaster*, in 2004. Lead single “Tonight’s Not the Night” marked their first to chart on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, peaking inside the Top 50. Now, the band is celebrating the 20th anniversary of the album with a remastered and resequenced edition that was released in August 2024. The band worked with the album’s pro-

ducer Radney Foster to polish the songs, as well as add in special moments such as outtakes of the band talking in the studio.

“It was pure, absolute magic,” Rogers raves about recording the album in four days. He also notes how listening back to the original version, he hears the “sense of fear” he had in his voice as a 22-year-old who was just starting out in the business. “It was a defining moment for me,” he remarks of *Rollercoaster*. “It’s still something that I can stand on and I’m proud of.”

The resurgence of the album has also re-inspired him as a songwriter, having written more lately than he has in the past two years. The band is currently working on a new EP with producer Jedd Hughes and Rogers hints that it will be “different” than what they’ve released over the past 10 years. “It’s reminded me that it’s still my job to write songs, I can still do this,” he professes. “I think that’s the beauty of music and what we have as a band and as a family is that we’re able to still be creative and have that outlet. We still have the desire to create. At 25 years into touring and playing music professionally, I’m still on fire, I still love it, and it’s still impossible. It’s still such a challenge just to stay at the level that we’re in and I’m very thankful.”

Another career milestone Rogers recently achieved is the opening of the Lost & Found rooftop bar in the band’s adopted hometown of New Braunfels, Texas. The space offers a private whiskey tasting room, an astroturf courtyard, jukebox, and more. But at the core of Rogers’ legacy is his endless passion for music. “I made up my mind a long time ago, ‘This chose me, I didn’t choose it.’ I was going to be the best that I could possibly be at it,” he proclaims. “And I’m still working on that.” ★

**“AT 25 YEARS
INTO TOURING AND
PLAYING MUSIC
PROFESSIONALLY,
I’M STILL ON FIRE, I
STILL LOVE IT.”**



ELLA TRAVOLTA

LOVE AND LOSS

Ella Travolta channels her experiences into heartfelt songs, paying tribute to love, family, and her mother's memory.

BY TINA BENITEZ-EVES

In *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Holly Golightly, played by Audrey Hepburn, feels blue and gently sings “Moon River” while strumming a guitar on her fire escape. The forlorn ballad of two drifters in love from the 1961 film, composed by Henry Mancini and written by Johnny Mercer, was also one of the first songs Ella Bleu Travolta learned to play when she first started strumming the ukulele between 2017 and 2018.

Seeking more assistance from YouTube tutorials, Travolta also learned how to play Edith Piaf’s 1947 classic “La Vie en Rose” on the ukulele. Another connection to the instrument was Travolta’s mother, actress Kelly Preston, who died after a long battle with breast cancer in 2020 at age 57 and was part Hawaiian. “I grew up going to Hawaii and hearing those sounds a lot,” shares Travolta.

Travolta continued using the ukulele to write her own songs, six vignettes covering varying degrees of love, for her debut EP, *Colors of Love*. She first shared the songs with her father, John Travolta, before fine-tuning them over the next four years.

“I played a few of them for my dad, and he told me, ‘You should really finish those,’” remembers Travolta. “‘Those are amazing.’ He responded to them really well, and I felt more confident, so I completed a few of them and recorded them as demos.”

Featuring her 2022 debut single “Dizzy,” which appeared in the film *Just Seconds Apart*, and “No Thank You,” *Colors of Love* features reflections of Travolta’s life and experiences. Each song on *Colors of Love* presents a different viewpoint on love, whether it’s unrequited, something infatuating, fleeting, or the grief and healing after losing a loved one.

“It’s that person you can always sing about, that person you love everything about. You can talk about them for hours,” shares Travolta of one spectrum of the songs like “Dizzy” and “No Thank You.” On the other end, “Don’t Say Forever” covers a betrayal of love, while “Let in Your Love” faces someone new and “wondering if that person feels the same way.”

“As I was writing the songs, each one became more relevant throughout this journey, too,” she adds.

“Little Bird,” the final song written by Travolta, was a tribute to her mother. Co-written with Callum Maudsley, Travolta’s tender vocals warmly embrace a discussion

between a baby bird and its mother. *Little bird don’t you cry / Would you stay awhile before I fly / Close your eyes / Won’t you smile / Sing a lullaby it’ll be alright.*

“[‘Little Bird’] is about listening to yourself and staying true to that pure relationship that you had with that person that you lost,” says Travolta, adding that the song covers any relationship and reconnecting to the memory and spirit of someone lost. “It’s about making sure that you have almost direct communication and a pure line to that person and know how you’re feeling and what you want to communicate to them.”

The song also explores some of the burdens of growing up in the public eye while grieving. *What is real / When everybody tells me / How to feel / What is mine / How do I speak / When every word is taken.*

“Growing up, you’re going to go through loss and growing up in the public [eye], which I have since very young,” Travolta shares. The accompanying music video for “Little Bird” features home videos of Ella with her mother and father and other personal snapshots from her childhood.

“There’s definitely going to be more attention on it from a lot of people,” she adds. “Anyone going through a loss, you’re going to have other people’s input that can easily be added into it, or other people’s feelings, and it can cloud how you feel when you don’t really know how you feel, or not be as pure to your own feelings.”

The songs also follow a color spectrum, a rainbow of stories, each linking to an individual color that’s more of a “feeling,” says Travolta. “Dizzy” is blue; “No Thank You” is orange; “Don’t Say Forever” is red; “Lost in Your World” is purple; “Little Bird” is a “light pink; and “Sing About You” flows in yellow. Travolta also links the color green to her remix of “Little Bird.”

“It’s all been an incredible learning experience, to trust your instinct and fight for it,” shares Travolta of her EP and working with collaborators. “When working with other artists, it’s important to make it a free space where everyone can think freely and also to step back and say, ‘How do I see it, and how do I communicate that?’”

After her first go, writing is a slightly different experience for Travolta. “The main purpose is to get some of those thoughts and feelings out there,” says Travolta. “Then, maybe other people will relate to it, feel a little better, or feel more heard.” ★



ALISON MOYET

Photo by Naomi Davison

A NEW RESURRECTION

Alison Moyet Revisits and Refreshes Her Catalog on *Key*

BY TINA BENITEZ-EVES

“T here are certain sounds from the mid-’80s that were very much of their time and were a part of the mood that doesn’t sit well for me, but when you’re living with that all the time, they become wearisome and feeling a bit bombastic,” says Alison Moyet, reflecting on her 1984 solo debut *Alf*, and everything that came after, following the demise of her synth-pop duo Yazoo (Yaz) with Depeche Mode’s Vince Clarke a year earlier.

It took some time for Moyet to find her way as a solo artist, even after shooting to No. 1 with *Alf* and her hit song “All Cried Out,” which went to No. 8 in the UK, along with charting singles “Love Resurrection,” “For You Only” and “Invisible.”

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of her solo career and debut album, Moyet revisited 16 songs spanning her extensive catalog on her latest album, *Key*. Produced by Sean McGhee, Moyet scans everything from her debut album through her eighth release, *The Minutes* (2013), as a semi-chronicle of her career with refreshed and rerecorded versions of songs, along with two new tracks.

“It was about finding the sound that could pull all of that really diverse material into one frame,” Moyet says of returning to previous songs for *Key*. “The language changes so much between the ages of 20 and 63, and the reason why it was such a significant thing for me to do is because my work circles mainly around wanting to play live. So when you’re looking at 40 years of work, it’s about finding a way into all the songs to bring them together as a body for a set.

“I needed to step away and to reappraise them.

It’s only when you’ve really played live that you understand what the meat and the bones is of the song, what part stays with you, where you can still engage, and what is superfluous.”

Along with more spacious renditions of “All Cried Out,” “Where Hides Sleep,” and “Love Resurrection,” Moyet also transformed “Is This Love?” and “This House” from her second album, *Raindancing*, into a more cinematic scene. She also included newer interpretations of “Fire,” “Can’t Say It Like I Mean It,” “World Without End,” and “This House” from her 2007 album *The Turn* and deeper cuts.

McGhee also reworked the arrangements from Moyet’s 2013 album *The Minutes* with a noir revival of “Filigree” and the synth-happy “All Signs of Life.” Though no tracks were pulled from *Others* in 2017, Moyet did take another turn with “My Best Day,” which she co-wrote with the Lightning Seeds’ Ian Broudie for the band’s 1994 album *Jollification*.

Along with reexamining her past, Moyet also looks forward on *Key*. She penned two new songs, “Such Small Ale” and “The Impervious Me,” while working on a first-class degree in fine art printmaking at the University of Brighton during the pandemic. She earned her degree in 2023 and utilized those skills to design the cover of *Key* along with its corresponding lyric videos.

We should step out / From under this cloud / Take chance to meet daylight / Abandon the crowd sings Moyet on the slow-burning “Such Small Ale,” co-written with McGhee and Suede guitarist Richard Oakes. With a penchant for reconfiguring pieces of language from the Middle Ages and other periods, the song references a Tudor-era saying, “Small Ale,” meaning a thing

of little importance.

“Such Small Ale” deals with sweating the small stuff, the subjects that you’re faced with when you’re my age and you have spent so much time fighting over bollocks, just rubbish, that even when you win a point, nothing is won,” shares Moyet. “You’re running out of time, and the song is saying ‘Look, we can either spend the rest of the time with this ridiculous, pointless battle, or we can just get out from under all of this grief that we pile on ourselves, feel the sun on our bodies, and forgive one another and be accepting of one other.’”

“The Impervious Me,” directly reflects where Moyet has arrived in her career. “You deal with coming to the fore and then dropping out, coming to people’s notice, being completely irrelevant, being a part of the zeitgeist, and being discarded,” says Moyet. “But as an artist, none of those things should affect your engagement with what you do.”

That’s part of the downside of having luck with music, which Moyet had from her earlier successes with *Alf*, *Raindancing*, and *Other* in 2017. “You have to get to this place where you trust your own voice,” she says. “I know that my best songs are not the ones that got the biggest platform or have sold the most copies. They are often buried.”

This new era of life is liberating for Moyet and the new songs indicate that it’s still in progression. “It’s still a journey that’s moving forward,” says Moyet. “There’s hope, that each of those songs become a key into the album from which you source them. The aesthetic fits the musician that I am now, which was always going to change in time.” ★



KELSEA BALLERINI

Journey of Healing

Kelsea Ballerini Gathers Her Girl Gang to Write About Life,
Love, and the Vulnerable Truth on *Patterns*

BY CINDY WATTS | PHOTOS BY PATRICK TRACY

Kelsea Ballerini, by her own admission, hasn't been home to Nashville for a long time. She's in a nondescript room in Los Angeles the day before her 31st birthday and is worried about her beloved Labradoodle, Dibs. He was recently diagnosed with inoperable cancer, just finished radiation, and had his first round of chemotherapy. The ordinarily bubbly Ballerini tears up talking about him.

"We're hoping for four months," she says, explaining why he's with her in Los Angeles. "He's my little baby."

Having to balance the devastation of Dibs' prognosis with the elation tied to her career trajectory feels unnatural to Ballerini. She's in Los Angeles while she films her first season as a coach on NBC's *The Voice*. The East Tennessee native is preparing to release her fifth album, *Patterns*, on October 25. She announced her first headlining date at Madison Square Garden and revealed it would double as her album release show. The singer used an emotional video heavily featuring Dibs in her MSG announcement but says she recorded it before she knew Dibs was sick. The pup loves frolicking around New York City.

"That city is landmarked throughout the album, *Patterns*," she says. "A lot of the moments and inspiration happened while I spent time there. I wanted to honor that throughout the visuals of the record and then really bring it there to kick off the live element of it at Madison Square Garden."

She describes *Patterns* as the sonic continuation of her Grammy-nominated EP *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*, inspired by her divorce. *Patterns* may continue the songwriting integrity celebrated on *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat* but differs in every other way.

"I am very proud of that because I felt like after *Welcome Mat*, I had to go somewhere else," she says. "And I think that's what we did."

Ballerini co-produced *Patterns* with friend, songwriter, and producer Alysia Vanderheym, with whom she recorded *Rolling Up the Welcome*

Mat. She jokes she's "fully musically co-dependent" on Vanderheym.

Patterns is Ballerini's first full album since 2022 and arrived about 20 months after the EP. She feels like she got a slow start on the album but wanted to give herself a chance to live some life before trying to write songs about her next chapter. Ballerini filed for divorce from fellow country singer Morgan Evans in August of 2022 and went public with her current boyfriend, actor Chase Stokes, early the following year. She calls him the best "dog dad."

When Ballerini was ready, she rounded up her "girls" to help her and Vanderheym write for the project. The singer's creative go-tos include Little Big Town's Karen Fairchild, Grammy-nominated writer Jessie Jo Dillon, and Songwriter Hall of Famer Hillary Lindsey, who Ballerini says is "single-handedly the reason I'm a songwriter."

"I think she's truly just the chosen one," Ballerini says. "She's just a freak. She's a freak of nature, and she doesn't know that. And that's one of my favorite things about her."

Fate initially brought the women together, and because they are all her friends, Ballerini knew they were a safe place to start writing for the project. She asked each of them if they would join her at a songwriting retreat. The women prioritized it, and their schedules aligned.

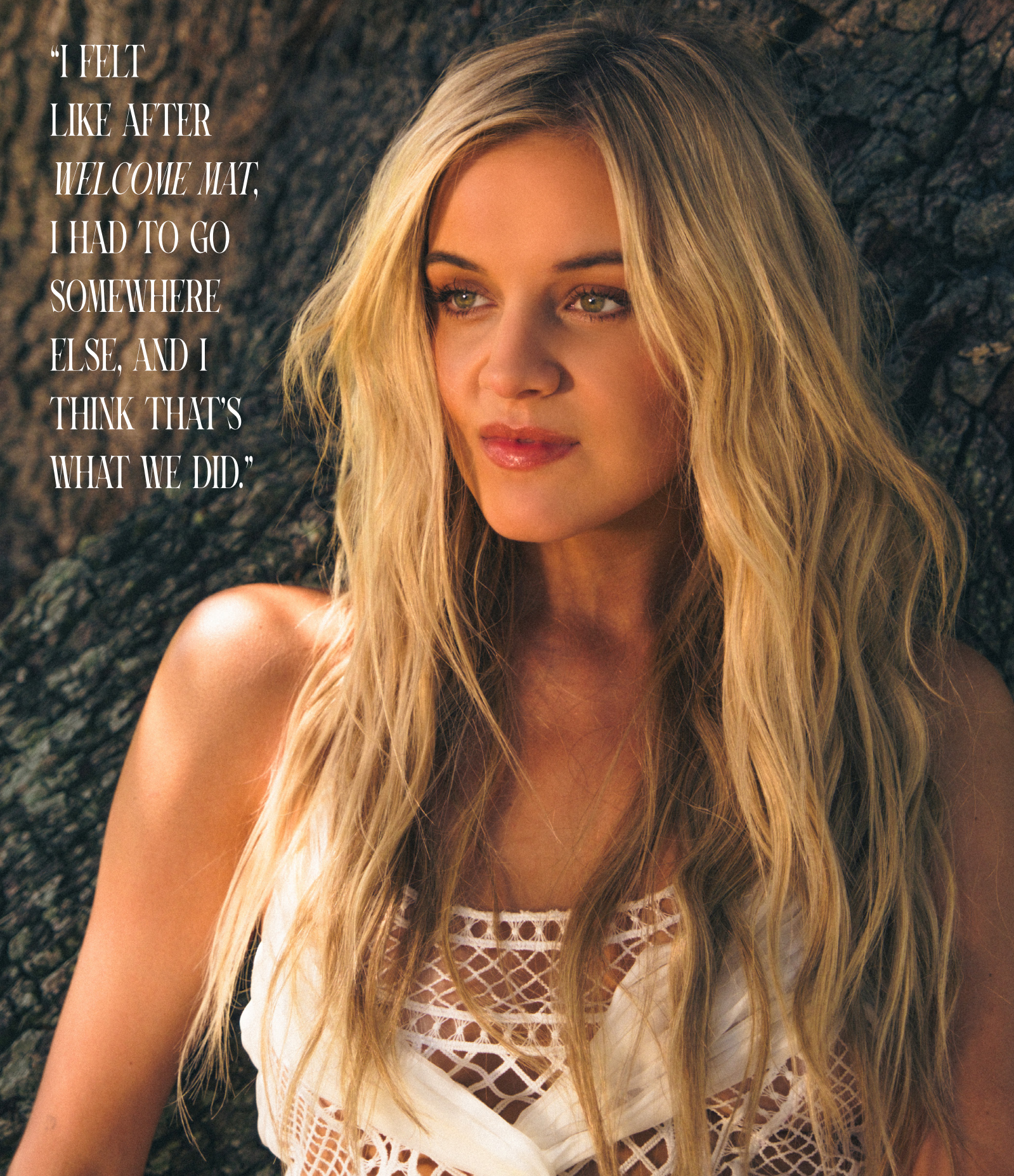
"It came together pretty naturally," Dillon tells American Songwriter of the album. "We're all friends, and it just kind of started happening. It's just really badass that it's five chicks working on a record. Particularly, to me, at least, producing it on top of that is cool. At least in Nashville, there's not a ton of female producers."

They wrote "Sorry Mom," "Two Things" and "Baggage" at the first retreat, and from there, Ballerini had a direction.

"I was like, 'OK, that's what it means now in this chapter of my life; this is what it looks like,'" she says. "It was after that retreat that I was like, 'I'm going to lock the door, and I'm going to make this whole record with these women.'"

She wanted them to eat, live, sleep, and breathe the music together. That's what they did, and Ballerini said it was comforting and empowering to thoughtfully craft such a personal record with

"I FELT
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WELCOME MAT,
I HAD TO GO
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WHAT WE DID."



others who felt the same way.

By the time *Patterns* was finished, they had gone to three songwriting retreats and worked on it in Nashville. The fact the women left their families to write with Ballerini is a sacrifice she doesn't take lightly.

The singer co-wrote 14 of the 15 tracks with some combination of writers. She added Noah Kahan to the mix with Vanderheym for "Cowboys Cry Too."

Dillon has writing credits on 11 of them.

"This album is her life," Dillon says. "She's an amazing writer. All the songs that you hear are all things that happened to her."

The album touches on healing from divorce and details the ups and downs that come with a new relationship.

"I think people expected two things of me from this record," Ballerini says. "One is for it to be pop, and one is for it to be soft and mushy, gushy and lovey. I was very defiant in not doing either of those things."

The singer/songwriter wanted to write about the love lessons she's learned during her relationship with Stokes. Ballerini filed for divorce about two weeks before her 30th birthday. Starting her love life over as a full adult with another adult, she came to understand they both had big lives and big careers with different childhoods and different relationship histories.

"IT'S LIKE,
'I'M 30.
HERE'S MY
LIFE. LET'S
TAKE SOME
INVENTORY
HERE.'"

"You put them together, there's no world where that's just going to be an easy journey," she says. "I'm really proud of the way that not only we've walked with each other through figuring all of that out, but we've

really challenged each other on the patterns of our pasts and which ones don't serve us anymore. We're at a place where it really works so beautifully now."

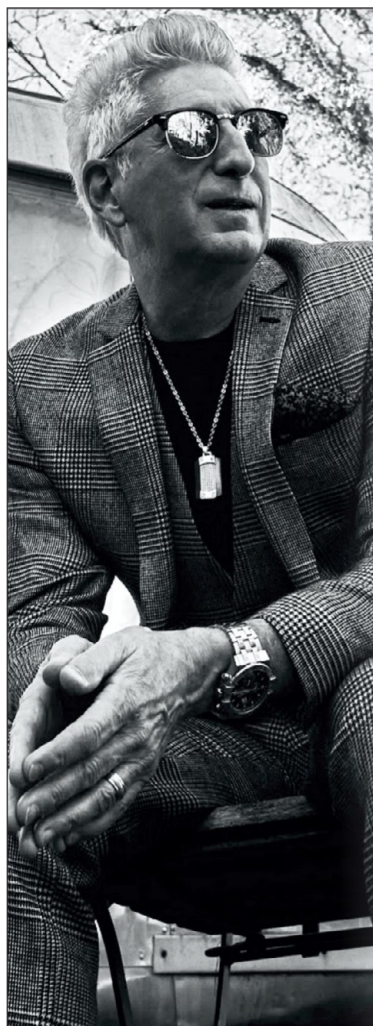
Ballerini is gratified she shared that side of a love song—the one where they fought like hell and then fought for each other.

"It's beautiful to have a partner that stands by that with me and supports that, too," she says. "It would be really easy for me to make a record that's like, 'Oh, I got through the storm and now look at me. I'm all happy, and all the things are going great.' But the journey through it, whether it's the relationship or anything else that comes with growing up, there is nuance to that. And that's always what's appealed to me as a songwriter."

The key, she says, goes back to the album's title.

"One of my cute little fun patterns that I have in my life is that I leave before I get left," she admits. "I write about that in the song, 'Wait.' It's like a giant fear of abandonment. So, I do it so no one else can. And even when I tried to stay, it didn't stick."

She says she's learned that sometimes she has to take a deep breath,



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talk to her therapist, and come back.

Ballerini knows *Patterns* is revealing and deeply personal. She feels like it had to be to uphold the standard she set for herself with *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*. Her best friend, Kelly Bolton, told her that if she didn't include "Beg for Your Love" on the album, she was doing her Grammy-nominated EP a disservice.

I'd follow you to the moon, babe / You know I'm ride or die for you / But if you want a chase, I won't run / I ain't gonna beg for your love.

Bolton told her: "I know it feels a little uncomfortable. You have to put that song on this album because that is the level of 'Mountain With a View,' 'Just Married,' or 'Penthouse.' You got to do it."

Bolton's argument worked.

When it comes to "Sorry Mom," Ballerini quips that "clearly, nothing is too honest." The song's first line is, *Sorry, Mom, I smelled like cigarettes.*

One of Ballerini's favorite life changes is growing into womanhood and experiencing her relationship shift with her mom from mother-daughter to woman-to-woman. She feels like the song articulates that. Ballerini quotes the lyrics: *Maybe I ran all the red lights / Maybe we got into a few fights.*

"There are ways that we're different," she says. "There are different choices (Mom) would've made for me. But at the end of the day, I'm safe, and I'm growing up, and (she's) proud of me, and I'm proud of (her). That's what matters. It's a love letter to my mom. It is very honest."

Ballerini's favorite compliment is when people tell her the song makes them want to call their mom.

"I'm like, 'Perfect,'" she says.

"Wait" is another of Ballerini's favorite songs on the album because she thinks her female fans will scream the lyrics, which she loves. She calls "First Rodeo" "production magic" and says "Patterns," the title track, "is so sick."

Every woman in her beloved girl songwriting-group has a writing credit on "Patterns," which they wrote in the Bahamas. She remembers she had the title, and when she shared it, Lindsey grabbed her guitar.

"It's like, 'I'm 30. Here's my life. Let's take some inventory here,'" she says. "What do I like? How did I get here? What did I contribute? What do I like about that? What do I need to rewrite about that? The closest people around me, is this healthy? What needs to change? Can I challenge that? It was all that."

Musically, the song took a Fleetwood Mac-sounding path, which is new for Ballerini. She planned to title the album *Did You Make It Home*. But when they wrote "Patterns," she says it "immediately kind of flipped everything on its head."

"I was like, 'If people think that they know what to expect, they'll put on *Patterns*, and Track One will kindly let them know that it's different,'" she says. "I always thought of patterns as a very negative word. In writing that song, and then certainly now and talking about the record, my life has some amazing patterns. There are some that could be toxic. And it's not a bad thing. It's just a series of habits. Some are in our blood, some are developed, not all are bad." ★

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How the
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SCOTT STAPP



REWRITING A LEGACY

Scott Stapp Rediscovered
His Roots with *Higher
Power* and Creed's
Triumphant Reunion

BY ANNIE REUTER | PHOTOS BY HUNTER WURZELBACHE



For the better part of 30 years, Scott Stapp has served as songwriter and frontman of Grammy Award-winning rock band Creed and as an in-demand solo artist. His latest release, *Higher Power*, puts the powerhouse vocalist in new territory. The title track marks Stapp's highest-charting solo single while the project also includes his first-ever duet with "If These Walls Could Talk," featuring Dorothy Martin, the vocalist of the rock band Dorothy.

Stapp's 2024 has been a year of rebirth and reunion as the singer-songwriter joined forces with his Creed bandmates onstage for the first time in 12 years. The rock outfit reunited on the water for a pair of festival cruises earlier this year. The overwhelming fan response to Sixthman's The Summer of '99 cruise resulted in Creed's summer amphitheater tour followed by a fall arena trek that runs through December.

"The shows have been beyond our expectations," Stapp tells *American Songwriter* over the phone. "It's been an incredible experience."

Long before Stapp began his career as frontman and chief lyricist of Creed, penning hits like "With Arms Wide Open," "My Sacrifice," "Higher," and "What's This Life For," he was writing songs on his own. An avid writer as a kid, Stapp often journaled and wrote poetry.

"Looking back, my poetry and my journaling were formatted like song lyrics," he says. "So, it was an easy transition to begin turning those into songs. If you want to classify that as songwriting, in my teens is when I began writing lyrics that would become songs."

It would be a while before Stapp felt he had arrived as a songwriter. In 1994, Stapp and guitarist Mark Tremonti formed Creed. The high school and college classmates wrote countless songs together, but it was the unreleased track "Grip My Soul" that took the band in a new direction. As Stapp recalls, when the song was finished, the co-writers realized they had found their identity as a band.

"The next group of songs that came after that would go on to make up Creed's first album, *My Own Prison*," he explains. "But that was a critical song because it really woke us up to, 'Hey, we've got something here.' We found our sound and how we worked together as songwriters and collaborators."

My Own Prison was released in 1997. The lead single, "My Own Prison," peaked at No. 2 on *Billboard*'s Mainstream Rock Airplay chart later that year and began Creed's domination. "What's This Life For" came the following year and garnered the group its first No. 1 on the chart, where it spent six weeks in the peak position.

Multi-week chart-toppers "Higher" (17 weeks), "With Arms Wide Open" (4 weeks), and "My Sacrifice" (9 weeks) would follow, further cementing Creed's place in the rock world. "Higher" and "With Arms Wide Open," featured on the 1999 sophomore album *Human Clay*, remain fan favorites and social media staples today, with countless memes and covers playing a major part in the band's resurgence.

As 2024 marks the 25th anniversary of *Human Clay*, Stapp says the RIAA Diamond-certified record continues to leave an impact on the band and fans. He says the album's writing process began on tour as a necessity to play more songs during headlining sets.

"That record has become even more and more special to the band over the years because of how much it's stood the test of time and how much the songs are still connecting with folks today," he explains. "We only had

ten songs on our first record and were headlining from Day One, so we needed more material. We started writing on the road and playing songs that our audience had never heard before that would go on to be on *Human Clay*."

"I always appreciate that album because of how it was created," he continues. "We were finding our groove. We were writing off the success of *My Own Prison* and having this confidence. They talk about bands feeling pressure for their sophomore album, and we didn't feel that at all. We were in the moment being artists, creating on the fly, touring, and then playing those original songs live in front of an audience before the album ever came out. The aspect of that process and that record will always be something I hold on to and cherish."

Stapp says most of the songs for *Human Clay* came together during soundcheck. He and Tremonti would collaborate before taking the stage later that night. One of those soundcheck writing sessions was "With Arms Wide Open."

"A song that's always going to be the most special song for me on that album is 'With Arms Wide Open,'" Stapp says. "It is a song I continue to connect with today, just like it was the day I wrote it."

"With Arms Wide Open" came together on tour in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, following a phone call. It was a call that would forever change Stapp's life as he learned he'd soon become a father.

"I walked into the venue, a small club, and Mark was doodling on his guitar, getting ready for soundcheck," he recalls. "I liked what he was doodling and said, 'Hey, man, just keep playing that.' That's how we operate. It's one of the ways that we write. He plays something, and I like it, I'm like, 'Hey, that's a verse. Keep playing that over and over, and let me sing over it and write over it.'"

"He did that, and I stepped up to the mic, and those words came out," he continues. "I always carry a pencil and a spiral notebook with me, and I started writing down the words that I was singing as they were coming out. I looked over at Mark, and he knew, 'OK, time to go to a chorus,' he hit the chord, and then the melody and the lyrics came out. We wrote it

down, and that song was born right there on stage during soundcheck, right before a show. We might have even played it that night."

Stapp credits "With Arms Wide Open" as the song responsible for Creed's resurgence. He says throughout the band's 2024 tour, fans at the shows tell him their parents played the song for them as kids.

"That's exactly what that song was all about," he says. "It's very cool what's happened with that record and how it continues to connect with people today."

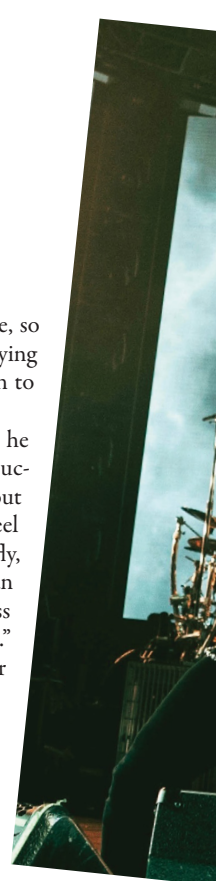
Before his first solo record, *The Great Divide* in 2005, Stapp had only written with Creed bandmate Tremonti. By his sophomore solo album *Proof of Life* in 2013, Stapp found his writing tribe. Most songs on *Higher Power*, released in March via Napalm Records, were created with the songwriter-producer team 4 Horsemen Music: Blair Daly, Marti Frederiksen, Zac Maloy, and Scott Stevens.

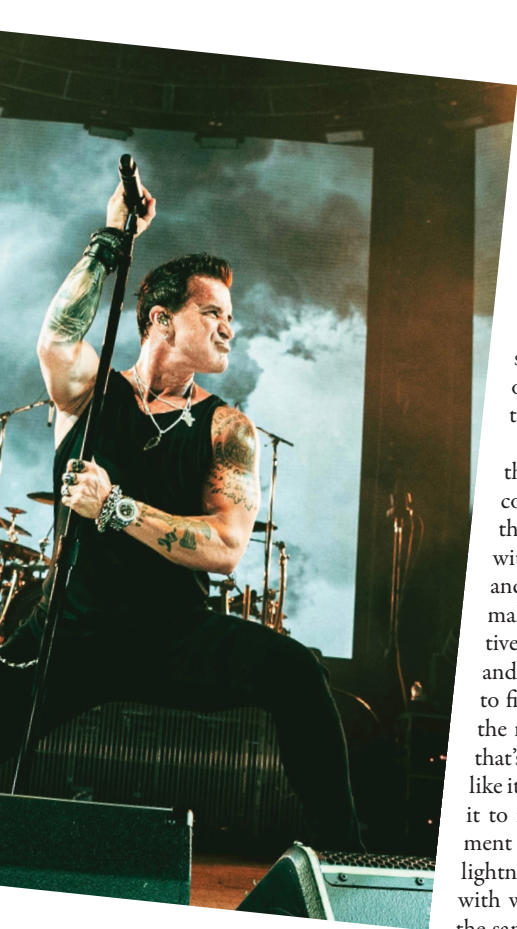
"All the guys in the 4 Horsemen, that's been my crew," he says. "We've worked together for over a decade now."

Stapp describes writing with his collaborators as "organic." He says he typically comes into a writing session with something on his heart, either a real-life situation that is inspiring him or something he's previously written.

Stapp knows his strengths: lyrics, melodies, and song arrangements. But

**"WE WROTE
IT DOWN,
AND THAT
SONG WAS
BORN RIGHT
THERE ON
STAGE DURING
SOUNDCHECK,
RIGHT BEFORE
A SHOW."**





he also comes up with musical ideas like guitar licks or other instrument suggestions.

"I feel out the situation and then be myself," he says of co-writing. "I was fortunate that everyone I have written with has allowed me to be me and do what I do, and then help make the song better collaboratively. I love writing. ... We go in and start riffing and freestyling to find the right music bed and the right melodies. It's fun, and that's how I like to create. I don't like it to be real mechanical. I like it to feel organic and in the moment where you almost capture lightning in a bottle. My approach with whoever I'm writing with is the same as it is when Mark and I

are writing."

Stapp says he started writing *Higher Power* in January 2021. Without a set deadline, it became a much longer process. Singles "Higher Power" and "Black Butterfly" reached the Top 10 and 20 on the Mainstream Rock Airplay chart, respectively. Meanwhile, the current single "If These Walls Could Talk" charts new territory for Stapp as his first duet. He'll perform the song live for the first time with duet partner Dorothy when the pair make their Grand Ole Opry debut on October 23.

"I'm very proud of this album and excited to share it with the fans out there," he says. "The entire record, it's my journal. It's my life as I've lived it in the moment. I think that's why the songs have connected with folks. It's not manufactured. It's real life. It's a journey. It's a story, it's a struggle. It's the highs and it's the lows in real time."

While Stapp and Tremonti haven't written on the road together in 2024, Stapp hints that it's not a far-off possibility. "I think when the time is right and when the dust settles, we'll probably reevaluate and see what happens," he says.

For Stapp, playing music together 30 years after Creed formed was always the goal. While he admits it was "a very naive and ignorant plan," he says it was also an idealistic view of what could happen.

"When we were younger, and before we even had a record deal, we thought we had something," he says. "When we got a record deal, I was operating under the mindset of, 'If you get a record deal, you're going to be huge and have a career forever.' It wasn't until after the *Weathered* album when we went on hiatus and had a break that I began to realize how rare it was what happened to the band. Still, it took me years and years and years to really understand that it was such an anomaly and that's when the gratitude began to sink in."

Like his career with Creed, Stapp is grateful for his unyielding passion for songwriting.

"As a songwriter, trust your gut and be who you are and create from the love of doing it and the need," he advises. "When you love something and it's a passion and you do it for the joy of it and the joy of creation, you can't make a mistake." ★

BEHIND THE SONG: "IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK"

Written by: Scott Stapp, Marti Frederiksen, Kylie Sackley, Scott Stevens
Featuring: Dorothy

Scott Stapp teams up with Dorothy on the captivating acoustic ballad "If These Walls Could Talk," which he penned with Kylie Sackley and frequent collaborators Marti Frederiksen and Scott Stevens. Stapp's first duet, "If These Walls Could Talk" was an emotional writing session.

"There were things going on in my personal life, and it was heavy for me that day," he recalls of the writing session. "I came in and I needed to get these emotions out. It was like a therapy session initially because they're my friends and Kylie seemed safe. I started sharing my feelings and what was going on. Through that process of articulating what I was feeling, lyrics and ideas started coming out. I can't remember exactly who said it, but as I was sharing and describing what I was feeling, someone in the room said, 'Hey, if these walls could talk.'"

Stapp gravitated to the line *if these walls could talk*, and the collaborators immediately began working on the lyrics and the music. The song was born an hour later, and Stapp recorded his vocals the same day.

"It had so much raw, real, emotion that I was living in my personal life at that moment that it was magic," he says. "I'll always remember that day."

Stapp describes Dorothy as a "generational talent" and "one of the most incredible voices I've ever heard." He says "If These Walls Could Talk" shows a side of her that the rock community didn't know she had.

When producer Stevens first played the song for Dorothy, she cried. She says the verses were "so raw and real," as if it was a page out of her diary.

"I resonated a lot with the storytelling in the song being in recovery and picking up the bottle, or putting down the bottle," she says. "My journey with faith and with God, all of that was in there. I was very honored when he asked me to sing the song with him."

A longtime Creed fan, Dorothy says Stapp is one of her favorite frontmen. She recorded her vocals with Stevens in California and feels "very blessed" to be Stapp's first duet.

"I was able to lose myself in the song," she says. "I tried to sing from the heart because I resonated with the lyrics."

Dorothy, who taught herself to sing and yodel from listening to LeAnn Rimes, says the invitation to perform "If These Walls Could Talk" at the Grand Ole Opry is a major milestone in her career.

"I never thought in a million years it would happen," she marvels. "It does show that you can break out of your shell. Music is supposed to be about being open, trying new things, and welcoming all."

"If it's good music, it can cross all the boundaries, break all the glass ceilings," she adds. "It's really amazing to get an invitation like that. I couldn't have done it without Scott Stapp and his amazing song that he wrote that I got to be a part of, so I'm just happy to be there." ★



Photo by Matt Akana



VIRANDA

REKINDLING THE FIRE

With *Postcards
From Texas*,
Miranda Lambert
Embraces Change,
Independence,
and Homegrown
Inspiration.

BY CINDY WATTS

PHOTOS BY JAMES MACARI

LAMBERT







IT'S A SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN NASHVILLE,

and fans have crowded into the top floor of Miranda Lambert's Casa Rosa Tex Mex + Cantina on Lower Broadway for a pop-up show to celebrate the release of her new album *Postcards from Texas*. Pink neon block letters spell her name on the wall behind the stage, giving the space a soft, glowing hue. The album has been out only three days, and she plans to sing it top to bottom.

Lambert walks out at 5 p.m. in a white cowboy hat, turquoise fringe, and the broad smile of a woman who just defiantly rebooted her music career—at 40 years old.

After nearly two decades together, Lambert left Sony Music Nashville in March of 2023. One year later, the proud Texan announced she had signed with Republic Records and that Nashville's Big Loud would provide country radio promotion and marketing support. Her debut single with the new label, "Wranglers," came out in May, and *Postcards from Texas*, her 10th studio album, arrived in September.

"I feel like, after 20 years of doing this, I still have this crazy amount of inspiration and fire," she told *American Songwriter* on release day. "I think it's because I have a new team that's fired up with me. It's a game changer when you have a support system who's leading with art, who's excited with you and for you."

Lambert's vision for *Postcards from Texas* came into focus at her 40th birthday party. Last September, Lambert's friend and backup singer, Gwen Sebastian, asked her where she wanted to turn 40. Lambert told her making that decision felt like pressure. Sebastian asked the singer if she wanted to turn 40 in Texas. Her answer was yes.

"Now that you mentioned it, because I felt like I kind of want to go home," she said.

Lambert took over Billy Bob's in Fort Worth, Texas, one night when the famous bar was closed for her celebratory bash.

"That was the start of 'I know what I've got to do now,'" Lambert said of what she called her "aha moment." "You know what I mean? I really want to just get back to the heart and the root of it all. Not that I ever left it at all."

Lambert contacted longtime collaborator and producer Jon Randall and asked if they could go to Texas to see how creative they felt. She didn't have a plan, and it wasn't a big production. She wanted to round up some musicians they both liked and see if Arlyn Studios was available near her home in Austin, Texas.

"As soon as we got in there, I was like, 'This is right,'" she said. "'This feels right to me.'"

Lambert feels like the songs on *Postcards from Texas* could have been on her past albums. Lambert is one of this generation's most renowned singer/songwriters, but she firmly believes in recording outside songs. Some of her biggest hits—"House That Built Me," "Mama's Broken Heart," and "Little Red Wagon" included—were written by other people. With that in mind, she contacted her songwriting friends and asked them to send her songs for her new album.

"I want to hear what they're doing," she said. "I think it's so important. If I didn't have outside songs, I would not have the career I have. I would not have the set list I have. It's important to me to stress that to young artists. If I tried to write every single thing we ever cut, we're probably robbing ourselves of some gems."

Aaron Raitiere sent Lambert "Armadillo," which he wrote with Jon Decious and Parker Twomey. When she received it, she was in Austria with her husband, Brendan. She put her AirPods in her ears, hit play, and immediately thought, "This is it. Here we go."

Then she gave her AirPods to her husband, whose reaction was the same.

"He was like, 'Oh, hell yeah, now we're rolling,'" she said. "I knew the first time I heard it that I wanted to cut it. It gives me chills talking about it. I don't know if it's synchronicity, serendipity, or all of that, but it felt right. My gut had been leaning towards this and pushing me home."

The armadillo with a doobie and a coldie in a koozie had me drivin' to the county line / And I know it sounds crazy, but please believe me, baby, I swear that's where I was last night.

The song is as country as Lindale, the Northeast Texas town where Lambert grew up.

"Miranda Lambert is as real as it gets," said Jessie Jo Dillon, who wrote Lambert's Parker

McCollum duet “Santa Fe” with her dad, songwriting legend Dean Dillon, Jesse Frasure, and Lambert. “She has such a reverence for songs, songwriters, and for the person. That’s a little bit different than everybody else.”

Dillon described Lambert as raw, funny, and one of a kind.

“I think she is so important for this genre and always has been because she’s not being anybody but herself,” Dillon continued. “I think that’s why she connects and always has so much. That’s why it was so cool that she wanted to work with my dad and me.”

“Santa Fe” is one of Lambert’s favorite songs on *Postcards from Texas*. Frasure told Lambert that Dean Dillon was in town and was interested in writing with her. Lambert was excited to add Dillon to the appointment because she used to write songs with her dad, and she was interested in the Dillons’ writing dynamic. She hoped to get a song that sounded like every George Strait hit that Dean wrote—and she did. Dean went there naturally.

Lambert thought “Santa Fe” would be a sweet duet and reached out to fellow Texas native Parker McCollum to join her. She said he loved it.

“I think that song is so special,” Lambert said, and Dillon agreed.

Dillon recently spent an extended period on tour with Brooks & Dunn. She played the unmastered version of the song to Ronnie Dunn, and he cried.

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“He sent me a long text the other night about how amazing he thinks that song is,” Dillon said. “That was really cool to see one of me and Miranda’s idols love the song so much. I think that says everything about her, too, that she’s always been making music that young people and her icons



love.”

Lambert wrote “Dammit Randy” with her husband, Brendan McLoughlin, and Randall. The Randy in the song is Randy Goodman, Chairman and CEO of Sony Music Nashville, Lambert’s former record label. The singer didn’t intend to write “Dammit Randy” with her husband, but he kept throwing out lines while watching a football game. Lambert told him he had to choose—songwriting or football.

“Honestly, who better to write that with than someone that you’ve been coming home to every day for months talking about something you’re going through,” she said. “Brendan had lived that with me. It’s that good old adage of ‘if you piss off a songwriter, well, it’s fair game.’”

Brent Cobb and Neil Medley wrote “January Heart,” another of Lambert’s favorites on the album. Frank Liddell sent the singer the lilting mid-tempo, which she describes as different than anything she could write.

“I just thought it was so beautiful,” she said. “I just thought, ‘What a beautiful love song, but still with some darkness and some mystery.’ Those are the kinds of songs I’m looking for. I can’t write this. I wish I could have, but this is just so different melodically than anything I would’ve thought of or message-wise.”

Lambert wrote “Run” alone in 2015. Everyone in her circle of friends had heard it and kept asking if she was going to record it. Randall and McLoughlin convinced her that now was the time. Her husband told her he would quit supporting her if she didn’t.

I’m trying to survive in this state of defeat / Is it you or I that really lost me? / I’m lookin’ for someone I wasn’t with you / We held on for dear life, babe, but both of us knew I was gonna run.

“I don’t know if that was subconscious, I wasn’t ready, or just because I didn’t have a good home for it, but I felt like it was ready,” she said. “I’ve tried to have a song that I wrote by myself on every album because it’s important. But it’s scary. There’s nowhere to hide. It’s me and my rawness.”

With the album available now, Lambert can look at the finished project and know it was a reset for her. *Postcards from Texas* is her thinking about where life and career started, getting back to her Texas roots, and remembering what that felt like.

“I’ve been doing this 20 years,” she said. “I’m going to go back to the start and rekindle that whole fire and soaking all the things that made me chase this in the first place. Now we’re rolling again. I feel like this record is setting up the next decade of my life.” ★

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BRYAN FERRY'S INTRO- SPECTIVE 'RETRO- SPECTIVE'

With New Music on the Horizon,
Bryan Ferry Looks Back—and Forward—
on His Legendary Career

BY KATHERINE YESKE TAYLOR | PHOTOS BY NEIL KIRK



“Most of the time, I’d like to be working on new stuff—but occasionally, it’s good to take stock of what you have done and put it all in order,” says Bryan Ferry, referring to *Retrospective: Selected Recordings 1973-2023*, the 81-song overview of his solo career that’s set for release on October 25 via BMG.

During a video call from Ferry’s London recording studio, he looks debonair in a crisp olive green button-down shirt, his salt-and-pepper hair elegantly swept back. He smiles easily and often, seeming utterly at ease. And why not? For five decades now, he has been celebrated as one of the most influential, charismatic, and innovative performers in rock history, both as the frontman for the legendary band Roxy Music and his highly successful solo career.

But his prolific output meant that when Ferry decided to put together this retrospective of his solo work, he faced a daunting task: after all, he has released 16 studio albums so far. In the end, though, he was clear about which songs should make the cut: “There are some things which are more hits than others, things that are popular, and they go in. And a few tracks that are less known. We tried to get a balance of stuff,” he says.

Everything a diehard fan could want is here, including Ferry’s international hits such as “Slave to Love” and “Let’s Stick Together,” jazz versions of some of his most beloved songs, and several rare and previously unreleased tracks. There’s an impressive selection of wide-ranging cover songs, including a brand new one, “She Belongs to Me,” which is a Bob Dylan composition.

There’s also “Star,” the first original material Ferry has released in more than 10 years. The pulsating techno/electronic track finds Ferry trading vocals with Scottish artist/writer Amelia Barratt and was based on a demo he wrote with Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross of Nine Inch Nails.

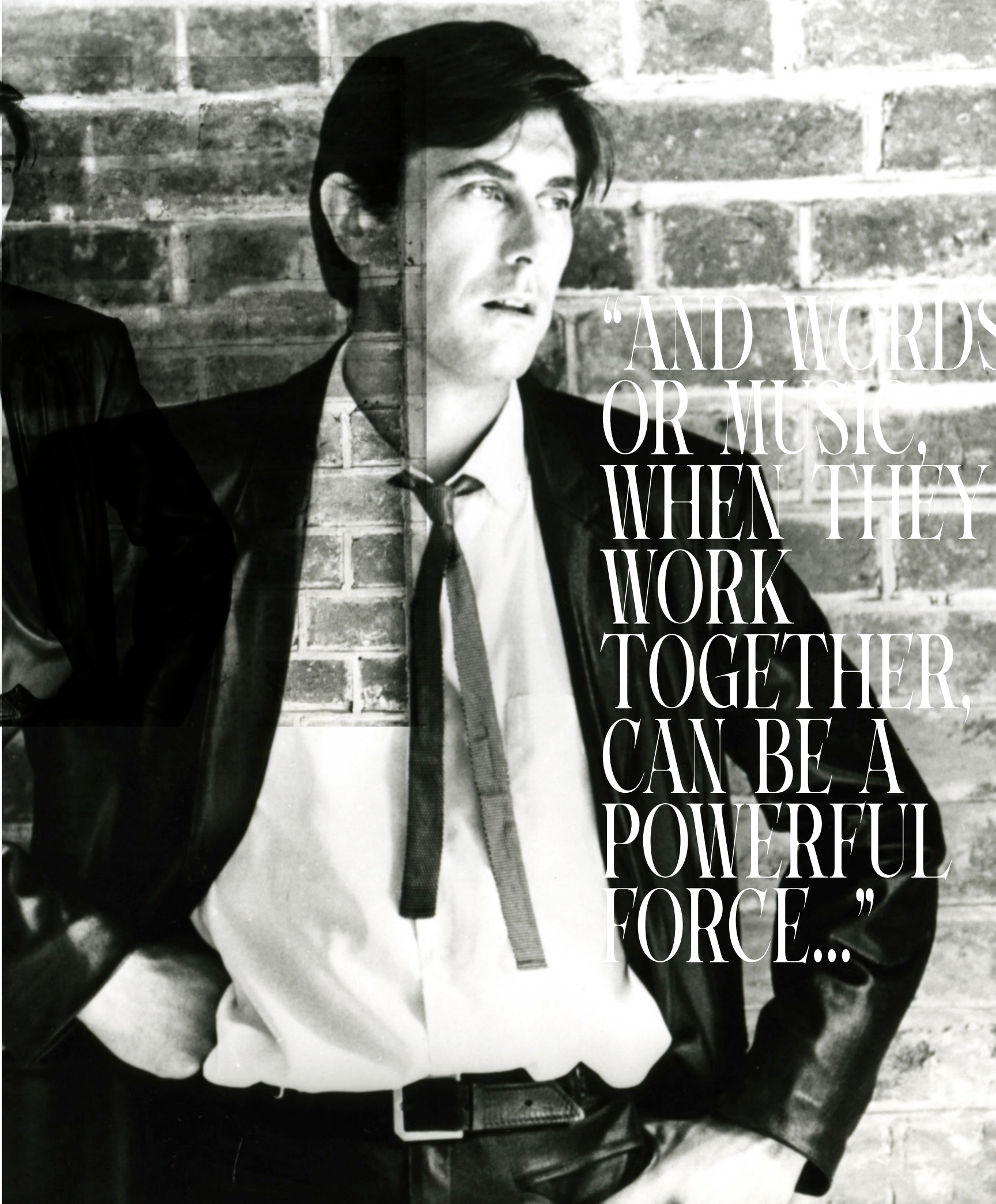
“When you work together with other people, it takes off some of the pressure,” Ferry says. “I’ve been concentrating lately on just the musical side, without the pressure of lyric writing. It’s been a joy for me, as the new track “Star” illustrates, I think.”



Ferry says that putting this retrospective together inevitably triggered many memories from across his entire career. “I’ve been in a lot of studios with a lot of people,” he says. “It was very nice for me to listen back to things and remember being in New York or L.A. or London or wherever doing these projects with a lot of great musicians.”

This desire to explore different musical territory was one of the main reasons why Ferry launched his solo career in the first place. “One of the great things of doing the solo recordings over the years has been being free from a band and being able to work with a lot of different musicians, and so that’s been a real pleasure,” he says. “I was very fortunate to be in a great band with some great, talented people. But when I started the solo records, it was trying to get away and work with different people and broaden my horizons a little bit.”

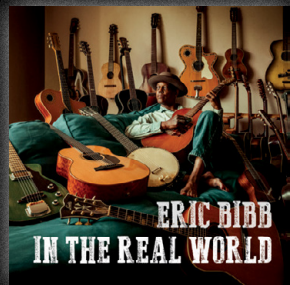
While he has been adventurous with his musical explo-



“AND WORDS
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WHEN THEY
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POWERFUL
FORCE...”



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rations throughout his career, Ferry says that his actual songwriting process has always tended to follow the same pattern: "Normally, traditionally, it's me improvising at the piano and just finding something there—usually, when I'm on my own and at night. I guess [that's] why so many of them have a nocturnal mood. I'm not one of these people who practices every day, and I'm not a great piano player, but I'm distinctive."

Ferry will usually record his ideas onto a cassette tape. "Nowadays, you can do it on a phone. I like cassettes, though," he says. "And then months, or sometimes years later, you listen to the cassette and think, 'Hmm, I like that tune. Maybe I'll turn it into a song with other players.'"

"Some songs are done more quickly or easily than others; some hang around for years before you really nail it," he continues. "It's lovely when you get there and you think, 'This really works, and it represents some feelings or thoughts that I've had.' You try and project yourself into a piece of music. And words or music, when they work together, can be a powerful force."

He confesses that one part of the songwriting process has remained difficult for him, despite all his experience. "Usually, I write the lyrics quite late—at the 11th hour, with a gun to my head!" he says with a laugh. "I've always found lyric writing quite hard—but very satisfying, if you feel you get it right."

Ferry has always seemed to have a particular knack for writing wistful love songs, and he agrees with this assessment. "I suppose I have sometimes fallen very easily into that mode because songs are kind of intimate, one-to-one; it's a universal language that everyone knows," he says. "So many of the great songs have been romantic. They've been about person to person. I guess there's a reason for that."

He first became aware of music's power when, as a child in Northern England, he developed a taste for many different musical genres. "I've been very lucky that my interests in music have been diverse. I think I've found that refreshing—and it helped my, dare I say, longevity as an artist, [because] I've gone here and there with my work with Roxy and with the solo career," he says.

Jazz artists such as Charlie Parker especially intrigued Ferry, as well as what he terms "the great American songs" such as "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." Originally a show tune written by Jerome Kern and Otto Harbach in 1933, that song became a chart-topping hit for The Platters in 1959. "I saw The Platters do it onstage in my hometown; I must have been really young, about 10 [years old]. Things like that really affect you," Ferry says. He later covered that song himself, and it reached the Top 20 in the U.K. music charts in 1974.

"NOTHING IS
EVER GOOD
ENOUGH,
I ALWAYS
THINK."

Beyond music, Ferry was absorbing many other things that shaped the songwriter he would become. “When I was young, I liked reading; I liked literature. I was inspired by films and things I’d read, and things I’ve done, and people I’ve talked to or heard talking,” he says.

Ultimately, he adds, it’s about “Life’s experience. I guess any artist will absorb what is around him or her. You try and create something that is your own, and reflects your personality, your feelings, your thoughts and your desires, your emotions. It’s hard to pin it down, really. But I feel much more complete when I produce work. The work is a better version of me.”

He admits that he didn’t initially think he’d become a musician at all, though. “I went to college to study art—painting,” he says. “That’s what I thought I was going to do...and then music kind of seduced me.”

While still in college, he began joining bands, then co-founded Roxy Music in 1970. That group evolved into a sextet that played a groundbreaking and sophisticated mix of glam rock and avant-garde art rock that has been credited with influencing everything from the punk rock scene to New Wave.

“When I first started writing songs, it was just me and the bass player [Graham Simpson] from Roxy in a room,” Ferry says. “Then, one by one, I met the other members of the band and put together a group to play these songs. I think I was very lucky to meet so many good people. None of us had ever made a record before. The freshness of that was something good, I think.”

Ferry says he became Roxy Music’s lead singer “because I hated my talking voice, and so singing was a way of getting out of that, I guess. Also, I couldn’t play anything, [but] toward the end of my college days, I started teaching myself piano a bit, playing by ear. I still just play by ear.”

Ultimately, Ferry recorded eight albums with Roxy Music, ending with *Avalon* (1982). By then, he had long established himself as a successful solo artist, having released his debut album in that capacity, *These Foolish Things*, in 1973.

Ferry made the decision to start a solo career right after Roxy Music finished their second album, *For Your Pleasure* (1973), which he says “was quite intense; it was quite dark. And I thought I’d like to do something a bit lighter, to show my versatility.”

These Foolish Things was so well-received that Ferry has maintained his solo career ever since. To date, all 16 of his studio albums have charted internationally. And soon, there will be more: he promises that he will release new music next year.

For now, though, Ferry is happy to concentrate on his solo retrospective and the legacy that it chronicles. “Nothing is ever good enough, I always think,” he says, though he says this with a smile. “I’ll say, ‘I wish I’d done more of this or that, or less of that.’ But there’s a lot to like, as well. I just wish I had been able to do more work than I did—but I’ve done quite a lot with all these solo records, and then the Roxy stuff. But I’ve got a lot more to do, so I’m really enthusiastic about everything. That’s a fabulous feeling to have.” ★



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DRAKE WHITE RISING ABOVE ADVERSITY

After Surviving A Life-Threatening Stroke,
Drake White's Latest Album is a Heartfelt
Celebration of Life, Love, and Resilience.

BY LISA VALENTINE | PHOTOS BY ZACK KNUDSEN



Country Soul artist and songwriter Drake White is grateful to be alive and tries to truly live and appreciate every minute. His new album *Low Country High Road*, which dropped September 20, focuses on what's most important in life: for White, that's being proud of where you come from, loving people well, and embracing the big and small moments. While he's always had a zest for living life to the fullest, this deepened perspective of appreciating every moment comes from his own experience walking through some of his hardest days after suffering a hemorrhagic stroke in 2019 and enduring multiple surgeries to fix his arteriovenous malformation.

"The last album, being *The Optimystic*, was all about keeping the faith and keeping the optimistic, keeping that glass half full thing through all of the stroke and all of the pandemic and all the things we were going through, my wife's sickness, the infertility issues," he explains of his previous album released in 2022, which was followed by his EP *The Bridge*, in 2023. "This one [*Low Country High Road*] is redemptive. This one is like, 'Hey, we made it! We made it, and now we're going to tell you how we made it...' And that's the difference, I think, in these two. *The Optimystic* was like, 'I think we'll make it. We might die in this, but I think we're going to make it, and I think I'm going to have something huge to say.' We lived through that to get to this [album]."

White has always had a signature, soulful Country sound that is uniquely his and stands out from the crowd. Throughout the album, White beautifully showcases his soulful, powerhouse voice rooted in such strong emotion. You can't help but feel it to your core, whether he's belting anthems or delivering meaningful ballads.

The sound of this album, in particular, draws from the musical style of a very specific region and the way of life of the people who make up the area.

"The Low Country produces this sound," he explains. "It's Southern soul country in three words. I've always enjoyed Low Country and that old Memphis, Muscle Shoals, New Orleans triangle is where my heart lies in music—the Low Country and the camaraderie around the Low Country. People in the Low Country are front porch people; they're not back porch people necessarily," he explains how they invite you over for good food and conversation.

The hospitable nature and community he describes of the Low Country is one that he hopes is embodied by the crowds at his shows, making everyone feel a part of the music and the community.

"I want to welcome people into the shows and have this Jimmy Buffett, Grateful Dead type of feeling when it comes to tailgating and when it comes to the festivities around my show," he says. White says the "low country" in the album's title also is symbolic of the low times in his life and how he's always strived to take the high road in both his career and how he treats people in life.

"[W]e've been through the low country and in symbolizing like the lower parts of our life and the high road is always something that I've taken and have been encouraged by my parents and my mentors to take," he shares. "[A] lot of times, you take the high road and you don't want to take the high road... Now I know that it's all happening for a reason and I think I always knew that; but now I think since I've matured a little bit, it's like 'Man, I can't wait to see what God does with that setback.' So *Low Country High Road*... it's kind of got two or three meanings."

The album is deeply personal to White who had a hand in writing each of its 13 songs. While he's always open to cutting outside songs from other songwriters, he says the art of songwriting is cathartic to

him and is good for his mental health. With the specific stories and messages that comprise this album, White felt it essential to be involved in the writing to best share these deeply personal experiences.

"I like the therapy that it gives me and like the breath," he says about songwriting. "I like creating something out of nothing, so I write a lot of songs. [T]his was so personal to say, 'Hey, we've been through this. We've seen angels, we've been ushered up to heaven's gates almost and this is how we made it out.' And I think that it makes it a little more authentic if it comes straight out of the horse's mouth."

While songwriting has served as a form of therapy for White, it also has helped him dig deeper into finding purpose and meaning in things. "The purpose of why we were doing what we're doing and why we're living this life and the deeper elements of it and the lighter elements of it," he explains. "The stuff like [the song] 'Miracles' and things like that. Like just finding the lightness and life and finding the joy and going through, but also understanding that I've been through a lot of shit and I've been through the darkness too, I know what it feels like to be in the depths of the darkness and just really have the demons have a hold of you. And I know how to get out of that by taking that high road and taking that approach of 'Tomorrow's going to be better than today, and there's more good people than bad.' I've experienced some life, and this record shows that."

For White, he says he always wants his songs to land "where commercial meets credibility." As a now independent artist, he's been taking songs off the shelf that he wrote up to a decade ago that may not have been categorized as commercial radio hits and was excited for the chance to incorporate them into this album. Co-writers on this project include a list of songwriting greats, including Ross Copperman, Marcus Hummon, Randy Montana, and Jonathan Singleton.

Not only did White write on every song for this album, but he co-produced it with Singleton. They brought the album to life in an unhurried and organic way, guided by what felt right and natural. Their method carried through the writing, recording, and production process and continued when mixing the album with David Broyles. "[T]o be able to sit down and say, 'Hey, turn that harmonica up,' or 'Hey, bring those horns down just a little bit,' or, 'Hey, I would love to say it like this, let me sing that real quick.' We did that for six months to this record and just massaged it," explains White. "There was no pressure to any of this and it wasn't looking for a single or looking for a hit or, you know, looking for anything. We were just making a record off of life experiences."

The album is filled with clever lyrics in songs like "Tequila Mockingbird" and soulful grooves that you can't help dancing along to in songs such as the title track "Low Country High Road," "Keep It Movin'," and "Stompin' Ground." However, when it comes to songs off the al-

"JUMP OFF THE
ROCK. GO SKIING,
GO BUNGEE
JUMPING. GO DO
WHAT YOU WANT
TO DO BECAUSE,
MAN, IT GOES
QUICK."

bum that he's most proud of, White gravitates to the ones that tug your heartstrings with profoundly personal lyrics.

He particularly notes the poignant song "Life, Love, and War" as one that he's proud to have written and holds significant meaning to him as he penned it as a love letter to his son Hawk.

"I had this kid after seven years of trying," White shares of his and his wife's journey to parenthood. "I just want him to be a good person. I want to raise a human being who knows who Jesus is but finds him on his own. I'm proud of 'Life, Love, and War' in a cool, Zeppelin-dad way."

The song's message and honest lyrics shine at the forefront as it was recorded with only the simple sound of Singleton on acoustic guitar. "You can hear the chair creaking," shares White. "You can hear [that] we didn't master it. We didn't do anything to it. That is the first take in the studio. It's really the love letter to Hawk and 'Hey, I'm glad you're alive. We worked really hard for you, and I hope you're not an asshole.'"

Another song he's especially fond of is "The Last Time", which was co-written with Jamey Davis and Justin Parker.

"I mean, I hope [the album] feels like it's not just sunshine and rainbows for sure, but with songs like '[The] Last Time' it's really a realization that, 'Man, we really only get 87,393 days on this Earth if we live 75 years.' That's a pretty good life. I've lived it pretty hard, so I'm going to bust ass and live it happy. You really put in perspective those days you get; those breaths you get are anointed and special, and you don't take them for granted. So 'Last Time' was like, you never know when it's the last time. So make sure you tell her 'I love you.' Make sure you tell him 'I love you' and make sure you love on people and you get off your phone long enough to understand that it's happening right in front of you. Don't let that happen through a screen, like it's right in front of you, man. Jump off the rock. Go skiing, go bungee jumping. Go do what you want to do because, man, it goes quick. I just turned 40 and I just feel like that whole near death experience brought that in perspective, so 'Last Time' is that tune."

"Wildflower" is a particularly special song because he wrote it completely on his own and realized only after he listened back to the song that it was inspired by his older sister. "My favorite line of that song is, *[And] watch her find a jagged line / and dare the sun to shine down where she's at,*" says White.

With an album full of meaningful life lessons, there is so much for listeners to connect to and glean from this work of art. White has hopes that people will gain a better understanding of life and its meaning after listening to the project.

"I hope that they take away that life is good, that life is worth living," he says. "That they take away a person that's been through a lot of stuff and they hear joy and feel joy from listening to it. The encouragement to keep moving forward, the encouragement to keep treating people good, the encouragement that there are more good people than bad and also that we're not as divided as one may think. That the secrets lie in these small towns and these strip mall places and these ferris wheel and funnel cake little places. You are special and I hope that they take away somebody that genuinely loves what he gets to do and knows he knows that flawed human being. And that I'm just happy to be doing it and I really am. I hope people take that away from it. I just hope it helps them get through life and helps them get through the good days and through the bad days." ★






GEORGE MICHAEL

How a Childhood Friendship Shaped
the Sound of '80s Pop with
George Michael's Biggest Hits

BY TINA BENITEZ-EVES | PHOTO BY TONY MCGEE



David Austin played the guitar, and George Michael pounded the “drums” on the pillow. As kids coming up together in North London, the two learned to play songs like Elton John’s “Crocodile Rock,” Sweet’s “Wig Wam Bam,” and “Banks of the Ohio” by Olivia Newton-John early on. “We were only five and six,” says Austin of his lifelong friend and collaborator. “Our mothers were best friends, so we lived in each other’s pockets, day in and day out, obsessed with, and always playing music.”

Playing what Austin called “simple songs,” soon he and Michael graduated to creating their own riffs and lyrics. “What stands out to me is that, even at that age, the songs we wrote were simple but incredibly catchy,” shares Austin, who later produced Michael’s 2014 live album *Symphonica*, and co-wrote “Look at Your Hands” (*Faith*), “John and Elvis Are Dead” (*Patience*) and “December Song (I Dreamed of Christmas),” a 2008 holiday single.

“Unlike most children, George had a very commercial-sounding voice, in the same way that Michael Jackson did as a child,” adds Austin. “Those simple tunes and that commercial voice seemed to work for us, and we were hooked. We just couldn’t put it down. I also know that at that age, George knew what he wanted to do.”

Michael often wrote songs while commuting to work on buses, trains, and cars, including his first No. 1 hit, “Careless Whisper,” the story of a guilty two-timer, from Wham!’s 1984 album, *Make It Big*.

“In the very early days, George would compose everything in his head—the lyrics, vocals, melodies, and even the rhythm,” remembers Austin. “As a teenager with ‘Careless Whisper,’ he essentially wrote the lyrics and melody in his head over time, adding bits here and there.”

He later came up with the entire saxophone solo on “Careless Whisper” in his head while handing money to a bus driver en route to a DJ gig at the Bel Air Restaurant in Northwood, London. He kept working on the riff for another three months. Then, while recording *Make It Big*, Michael started rehearsing different sax players to capture the arrangement in his head.

Session musician Stephen Gregory, who played with Fleetwood Mac, Ginger Baker, Fela Kuti, Van Morrison, Alison Moyet, and on the Rolling Stones’ “Honky Tonk Women,” was one of the players asked to try out the part on the album.

Busy playing with British R&B singer Geor-

gie Fame, Gregory finally made it to the studio 20 minutes before midnight. He bumped into fellow saxophonist Ray Wylie, who was tired of waiting around for Michael and left abruptly, telling Gregory, “You can do it.”

Michael originally composed the part in D major. Before recording, Gregory asked engineer Chris Porter to take it down a semi-tone so he could play the part on his old rough around-the-edges Selmer sax from 1954 and recorded it in D-flat minor. As Porter was playing Gregory’s part back, Michael entered. “Then George walks in and says, ‘I think we got it,’ and he points at me,” remembers Gregory. “Then he says, ‘You’re number nine.’ Gregory was apparently the ninth sax player to record the solo.

At first, Gregory wasn’t sure what a band like Wham!, whose previous single was “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,” wanted him on their album. “I just thought, ‘Oh, this is the slowest thing,’” says Gregory. “It’s just going to be an album track. Then, about three weeks after I did it, you couldn’t go anywhere without hearing it. It was mad.”

Wham! partner Andrew Ridgeley later added a chord sequence using a Fender Telecaster gifted to him on his 18th birthday, and the song was complete. Released July 23, 1984, “Careless Whisper” topped the chart in 25 countries, and Michael’s sax solo, executed by Gregory, became one of the most recognizable sax solos in history.

In 2024, Wham!’s 1984 hit, “Last Christmas,” written and produced by Michael, also commemorated its fourth decade. Released as a remix on the duo’s third and final album, *Music from the Edge of Heaven* (1986), “Last Christmas” peaked at No. 4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

Also marking its 40th anniversary, “Careless Whisper” was celebrated with a limited edition vinyl release of the song, along with a live version recorded at Madison Square Garden and a selection of merchandise.

After the success of “Careless Whisper,” demand for Gregory skyrocketed. “People want to be associated with a success, don’t they?” says Gregory. “They think, ‘I need a bit of fairy dust on my album,’ but it doesn’t really work like that.”

With the exception of performing “Careless Whisper” on *Top of the Pops* with Michael, Gregory never worked with the pop legend again but is still grateful for the song that transformed his career.

“Thank you, George,” says Gregory. “Thank you for giving us some great songs.” ★



LEE DEWYZE NATURE DAYS

Singer-Songwriter Lee Dewyze
Dives Deep Into Solitude, Nature,
and Storytelling in His Sixth Album.

BY JIM BEVIGLIA | PHOTOS BY KALIN GORDON

That old adage about location, location, and location being the three keys to real estate? Well, it turns out that applies to making records as well, at least if you listen to the evidence presented by singer-songwriter Lee DeWyze on his wonderful new album *Gone for Days*.

DeWyze decamped to Bristol, Virginia, to record the album, and it helped inspire a top-notch batch of songs. Both the beauty of the surroundings and the introspection he was able to indulge in while writing the material vastly influenced the end result. Put all that together with a stellar group of collaborators, and *Gone for Days* feels like a career-best, six albums into the former *American Idol* champ's catalog.

American Songwriter had the pleasure of speaking with DeWyze

about the album. Here are his thoughts on the process, his bandmates, and the songs that resulted from it all.

ON HEADING TO VIRGINIA

"I think there was this feeling for me of just needing to get out and immerse myself in the moment of being alone. I went out there, and I rented this house for 2 ½ months. I kind of just wanted to sit with myself and see what happened. There I was in this house I rented in Bristol, across the street from a funeral home, which I didn't know when I first rented it. So, on day one, I got out on the porch, where I did 80 percent of the writing. I looked across the street and said, 'Is that a funeral home?' Over the course of those two months, I'd see



these funeral processions come and go. It was actually oddly comforting. It was a very unique environment.

"It's really interesting what you'll find when you're alone. For me, there was this moment where an artist might say, 'I don't want to go there,' and you start to become friends with them, those things that you normally push away or might not want to write about. On one hand, for all the other records, I'm out in sunny California, and there was a heaviness to my writing. But here, I'm out in this creaky old house across from a funeral home, and I ended up writing this album, which, for me, ended up being a hopeful and inspiring space to be."

ON BEING INSPIRED BY NATURE

"I love being in the wilderness. I love being in nature. When I was growing up, I loved fishing and camping. Being in a place where there are hills and lakes and things like that, it bled into the music in a very real way, to the point that it inspired some lyrics very literally. In "Bloom," I sing, *Some days I wake up and I feel like a different person / But that's all right / I still know my name / But through the window / I can see the trees are hurting / And that's all right / It means a change is on its way*. That was literally a moment when I was writing. I looked out the window and saw the trees coming back. It was very inspiring.

"A song like 'Reminds Me,' I sing, *Songbird that the morning brings reminds me I can sing*. That was inspired by me sitting on that porch in the morning listening to these birds. I became a bird watcher while I was out there (*laughs*). There's so much wildlife that I naturally became very immersed in it, which bled into the songwriting. And I'm glad that it did. Deep down, I was hoping that it would. But I kind of let things come as they did. I think it's one of those experiences I'll probably chase forever. It's very unique to that moment and being there."

ON HIS ROLE IN THE RECORDING PROCESS

"I called Dave Eggar (who provided additional production on the album), and I said, 'I want to make a record there.' When I was out there the first time (DeWyze had first visited Bristol for the city's famed Rhythm & Roots festival), I visited Classic Recording Studio. I stopped there and met Mike Stephenson, who recorded and engineered this entire record, and we produced it together. We messed around in the studio a little bit. And I said, 'This feels right. I need to make my record here.' On my trip home, I talked to my wife and said, 'Hey, I need to talk to you about something.' She said, 'You want to make your record here. You should.' Getting that green light, well, she's always supportive, but it was a big deal to leave for almost three months to go write this album.

"Here's what I can say about the guys who played on this record. They absolutely put their trust in me and what my vision was. It wasn't where I walked in with a song and said, 'All right, I recorded my parts; I'll see you tomorrow.' I was there for every piece of it and worked with them. So much of the songwriting was visual; I would explain the songs visually. Like, 'Before you play your part, this is what's going on in my head in the song.' Everyone was open to trusting in me, and I in them."

"IT'S REALLY
INTERESTING
WHAT YOU'LL
FIND WHEN
YOU'RE
ALONE."

ON DEVISING THE SOUND OF THE RECORD

"I had a vision for what I wanted it to sound like. On this one, I wanted to really let the stories be heard. I wanted my vocal to be an essential piece of these songs. I wanted the storytelling aspect to feel honest and real. In doing that, early on, I realized I didn't want to hide my vocals behind production or the wall of sound. I wanted the

vocal to be out front, and I wanted it to be heard because I wanted the story to be told. And I made that very clearly known in the studio. So many of the songs I was writing they could have been anybody's stories. So many people have felt these things. It was really important to me that the song's message was conveyed clearly.

"Working with these people on this record, they're all such incredible musicians that it was very clear to me very early that I didn't need to babysit the session or say, 'Here's what I want you to play, exactly like this.' I find when you're working with such talented musicians who offer so much creatively, I like to tell them before we record, 'This is what I'm thinking, hearing, and feeling.' Not in a controlling way. I like to direct them like, 'Go play this thing that I'm feeling and I'm hearing.' Once that's done, play whatever the f** you want (laughs).

"I know that they're so incredible, and they have such vision as well, that they're feeling something also. I wanted to take that barrier or box away and say, 'Now, explore it.' Then they'd come out of the gate and do something incredible. There really was a trust between us. They respected me as a songwriter, and I respected them as songwriters and musicians. The vision for each song became apparent very quickly during the recording. The message of the song, and the emotionality with which I would be singing the song, drove the direction."

ON THE SONG "BLOOM"

"One of the best moments on this record was what Patrick Duke did on percussion on 'Bloom.' When I heard it, it actually reminded me of 'Longer Boats' from Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman*, which is my favorite record of all time. It was the first record I remember hearing as a kid and realizing what a song was. I remember reading the back of that record and saying, 'These are stories, these are songs.'

"There was something almost tribal in how Patrick played the percussion on it. There was a choice. It was like we could do the Americana thing, four-on-the-floor, straight drum beat. But then we had this other thing that he was doing on top of that. I was like, 'Let's get rid of those other drums. What does just that one thing on top sound like?' There was a totally different energy being

brought to it. It became this moment on the record where this special thing happened sonically."

ON THE SONG "DANDELION"

"The idea behind that song is that I was simply looking at dandelions in a field. As a child, it's something where you pick a bouquet of them for your mother, this beautiful, loving moment. As an adult, you buy weed-killer. It was such a representation of imagination, childhood, and innocence. It symbolizes how, as you get older, you can lose some of that joy. That's why it opens up with; *We counted castles in the sky / There were dragons*. As you get older, it becomes, 'Where is that place?' Over time, these memories get lost. That feeling of innocence, or that feeling of wonder and imagination, it all falls by the wayside. In a weird way, we're kind of all searching for that. Like when you smell or see something, or you hear a song, and it's like, 'Wow, I was just taken back to when I was a kid.' That song is a reminder to carry some of that with you."

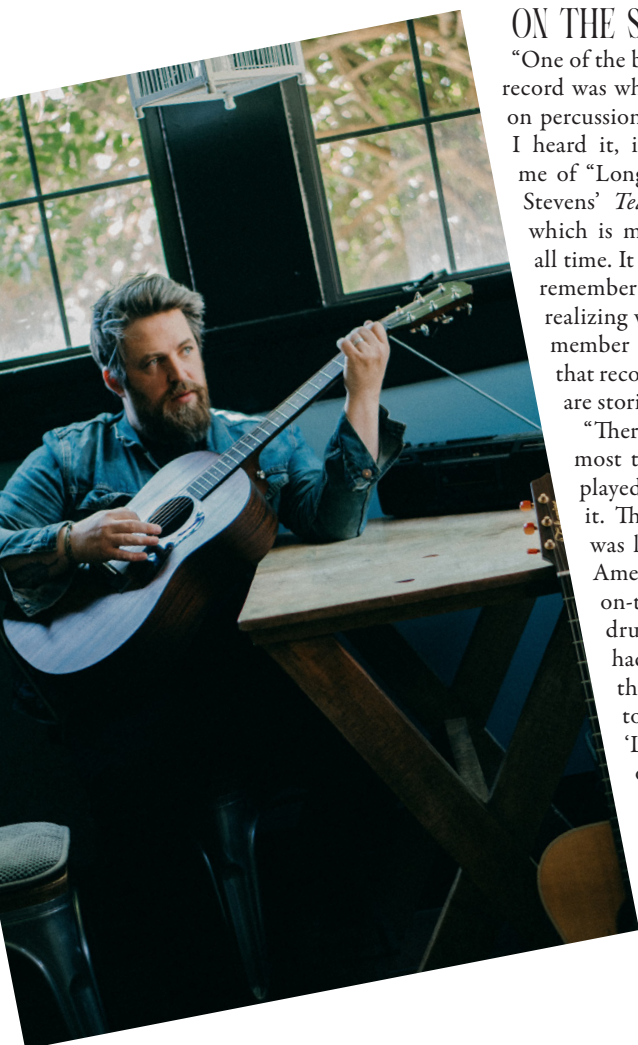
ON HAVING BARRY BALES AND TIM STAFFORD OF UNION STATION PLAY ON A FEW TRACKS

"It set a bar for myself in my head where I was like, 'I need to give this album what I think it deserves. And I'm going to do what's best for the music always.' That was the point of the whole thing. Let's do what's best for the song. It was like everyone, as we worked on it, and it's a special thing to say, everyone started to care about the songs. Everyone felt connected to it. That made it that much better. At the end of the day, that's what I wanted. And I didn't even know that's what I wanted."

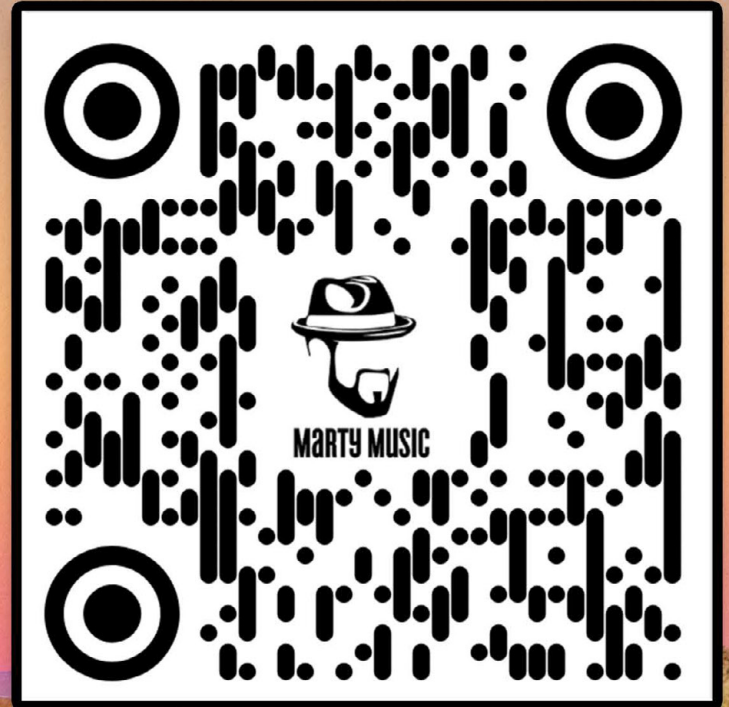
ON THE SPECIAL NATURE OF *GONE FOR DAYS*

"I didn't know what to expect when I went out there. But it became clear that we were doing something special, if for no one else, then for us. And I was able to drive away from Bristol with this record, and I couldn't be prouder of it. I think the job of a songwriter is this idea of being an emotional locksmith. I want people to hear the record and find their anthem. Let these songs be something that can open up a part of them and a piece of them that allows them to feel what the song is asking them to feel. That's really my hope for it. I feel very connected to it. There's a lot of questioning, searching, going into the unknown. But there's a lot of hopefulness to it as well, which came through in ways that I didn't necessarily expect." ★

"THAT WAS THE POINT OF THE WHOLE THING. LET'S DO WHAT'S BEST FOR THE SONG."



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BEHIND THE HITS

How Tape Room Music Helps
Songwriters Find Their Voice.

Long before he was one of Nashville's most sought-after songwriters, Ashley Gorley recalls sitting in his music publishing class at Belmont University, learning about what it entails to be a professional songwriter. "From that point on, I wanted to be a publisher and a songwriter," Gorley tells *American Songwriter*. "From the very beginning, I wanted to be both."

Since his days as an aspiring writer at Belmont, Gorley has become one of the most successful songwriters in country music, with over 75 No. 1 hits and artists ranging from Carrie Underwood to Bon Jovi cutting his songs. This momentum took years to build, as Gorley notes he was seven years into his publishing deal (2006) when he scored his first No. 1 single, co-writing Underwood's "Don't Forget to Remember Me."

In 2011, he launched his own publishing company, Tape Room Music. "I wanted to help people write better once I felt like I had that gift," the multi-time ASCAP Country Songwriter of the Year winner explains of Tape Room's origins. "When I was thinking about starting this up, I felt like we could offer something unique, that I could really dig into the bones of the songs. One of my gifts was helping coach writers. I've always tried to coach all of them to find their own voice."

Part of Gorley's method of helping writers find their unique voice is encouraging them to think outside the box, as well as provide constructive feedback on songs. One example of this is Tape Room's first signee, Zach Crowell, who has penned more than 30 No. 1 hits. Gorley credits Crowell for writing country music from a "completely different

approach” and infusing hip-hop into the many hits he co-wrote and co-produced for Sam Hunt, Keith Urban, Dustin Lynch, and more. Crowell is part of a roster of 14 Tape Room writers who’ve collectively written 50 No. 1 hits (not including Gorley’s).

The winning streak began in 2014 with Lynch’s chart-topper “Where It’s At,” co-written by Crowell, and comes full circle with Lynch’s most recent No. 1 single “Chevrolet,” co-produced by Crowell and co-written by Hunter Phelps.

“Even more so than me having a hit that I wrote is helping somebody go from not being sure if they can do this or not, to being one of the best ones in the game,” the 2023 ACM Songwriter of the Year praises of the Tape Room writing team. “It’s about signing the right people and by cultivating a culture to where they actually believe they can get these hits. To see it work out like this is amazing.”

Another team member integral to Tape Room’s success is President Blain Rhodes. The two connected while Rhodes worked at Warner Chappell Music where Gorley was signed as a writer. When Gorley shared his desire to launch his own publishing company, he asked Rhodes to join him.

“We do life with our writers and see a vision for what they want to do,” Rhodes says of the “family environment” at Tape Room. “They’re all competitive people, but they’re all pulling for each other to win. We care about each other.”

He describes scoring a No. 1 song as a “miracle” that’s the result of a dedicated team effort ranging from the writers crafting a quality song to getting an artist to record it and release it as a single before a promotional staff spends multiple weeks trying to get it up the chart.

“To have a number one, it’s such a huge deal. We know how hard it is to get, so much luck goes into it,” Rhodes shares. “The 50 number speaks to the writers to be able to keep doing it consistently like that. It feels good to get that number.”

“I LOVE SEEING GUYS THAT GO FROM BARELY MAKING THEIR RENT TO HAVING SUCCESS AND BEING ABLE TO PAY OFF THEIR HOUSE.”

One of the many writers who helped Tape Room achieve this milestone is Ben Johnson, who was introduced to Gorley through fellow hit writer Rivers Rutherford.

“I basically had been turned down by every publisher on [Music] Row,” Johnson recalls meeting Gorley six years into his Nashville journey. “I knew I wasn’t really good enough to be signed yet and I knew I needed help.”

Johnson scored a meeting with Gorley where he had the opportunity to play songs he’d written and get feedback. That meeting turned into a act of fate when Gorley asked the budding writer to play a song he considered playing for him, but didn’t. That’s when Johnson pulled out “Patient,” which Gorley requested he send after the meeting. At two in the morning, Johnson got a call from Gorley saying he had sent “Patient” to Charlie Puth, who recorded it for his 2018 album, *Voicenotes*.

“That changed my life,” Johnson affirms. He received another life-changing opportunity when Gorley invited him to co-write Lee Brice’s 2020 single, “One of Them Girls,” which became Johnson’s first No. 1 hit. “I’d had so many almost hits, and finally having my first one was pretty amazing and special,” Johnson says.



Both

Gorley and Rhodes agree that seeing the writers blossom not only musically but personally is one of the most gratifying aspects of the job, whether it’s helping an established writer sell their catalog of songs or seeing members of their team start their own families.

“I love seeing guys that go from barely making their rent to having success and being able to pay off their house,” Rhodes explains of an aspect of the job that brings him fulfillment. “Seeing the songs literally change their lives is the best part of it. I feel like I’ve had so much more than I deserve when it comes to my own personal songwriting success, so to think that I had a hand in giving somebody a better life is my favorite part of what I get to do,” Gorley proclaims. “As long as we’re doing that, then we’re going to keep doing it.” ★



PEYTAN PORTER

ROAD TO

AUTHENTICITY

Peytan Porter Finds Her Stride While Exploring New Creative and Personal Horizons.

When Peytan Porter first tried to find her footing in Nashville's music scene, she adopted a pop-country style that, when she looks back on it, wasn't really her speed. Though it was commercially viable, she walked away less than thrilled with her work. She's proof of the familiar advice that to be successful and *stay* successful, you must be yourself.

Porter is a Georgia native who moved to Nashville for college. All the while, she was fostering a love of writing songs and playing music. Porter got her first big break in 2020 when Jody Williams—a renowned music executive in Nashville—signed her to her first publishing deal. After that, she could officially boast that she was a songwriter. It was no longer just a passion but a job with an official title.

Soon after, she began sharing some original music on social media, quickly gaining traction. Thanks to that success, she also decided to try her hand at being an artist. As stated, her early projects felt inauthentic, pushing her to explore new musical territory.

She reintroduced herself in 2023 with a newfound confidence and sense of style. Her Georgia roots have produced a smoky, Americana style. The new sound can be heard on her latest EP, *Grown*. True to the name, the EP speaks to Porter growing into the artist she's always wanted to be.

"I really wanted to course correct," Porter tells *American Songwriter*. "I wanted to strip away the production styles and get more into my instincts."

The wayfaring spirit her music suggests is found in her approach to her career as whole. The best example of that is her recent tour out west. While many artists mull over the shows they play, Porter decided to let fate and her ambition guide her. In the middle of a road trip with her friends, she squeezed in some impromptu—and memorable—shows.

"I love road-tripping, and I love the new direction that my music is taking," Porter says. "I didn't have any fall tours lined up, and [I thought], 'What if I just do a road trip and make a tour out of it?'"

These shows allowed Porter to road-test her new sound to see if they



"felt good in a live environment." Among the material she was able to play were songs from *Grown*. The title track carries a sentiment many in their mid-'20s can relate to: *They're all so proud back home / They don't know how alone / I've grown*.

The song was born out of Porter's first experience living alone. She moved into an apartment she "had no business living in." She wanted to prove to herself that she could live alone. She found out that it was a lot harder than she had imagined. "I crawled out of bed with my journal, and I was praying for protection," Porter says. "It was this really lonesome feeling."

Elsewhere on her setlists was the song that inspired Porter's sonic shift, "God's Hotel." The song sees Porter reckoning with her Southern Baptist faith. "There's definitely a lot of fear attached to my faith and my spirituality, and that was one of the first things that I was trying to work through," Porter says of this track.

The song challenges her beliefs with a bit of humor, masking the powerful emotions at its core.

All in all, the shows were successes. It proved to Porter that, though

her career shift was inspired by her own desires, it could also be accepted by audiences. “It was amazing to get to meet such cool people in passing and also see some of the most amazing parts of the country,” she says of this once-in-a-career opportunity.

In addition to her own shows, Porter opened for Tim McGraw earlier this year, marking yet another career milestone for the singer. Playing arenas was a massive leap for the up-and-coming artist. Nevertheless, it was a welcomed challenge, according to Porter.

“I felt so at home in an arena setting that it was really shocking to me,” she says.

She got the call about the McGraw tour while playing a very small show in Raleigh, North Carolina. Learning that her career was about to take a massive turn was a shock for Porter, especially considering the circumstances she was in when she got the opportunity.

“This industry has a way of giving carrots and dangling them in front of you,” Porter says. “Playing a show to three people and knowing in the back of your mind that you’re going to be in an arena the next year opening for a legend was definitely a large carrot in my face.”

Both of these touring experiences were beneficial for Porter. While one helped cement her newfound style, the other proved she was ready to take on bigger crowds. Sharing her music with an audience is deeply important to Porter. She says it’s what making music is for.

“[Music] really doesn’t mean anything unless it’s a shared experience,” she says. “I love that at live shows people show up, and we experience something that won’t happen ever again. The rooms will never be the same. The crowds will always be different; the sound will change. But for however long the set is, we get to share something. It’s like magic.”

PEYTAN PORTER'S TOUR DIARY

MAY 30:
OPENING FOR TIM MCGRAW
IN TOLEDO, OHIO

I was so nervous that first night [on the Tim McGraw tour]. We were putting in our in-ears backstage, and the doors to the building opened up, sunlight came in, and you just saw a Tim McGraw silhouette walking in...He was so kind. He introduced himself to the entire band right as we were about to go onstage, which really helped bring my nerves down because he was so welcoming.

JUNE 14:
HOME STATE SHOW WITH TIM MCGRAW
IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

All my friends and family came to the Atlanta show. We got to stand side stage and danced





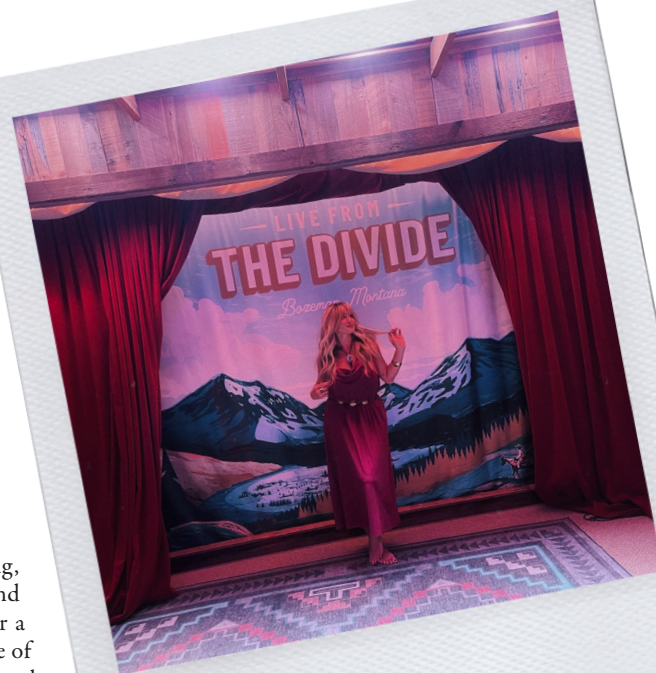
to all the Tim McGraw hits. My little niece was there and thought all the applause was for her. I think the best part of this is getting to share fun experiences with the people who have supported me trying to get them.

AUGUST 15: LOST CREEK RANCH IN MOOSE CREEK, WYOMING

Lost Creek Ranch was this stunning, stunning place out front of the Grand Tetons. All of the people are there for a week, I think, so I got to play for some of the folks that had been staying there and the staff that comes there for the summer, works together, and then returns to their homes across the country. The people at the ranch were real cowboys. One of the songs I tried out has this tagline of "Back it up, cowboy." The cowboys loved it! That was really surprising. There were a few people at each show who came up and quoted lyrics from that song.

AUGUST 24: LIVE FROM THE DIVIDE IN BOZEMAN, MONTANA

Live from the Divide in Bozeman is one of the coolest venues I've ever played. It's this old building with an intimate, listening-room style crowd. It was almost sold out, so it was packed. People were there to listen and learn. That's always a really fun crowd to play for. ★



KACEY

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MUSGRAVES

ES REF

KACEY MUSGRAVES

REFLECTS ON HER
LIFE, SISTERHOOD,
AND JOHN PRINE

BY CINDY WATTS

PHOTOS BY KELLY CHRISTINE SUTTON



Kacey Musgraves aches for the solace she finds in nature. Trees and wildlife surround her home, yet it's only 10 minutes from downtown Nashville. Musgraves' eyes sparkle as she describes the

deer, bobcats, and owls who wander across her yard. She chuckles, explaining she had to honk her horn at wild turkeys to get them to waddle out of her driveway.

Knowing the peace she finds in the forest, no one was more surprised than Musgraves when she felt herself gravitating to New York City to record her latest album *Deeper Well*.

She calls it a "conundrum."

"It's this maximalist environment full of humans," Musgraves says of New York City. "It's loud. It stinks in places. It's humanity on 10."

Yet, the Texas native felt compelled to record at Electric Lady Studios in Greenwich Village, the heart of the folk scene. Musgraves describes her creative brain at the time as a "blank canvas." Unexpectedly, the city's frantic energy and its crush of humanity made it easier to self-reflect and tap into her zen.

Musgraves' intimate 14-song album, *Deeper Well*, was born from the experience. She re-teamed with producers Ian Fitchuk and Daniel Tashian for the principally acoustic, folk-leaning atmospheric pop collection she released in March.

"Every project is different because you never step in the same river twice," Tashian tells American Songwriter. "Seasons change; people get on different wavelengths. I think Kacey is a highly sensitive and perceptive artist. She won't put her weight behind anything that feels insincere or too contrived."

Tashian recalls that Musgraves and her producers broke "things down to the bones." She didn't want any loops, tracks, or beats. "I think she wanted people to know she can create things that are self-contained and don't need a lot of production to understand them or for them to work," he says.

Then, Musgraves realized she wasn't finished writing for the project, adding seven new songs to the album and put out *Deeper Into the Well* in August. While the original version is home to the title track, radio single "Too Good To Be True," and possibly Musgraves' favorite song,

"Jade Green," *Deeper Into the Well* includes her Leon Bridges duet "Superbloom," a song for her sister, "Little Sister," her brokenhearted "Arm's Length" and "Irish Goodbye," a song about being ghosted by a romantic partner.

"It can be really intimidating to put your most intimate thoughts out there," says Musgraves, perched on a stool in American Songwriter's Nashville office. "But I always find it to be the opposite in the sense that some of the things that are hard for me to say in real life, I can actually randomly say more easily in song form. The whole process is really therapeutic for me, for sure."

Musgraves sat down with American Songwriter to share the stories behind many of the songs on *Deeper Well* and *Deeper Into the Well*.

"Cardinal"

"I'm a believer in the other side," Musgraves says. "I think we don't have all the answers there. And I think everything is made of energy. I just feel like there's got to be something else other than what's right in front of us."

Musgraves and John Prine became good friends before Prine passed away in April 2020 from complications of COVID-19. Musgraves considers him a mentor and says he undoubtedly influenced her more than anyone else in songwriting.

"After he left this world, it was really strange," Musgraves says. "A lot of things kind of started happening. We would be here all day if I went into all of those things, but there was some weird kind of supernatural stuff."

Sometimes, Musgraves feels she's tapped into otherworldly things, and her friends joke about it.

"The weird stuff always finds me," she says. "But one of the things was that this cardinal would come to my window every day. It was the same one, and he would sit on this branch. There were interesting song ideas and messages and lights turning on and off. I don't know; it was just getting weird. There was that old saying, what is it? 'Cardinals appear when angels are near.' But yeah, that's where that song kind of came from. Just looking at this cardinal being like, 'Are you just a cardinal? Or are you bringing me a message from somewhere else?'"

"Deeper Well"

"Deeper Well" was the second song Musgraves and her producers wrote for the album. She didn't have a title for it yet. She planned to let the songs shape her journey and then zoom out

to find the overarching theme. When they wrote "Deeper Well," the title spoke to her.

"I just knew it spoke to, in a larger sense, where I feel like I was in my life and where I am right now," she says. "I'm right in the middle of my 30s. It feels really good. 'Deeper Well' is an ode to ruthlessly removing resistance to growth. That has been a theme for me in the last few years. It can look like trimming out the fat, trimming friendships down, and reallocating where your energy is spent. Are these habits working for me? Am I living in the right place? What can I refine here about my life? And sometimes that means maybe disappointing someone who has different expectations."

"Too Good To Be True"

Musgraves describes the song as the newly-in-love stage when you're dying to spend time together.

"You are making love," she says. "You're making breakfast, throwing all your cares out the window."

"Too Good To Be True" delves into the fear of opening up again after being deeply hurt.

"It takes a lot of bravery to put yourself out there again," she says. "But I do think that's why we're here as humans, and it can be easy to stay in this little world, currently single world, where you can control every aspect of everything, and it feels good. But you also grow a lot as a human by rubbing up against someone else's shortcomings and them rubbing up against yours. And it's just scary. Conflict is inevitable with love. It's part of it. I think I was just in this mindset at that point in time of like, 'Okay, I'm opening myself up again here.'"

"Jade Green"

"People ask me, 'What's your favorite song?'" Musgraves says. "And it's ridiculous. You cannot pick as the creator. But if I was going to pick a fave, fave, I feel like 'Jade Green' would be very high up on there. That song makes me want to just frolic. I just want to frolic. I just want to run and frolic through Irish fields when I hear that song."

"The Architect"

"The Architect" was the last song Musgraves wrote for *Deeper Well*. She thought the album was complete, but the singer, Shane McAnally, and Josh Osborne met for a write in Nashville in early 2023. The date was a couple of weeks after the Covenant School shooting in which three children and three adults were murdered.

"I think I can speak for everybody whenever I say Nashville did not feel right for a long time



“That song was written super fast. Some songs just write themselves.”

after that,” Musgraves says. “It just was so horrific and unbelievable, as all of those things are. But this one, obviously, was very close to home.”

Meeting her collaborators on a sunny day to do their jobs and write songs felt “just ridiculous” to her when there were parents down the street suffering. They didn’t know what to write about or what to say.

“We were talking about the beauty and the terror of being a human,” she says. “The conversation started flowing.”

She had the title “The Architect” written down but didn’t know what to do with it.

“If you say something like that in a room with either Shane or Josh, in two milliseconds, you’re going to have your answer,” she says. “Josh just goes, ‘Can I speak to the architect? What’s going on here in this world?’ It really was born out of a real conversation. And I was holding a little green apple whenever I was sitting in there. That song was written super fast. Some songs just write themselves.”

Musgraves put significant thought and intent into the original batch of songs for *Deeper Well*. She didn’t realize until later that she wanted to dig even deeper. Her original 14 songs expanded to 21 tracks.

“It’s scratching a little bit more under the surface,” she says. “I guess it just turns out there was more to say.”

Highlights from
Deeper Into The Well

“Ruthless”

Musgraves thought about her nephew when she was writing “Ruthless.”

But if anyone tried to hurt you, I would be ruthless for you / Do something crazy, you know I would, baby / I swear I’ve got your heart / And if it came down to it, I would be ruthless.

“Obviously, it can be about somebody that you’re in love with, or it can be about anyone that you love that you feel protective over,” Musgraves says. “That’s how I feel about my friend group. I’m nice until you’re messing with somebody that I really love, then the gloves come off.”

“Little Sister”

“There is something so beautiful and terrible about a sister’s relationship,” Musgraves says. “You’ll hurt each other so much. Growing up, Kelly and I have fought a lot. But I cannot imagine my life without her.”

Musgraves and her sister, Kelly, are



best friends. The singer considers her a confidante. Kelly is a photographer and takes all of Musgraves' photos.

"She's brilliant," Musgraves says. "But there was a point in time where I literally threw a full can of Coke purposely at her head. And I will say, I freaking nailed it. I could have been drafted into Major League Baseball with this throw. I mean, it was across the room. It was impressive, but it really hurt her. Anyway, the moral of the story is, we're fine now."

"Perfection" featuring Tiny Habits

"Perfection" is an ode to Musgraves' OCD tendencies.

"I'm a very detail-oriented person," she says. "Even since I was little, I really make sense of the world via symmetry and balance. I mean, you can ask all my friends. I'm always arranging things. If I'm standing at a hostess stand at a restaurant waiting to be seated, I'm straightening the business cards. So that song literally does touch on some of that. But also, my friends Tiny Habits, I'm such a fan of their songs, their writing, their voices. I just think they're going to take over the damn world. I'm lucky to call them friends. They're so sweet. And it is just an honor to have them on that song with me."

"Arm's Length"

An achingly vulnerable lullaby about loving someone who doesn't love her back, lyrics include:

I couldn't love you into lovin' me / Keepin' me should've been easy, but obviously / It just wasn't easy / I gave you water, but I couldn't make you drink / Keepin' me just within reach, always holdin' me / At arm's length

"I love that song," Musgraves says, recalling that she wrote it in California with Daniel Tashian and Ian Fitchuck. "They're all three of my great friends, and just so fun being in a room with them and writing. But it's not a fun feeling to really love somebody and want to pull them in, and they're just kind of keeping you here."

The magic is in the specificity, she explains.

"That's the challenge of a songwriter," she says. "Every song has been written a million times. Every emotion has been written a million times. How can you say it differently?"

Musgraves challenges herself by asking how she can simplify songs. How can she make them more conversational? How can she flip the concept into something listeners wouldn't expect?

"It's a really fun challenge," she says. "It's almost like a little game."

"Irish Goodbye"

Irish Goodbye is a term that means to leave without saying goodbye. Musgraves supports them at parties—but not in romantic relationships.

"Don't ghost people," she says. "Just have the balls to say, 'I'm sorry. I need to move on. I need to do this, that, or the other.' Don't leave people hanging. But at a party, what are you going to do? Make the rounds? Say goodbye to a hundred people. You're going to be out there all night. Just slip out the back. They won't even notice."

"I love that song." ★



Kacey Musgraves Designs Clothing Line Inspired by *Deeper Well*.

Kacey Musgraves recently added fashion designer to her resume. Musgraves teamed with sustainable fashion brand Reformation for a 17-piece line primarily made from recycled cashmere and regenerative wool.

Reformation x Kacey Musgraves includes vintage-inspired and fashion-forward pieces ranging from boots, fur jackets, and denim corsets to delicate dresses, separates, long, heavy coats, and more. Prices range from \$28 to \$498. Musgraves and her sister, Kelly, who is also her photographer, traveled to the famous Cotswolds in England to do the brand's photoshoot.

"I'm so proud of it," Musgraves tells American Songwriter of the fashion line. "Even down to all the names, the fit of everything, where the zipper is."

The singer who recently released *Deeper Into the Well*, the extended version of her *Deeper Well* album, described herself as "super hands-on" in the design process, even going over sketches and choosing the fabrics.

She describes Reformation as "an awesome clothing brand" that she's a fan of. Musgraves has always had a heavy hand in designing her world—whether it's her website, merchandise, or album covers. When this opportunity came up, it gave Musgraves the chance to flex a different type of creative muscle.

"I'm working hand in hand with a brand and thinking about their consumers, what they would like, what do I want?" she says. "I want to create a world for someone to step into, much like my albums. This was sort of an extension of that, and it did start with the aesthetic of *Deeper Well*. I thought, 'How could this be taken into clothing form and another dimension?'"

She details the line as beautiful, tailored, cottage core, feminine, and slightly equestrian. Given the aesthetic, the location for the photoshoot was of the utmost importance to her. Musgraves couldn't be happier with

the frames they captured in the Cotswolds and thinks they reflect the line flawlessly.

"They're so dreamy," she says of the photos, explaining that her sister had shot them at a house that was originally a monastery built in the 1400s. "There was a 1,000-year-old tree in the front yard. I mean, stacked stone walls and rolling hills and sheep and horses. Oh my God, it made my soul so happy."



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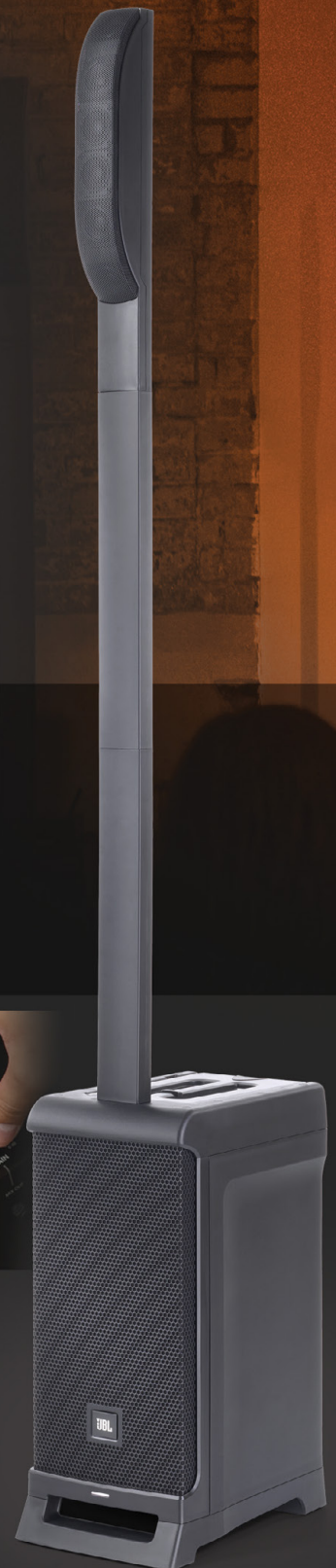
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SONG CONTEST **OVERALL WINNER**



2023 GRAND-PRIZE WINNER

CHRISTIAN GATES—BAHLHORN

WINNING SONG: "WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN"

AS: What made you decide to enter American Songwriter's Song Contest?

Christian Gates-Bahlhorn: After releasing my most recent album, *Kironic*, I was having trouble getting it off the ground, so I was looking for outlets that could potentially spread the word and saw American Songwriter coming across my Facebook timeline. I usually am reluctant entering into contests, but I felt like this was the only move I had in the chamber to get the ball rolling. So I took it and submitted three songs.

AS: How did you feel when you learned you were the Grand Prize Winner?

CGB: I was absolutely surprised. It was unexpected. I sat on "What's It All Mean" for five years until it became the opening theme for my album. Five years ago, I didn't release it in 2019 because I thought it was boring. Then, as time went on, I grew older and experienced life. I saw [that] this song reflected my headspace at the time of release. Oh, how time can change our perspective!

AS: What was your inspiration for your song, "What's It All Mean?" Why did you want to write it?

CGB: I was going through a phase in my life where nothing made sense: the life I was living, the things I was doing, reflecting on life in its entirety. I was in my first existential crisis. Granted, I was 26, and the pandemic didn't even happen yet. Usually, I feel compelled to write music when the emotions in the present

moment are too much to deal with internally. This happened to be one of those times.

AS: When writing a song, what comes first, the music or lyrics?

CGB: Depends on the song and the concept. Nine times out of 10, I'm starting with the music. I will make a drum pattern and then keys, work on eight bars, and start with the hook. But on some of my best ideas, there's usually a melody accompanied by words before the music is

even thought of. I've only had that happen a handful of times, though.

AS: What keeps you motivated as a songwriter?

CGB: Life always motivates me—I'm not on a specific writing schedule. I write when I'm moved to write. Though it's good to be consistent, I also think it's good to diversify your time and become equally good at many different things. When it's time for me to put it down in a song, I feel it in my bones and start writing.

AS: How long have you been writing songs, and what are your songwriting goals?

CGB: I've been writing for 14 years now, since I was 16 as a producer, multi-instrumentalist, and artist. My songwriting goals have moved more into elaborate concepts and ideas. I want not only the songs to be good and relatable but also the environment and presentation of them to really give listeners a tangible perspective. I want them to feel as if people are watching their favorite film or reading their favorite book.

AS: Are there any songwriters, artists, or

events that have especially inspired you lately?

CGB: Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, and Pink Floyd have been huge inspirations to my art and the direction I want to take it, especially when it comes to ideas and concepts.

AS: What is your idea of the perfect song?

CGB: The perfect song is one where its mistakes can't be fixed.

AS: What's the best piece of advice another songwriter has ever given you?

CGB: 'You've gotta leave space for God to walk through the room'—Quincy Jones

AS: Who are your all-time favorite songwriters, and why?

CGB: Stevie Wonder for his ability to combine words and music in the most beautiful way. Prince for his musicianship and showmanship. Pink Floyd for their album concepts. Kanye West for his ear for sonic innovation. Kendrick Lamar for his perspective on life. Quincy Jones for his unlimited capacity to make amazing music.

AS: As you were also the *Make It Count* winner, tell us about the mentorship prizes you received from that promotion.

CGB: They were very helpful in getting me where I wanted to go. It's not very easy to ask for help, but knowing what you're asking for is effective in these conversations.

AS: What's next for you?

CGB: Continue to do the work and write music, live life, and help others write music to assist in maximizing self-expression.

AS: What would you tell other aspiring artists considering entering the Song Contest?

CGB: You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take. If you aren't willing to take the risk, you aren't willing to receive the reward. Take the risk. It worked for me. Also, don't put your eggs in one basket; submit more than one song. I submitted three and it led me here. ★

"WHEN IT'S
TIME FOR ME
TO PUT IT
DOWN IN A
SONG, I FEEL
IT IN MY BONES
AND START
WRITING."

2023 SONG CONTEST CATEGORY WINNERS

American Songwriter is always looking to elevate the next generation of musical talent, providing a platform to help emerging artists gain the recognition they deserve through our 2023 Song Contest. With the support of a notable panel of judges featuring top artists and industry-leading A&R executives, contestants had an opportunity to showcase their work to people who could help build their careers. Out of the many entries we received, 10 special songwriters stood out, claiming first place in their respective categories. Meet the 2023 winners who are set to take their music to new heights.

Terry Blade



AMERICANA FIRST PLACE WINNER: “STARDUST”

BY MEG MCREE

Writing songs has become the main way I make sense of the world around me and I loved playing with perspective while writing “Stardust.” I wanted the story to depict a sort of out-of-body experience. There’s this weird cognitive dissonance that happens when someone knows the consequences but makes the mistake anyway, over and over again. I know the feeling well but enjoyed the challenge of describing it with a song.

Meg McRee



BLUES FIRST PLACE WINNER: “WON’T BE AROUND”

BY BOBBY COLE, LARRY D. ROBERTSON,
TERRY BLADE

Terry Blade is an award-winning singer-songwriter based in Chicago. “Won’t Be Around” is a song from Blade’s album *Ethos: Son of a Sharecropper*. The album’s title is a reference to Blade being a descendant of African American sharecroppers from Colerain, North Carolina. At its core, the song is about leaving an abusive relationship by having the will to speak it, the courage to do it, and the strength to never return to it.



CHRISTIAN FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“JOY IN THE BATTLE”

BY MAJOR JOHNSON FINLEY,
 JOAQUIN BYNUM (MAJOR.)

3 years ago, during GRAMMY week in Vegas, I (MAJOR.) was introduced to co-writer/producer Joaquin Bynum by Michelle Bell of RocNation Publishing. Prior to the intro, Michelle said, “You are a powerfully relatable storyteller, and I believe I have the perfect collaborator to help curate the magic with you.” She was right; we had instant chemistry. Writing “Joy In The Battle” alongside Joaquin Bynum was truly divine... it was MAJOR. Now, as part of his EP “The Hope Of My Soul” has an award-winning hope anthem to inspire the nation and beyond!

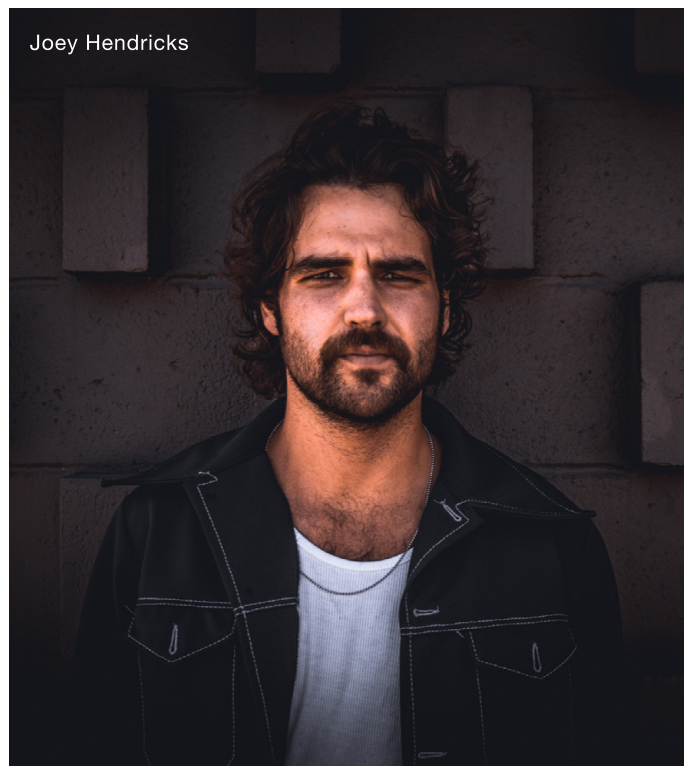


Lydia Frutig

COUNTRY FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“COMEBACK KID”

BY JOEY HENDRICKS, ANDY ALBERT,
 ZACH ABEND

I’m Joey Hendricks, a songwriter from Anacortes, Washington, who moved to Nashville seven years ago to pursue music and songwriting full-time. The inspiration behind “Comeback Kid” was just wishing you could go back to your younger self before love, heart-break, and life begin to distort your old, innocent view of the world and the safety I felt when I was a kid and didn’t know any better. This song is about that.



Joey Hendricks

FOLK SINGER-SONGWRITER
 FIRST PLACE WINNER:
**“I’M NOT IN LOVE
 WITH YOU”**

BY LYDIA FRUTIG, ALEX NOBILE,
 NATE SANDER, WESLEY HENRY

I’m an independent artist based in the valley of Los Angeles. I met

my producer, naebird, a few years ago, and since then, we have built this project from the ground up with perseverance and strong belief. We are a small group of artists and songwriters who believe in each other and I feel so grateful to be surrounded by such amazing humans.

“I’m not in love with you” came after a breakup when I realized I was hiding such an important part of myself in order to make the relationship succeed. So when I regained that part of myself, I became unrecognizable to the person. It made me see that they didn’t really know me in the way I wanted.

Leshaun Nash



HIP-HOP/RAP FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“DRAMA”
 BY LESHAUN NASH

I grew up in a small city called Gautier on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi. I was heavily influenced by hip-hop as a child where I eventually started writing lyrics around the age of 10. I was an oddball compared to other artists in my region. I prioritized the art of lyricism over catchy chants and heavy bass beats. Because of my unusual approach of creating music, the reputation of my work grew and stood out for being different. ‘Drama’ was the first single that I wrote for my sophomore album. I wanted to set the tone by captivating my listeners with witty punchlines and an

energetic flow, while also paying homage to some of my favorite artists in the midst of the creative process.

Eloise Alterman



INDIE FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“SAD BIRD STILL SINGS”
 BY ELOISE ALTERMAN, DAN HENIG

As an artist and songwriter, my creative journey is deeply intertwined with my personal experiences and emotions. I grew up in Detroit and had a wonderful childhood but I always had a little bit of sadness that felt unexplainable and inescapable. I have always felt everything in my life so deeply which has made songwriting a form of therapy for me. ‘Sad Bird Sings,’ which won Indie song of the year, was born from a place of introspection and vulnerability. I think everyone hides their pain in order to protect themselves. I had written the song about smiling on stage for people while singing love songs while the truth was that I was completely broken inside. Fast forward a year later, I submitted this song the day that my record label dropped me. I thought the worst heartbreak I could feel was from a relationship but, man, was I wrong. That day changed everything about me when it comes to pursuing my passion and the belief in myself that I can do this. I was feeling defeated and needed to remind myself that I can keep going even when it feels like everything is falling apart. The metaphor of a bird singing is the same as faking a smile. Nobody knows the bird is sad because it’s made to sing. The track explores themes of sorrow, hope, and the transformative power of music to heal and uplift the soul. Through ‘Sad Bird Sings,’ I aim to connect with listeners on a level that lets them be vulnerable as well, offering a glimpse into the universal journey of embracing both the darkness and the light within ourselves.

Brooke Alexx



POP FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“ALL MY EXES’ MOMS”
 BY BROOKE ALEXX, WILL JAY, JXNDREN, DE’LA

My goal as an artist has always been to create pop songs that are as clever as they are catchy, largely influenced by the songwriting culture here in Nashville, where storytelling and lyricism reign supreme. I wrote “All My Exes’ Moms” while participating in an AAPI songwriting camp with all writers and producers of Asian descent. Little did I know that this silly breakup song would soon become the biggest leap for my music career yet. Its viral success led to millions of streams, tours across the U.S., and a whole lot of gratitude for my exes’ wonderful mothers. Thank you to American Songwriter for honoring my work by awarding this song first place in the pop category of its 2023 Song Contest!

ROCK FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“MATADOR”

BY MICAH SMITH, NADIA VAEH (EMPTY ATLAS)

While I love co-writing and want to get more into that world, my main outlets have been my band Empty Atlas and new solo project, Stray Gold. “Matador” is a song I wrote for Empty Atlas about pursuing your passion and coming up short. But it’s also about realizing why it’s worth pushing through that every time. So many songs have helped me pull back from low points over the years, so I hope “Matador” can be that for someone.

Micah Smith



TEEN FIRST PLACE WINNER:
“SWEET TALKER”
 BY KAIYA GAMBLE, SPENCER CHEYNE,
 JUSTIN KUDDING

Hello to whoever is reading this. My name is Kaiya Gamble. I am a 17-year-old recording artist, performer, multi-instrumentalist, and songwriter who strives with my music to make people feel a little less alone in what they are going through. My songs come from many places, but ‘Sweet Talker’ was a story that unfolded unexpectedly as I put my hands to the keys. It is a goodbye to the toxic people in and around your life, and a hello to the power you hold within yourself. I have so much left to learn as a songwriter, and I am beyond grateful for my collaborators, old and new, honored for this recognition from American Songwriter, and so excited for the songs coming in the near future. ★

Kaiya Gamble



THE AMERICAN SONGWRITER RATING GUIDE

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Pass

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Mediocre

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Average

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Above Average

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Good

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Great

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Excellent

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Exceptional

🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵 - Classic

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REVIEWS



BILLY STRINGS HIGHWAY PRAYERS (Reprise) 🎵🎵🎵🎵

String band music has been around since at least the 1940s, but it's safe to say it has seldom been as popular since Billy Strings appeared on the scene.

When *Turmoil & Tinfoil* (2017) first turned heads towards the talented youngster, he was still in his teens. His upward career trajectory has brought old-time sounds, updated by youthful, energized playing, to the masses, all with just three albums of original material.

Once on the indie Rounder label, after multiple Grammy nominations (and one win), Strings got the major label call. The sprawling 20-track *Highway Prayers*, his first new music in three years, is the result.

It's a well-rounded summation of what he has so successfully delivered in the past. From the high-octane banjo picking of "Leadfoot" to the Jew's harp (aka jaw harp) and harmonica acting as percussion on "It Ain't Before" and the windswept story of "Seven Weeks in County," the approaches change but stay aligned with the artist's backwoods roots.

"Be Your Man" moves into classic waters. Strings recounts being a traveling musician happily returning to his true love *with an everlasting lily in my hand*, as piano and fiddle recall '60s folk. "Gone a Long Time" describes life on the road, then shifts to finding his wife with someone else. On "Catch and Release," he draws an entertaining "Alice's Restaurant"-influenced anecdote about being stopped for weed and then let go, associating that with the catch and release of fishing.

Strings pushes outside genre boundaries on "Stratosphere Blues/I Believe in You," bringing in Jefferson Airplane-influenced acoustic psychedelic effects on the song's opening. The song dissolves into a lovely ballad at the close of an unsettling tale about drug addiction.

Between the skilled playing, accomplished lyrics, Strings' mellifluous, plainspoken vocals, and diverse songs, this might be the musician's finest, most varied effort. Better still, he has plenty of highway miles left on his life's odometer for more of where this came from. — HAL HOROWITZ



THE PIXIES THE NIGHT THE ZOMBIES CAME (BMG) 🎵🎵🎵🎵

Some refer to the band's surprising 2003 reformation after their initial 1993 breakup as The Pixies 2.0. If so, the renewed version, which started touring without original bassist/vocalist Kim Deal and finally released fresh music in 2013, will, as of this recording, have more studio albums than the first incarnation.

There are some changes—bassist Paz Lenchantin is out, Emma Richardson is in (maintaining a woman in that spot), and they have returned to a major label—but much has stayed the same.

Producer Tom Dalgety, often called the fifth Pixie since he helmed their previous three discs, returns to mold the sound. The three founding members—frontman Black Francis, guitarist Joey Santiago, and drummer David Lovering—remain older and wiser to continue the indie rocker's extended run.

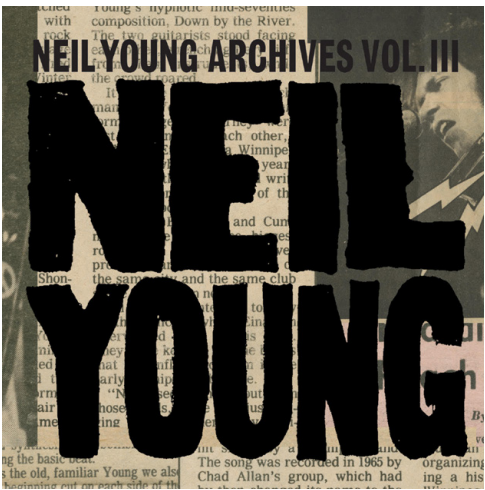
And, judging from *The Night the Zombies Came*, it's far from over.

While few would consider The Pixies a slick, commercial pop collaboration, they have increasingly leaned towards a less aggressive sound. Instead of the once jagged loud/soft dynamics that made discs such as *Doolittle* so iconic, Black and crew rock out with fire and fury, yet within more standard and restrained musical parameters. Their taut punk impulses endure in the hard-charging "You're So Impatient" and "Oyster Beds," the roiling "Motoroller," and the ringing, near surf guitars that propel the driving "Ernest Evens."

But the strummy, psychedelic "Johnny Good Man," the darker thumping drums beating through "I Hear You Mary," and the twisted ominous ballad "Chicken" (with mentions of zombie movies and decapitation) display a more pensive lyrically warped approach.

That's nothing new for Francis, whose vocals have become less manic and increasingly, well, melodic and relatively unruffled as he pushes 60.

The group plays with passion, if less wired hunger than in their 1.0 incarnation, making *The Night of the Zombies* a sturdy, occasionally inspiring reminder that The Pixies will never be mistaken for the walking dead. —H.H.



NEIL YOUNG
Neil Young Archives Vol. III (1976-1987)
(Reprise)

Unlike some artists, Neil Young doesn't deny his past. He embraces it. His ongoing series of archival offerings is dazzling, to say the least, given that they roll out consistently, even within weeks.

Not surprisingly, the 17 CD set *Archives Vol. III* follows closely on the heels of another recent release titled *Early Daze*. It, too, mines a critical period in Young's trajectory, one that extends from the mid-'70s through the late '80s. By that point, Young had established himself as, alternately, a forlorn balladeer and a robust rocker through his treasure trove of late '60s seminal standards. Nevertheless, the efforts that followed often involved unhindered experimentation. His detour into rockabilly and electronica left many of his followers discouraged, and the darkness that dominated the dismal *Rust Never Sleeps*, and *Live Rust* alienated any number of others as well. While *Archives* doesn't steer clear of the musical meandering, it does manage to involve the familiarity factor, courtesy of several classics in early, alternate, or live renditions. Given that there's no shortage of entirely unreleased material—including the albums *Oceanside Country-side*, *Johnny's Island*, and *Summer Songs*—there's more than enough music to entice Young completists.

Still, it's the seminal standards—"Only Love Can Break Your Heart," "Heart of Gold," "Cowgirl in the Sand," "Down By the River," "Like a Hurricane," "Cortez the Killer," "The Losing End (When You're On)," "Helpless," and "Mr. Soul"—that make the most formidable impression, albeit that the electric performances featuring Crazy Horse exude an unfiltered fury frenzy. Several songs are repeated in different settings and with varied treatments. The live songs are interspersed with Young's spoken narratives, allowing him to share his backstories, and bringing further explanation and enlightenment to the offerings overall.

Granted, there's a lot to digest, and with a pretty steep price tag, considerable commitment is involved. Nevertheless, aficionados will find it hard to resist. It's best to gather the coins that have fallen between the couch cushions and prepare to proceed on another archival adventure. — LEE ZIMMERMAN



KELSEA BALLERINI
PATTERNS
(Black River Entertainment)

Want to know more about Kelsea Ballerini? Key her name into American Songwriter's website, where you'll find over 50 articles on the Nashville by way of Knoxville country pop artist. And that's just in the past year.

Or, you can spin any of her four previous albums and two EPs and watch the 20-minute video for *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*.

That's because Ballerini lays her life out in song with openness. Since her hit 2015 debut, she has expanded into other artistic endeavors such as writing and directing the aforementioned short film, releasing a book of poetry, and recording "This Feeling" with EDM stars The Chainsmokers, her most streamed track.

On Ballerini's fifth full-length album, *PATTERNS*, the singer/songwriter is no less forthcoming about her love life. Tunes such as "How Much Do You Love Me," "Beg for Your Love," and the decisive "We Broke Up" tell their stories in the titles.

Sonically, this gravitates to a generally somber mood, placing her sweet yet emotionally laced vocals over easy-flowing melodies, programmed drums, layered guitars, and softly bubbling keyboards.

Despite the lyrics to her duet with Noah Kahan, "Cowboys Cry Too," there's not much country present. A fiddle here and a banjo there are submerged in layers of radio-ready studio sheen. Rather, Ballerini adheres to the undulating pop she has delivered to much acclaim (and four GRAMMY nominations).

Some roots are displayed, such as the unaccompanied acoustic guitar that kicks off "Sorry Mom," an apology to her mother about making some questionable decisions concluding with *I turned out all right*. More of those musically vulnerable moments would infuse a greater organic feel to her performance. Perhaps she will consider releasing stripped-down versions of these songs, as she did on *Ballerini* (2020).

If you're already a fan, this strikes the right sensitive and personal notes without pushing outside existing boundaries, making *PATTERNS* another successful notch in her belt. — H.H.

REVIEWS

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REVIEWS

KASEY CHAMBERS BACKBONE



KASEY CHAMBERS

BACKBONE (THE DESERT CHILD)

(MGM Distribution) 🎵🎵🎵🎵

In many ways, Kasey Chambers could be considered Australia's answer to Emmylou Harris. She's similar in the sense that, like Emmylou, Chambers commands a similar level of devotion from her fans and followers. Having attained honors from the Australian Recording Industry Association Hall of Fame and multi-platinum sales status back home, she's revered as an artist who sets a standard as far as Australian Americana.

It's hardly a surprise that *Backbone* is uncommonly candid and revealing, given the emotions and expressions that inform each of these songs. The album accompanies an autobiography, decidedly dubbed *Just Don't Be A Dickhead*, and, as a soundtrack of sorts, the album is honest, intriguing, and flush with earnest emotions. Both book and album are intrinsically bound together, with certain songs—the steady romp of the title track, “For Better or Worse,” “My Kingdom Come,” “Silverado Girl,” and “Take Me Down the Mountain”—that attest to a meditative mindset. The plaintive strains of “Arlo” and “A New Day Has Come” (the latter boasting a reassuring refrain, *Everything's Gonna Be Alright*), the cooing cowgirl song “Broken Cup,” and the quiet, yet compelling “For Better Or Worse” all attest to the fierce determination Chambers has been known for throughout her career.

That said, she can be playful as well. The sprightly “The Divorce Song,” featuring another Aussie auteur, Shane Nicolson, and the vampish “Little Red Riding Hood” are upbeat additives. At the same time, the song titled “A Love Like Springsteen” comes across as an ideal musical metaphor. Chambers shares a decided measure of verve and versatility, and in so doing, she effectively sums up her standing as an important and enduring artist on the international stage. Given her ability to veer between the tender and tenacious, Chambers has always proven to be a well-rounded artist with something significant to say. In that sense, *Backbone* deserves to put her on center stage and bring her the greater recognition she deserves. Ultimately, she possesses a backbone that's both solid and sturdy. — L.Z.



JERRY CANTRELL

I WANT BLOOD

(Double J Music) 🎵🎵🎵🎵

Jerry Cantrell, Alice In Chains co-founder/co-lead vocalist, primary songwriter, and guitarist, also has an impressive but inconsistent solo career. That's partially due to his main project's ongoing popularity, which started with the Seattle grunge/metal band's 1990 debut and continues today. However, their most recent release was in 2018, so it's unclear what their future holds.

That's especially in question with the appearance of Cantrell's new venture. His first offering since *Brighten* (2021), *I Want Blood*, is, in many ways, a return from that set's less aggressive stance to an attack closer to the more forceful Alice In Chains sound. He admits as much, saying, “It's hard...and completely unlike the last one,” in the advance publicity. Just a glance at songs such as “Off the Rails,” “Throw Me a Line,” “It Comes,” and the title track imply a tougher, gloomier approach.

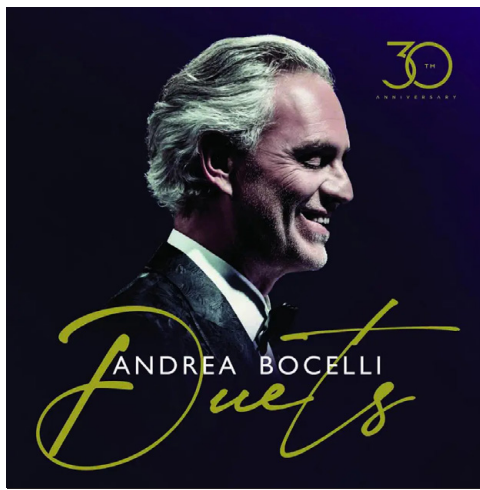
Opener “Vilified” sets the mood with its prog-inflected power riff, thumping drums, shadowy-hued minor key chorus, and hints of psychedelia. Cantrell discharges shards of scruffy arpeggios with a tricky stop-start rhythm.

Elsewhere, “Let It Lie” borrows murky Black Sabbath bluster with Cantrell working a Tony Iommi vibe and lyrics of *release the need to be so right / Oh won't you let it lie?*

The title track explodes with propulsive punk vitality and pent-up ferocity, perhaps let loose after being restrained on his previous offering. The ominous crawl of “Echoes of Laughter,” in which the protagonist searches in vain for his partner who left, or perhaps died, in canyons, is creepy, unsettling, and powerful.

There are audible references to Northwest acts like Nirvana (particularly on “Held Your Tongue,” where his vocals reflect Kurt Cobain's swagger), Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and AIC. Cantrell's twisty guitar pyrotechnics are displayed in his harmonic voicings and roaring chords.

Those waiting for new Alice In Chains music can rest assured that with Jerry Cantrell's superb *I Want Blood*, they have a substitute every bit as potent, intense, and sonically heavy. —H.H.



ANDREA BOCELLI

DUETS

(Decca Records/Sugar Music) 🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵

Undoubtedly one of the greatest singers of modern times, Andrea Bocelli takes a look back at his 30-year career courtesy of a greatest hits of sorts, one which, as the title indicates, highlights new and old collaborations with an impressive roster of pop superstars. Granted, commercial considerations played a large part in the process, not only in terms of the contributors (Ed Sheeran, Céline Dion, Sarah Brightman, Jennifer Lopez, Luciano Pavarotti, Shania Twain, Chris Stapleton, Steve Wonder, Bono, Gwen Stefani, and Marc Anthony, among the many) but in the song selection as well. The arias aside, Bocelli aims to achieve mass appeal, courtesy of such standards as “Moon River,” “Hallelujah,” “Can’t Help Falling In Love,” ABBA’s “Fernando,” and “Amazing Grace” figuring prominently among the more than three dozen songs in the set.

Consequently, it would hardly be surprising if classical connoisseurs voiced their disapproval. Yet, given the fact that Bocelli has already reached well beyond any classical confines—he’s taken center stage at the Olympic Games and the World Cup—and reaped the high honors of a Golden Globe, seven Classical BRITs, and seven World Music Awards, not to mention a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, he hardly needs permission or approval.

Indeed, the beauty and majesty of these performances ought to sway even the most disapproving cynic or skeptic. When Bocelli soars to a higher register as if in full flight, the result is simply stirring and sweeping, a remarkable display of power and passion. It’s nothing less than breathtaking.

Granted, duets involving Chris Stapleton, Alison Krauss, or Mary J. Blige might seem somewhat incongruous at best, but inevitably, it’s that tenor that takes center stage, making any added component seem superfluous even at the outset.

Ultimately, *Duets* need only rely on the power of Bocelli’s voice, an emotional and emphatic instrument that needn’t be served by a commercial crutch. Simply stated, one needn’t be simply an opera aficionado to be moved by this music. — L.Z.

REVIEWS



MARC BROUSSARD

TIME IS A THIEF

(Artist Tone Records) 🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵

Given his specific musical heritage—that which was borne from his Louisiana origins—it’s little wonder that Marc Broussard has successfully carved a niche that he can justifiably claim as his own. His music effectively blends the traditional roots of those environs with rock, blues, and rhythm and blues, creating a sound that reflects that region while also ensuring contemporary credence and creativity.

In that regard, *Time Is a Thief* conveys a specific style. Combining fluid grooves with Broussard’s soul-stirring croon, it’s an infectious brew that recalls certain radio-ready sounds of the early-to-mid ‘70s. Each of the 10 songs could be considered a singular standout, be it the fully-fueled funk of the frenzied album-opener “Fire,” the brazen title track, the more considered approach taken for “You Deserve More,” or the surprisingly chipper tune titled “Hard Times.” Regardless, Broussard maintains the momentum throughout, from the soulful strut of “Stay Still” to the decided determination of the coolly confident “Way You Shine.”

That said, credit producer, guitarist, and co-writer Eric Krasno with steering the proceedings and ensuring clarity and consistency. Broussard and Krasno play the lion’s share of the instrumentation—aided and abetted by multi-instrumentalist Jeremy Most and occasional others—while getting in a groove and adding various nuances that convey resilience and resolve.

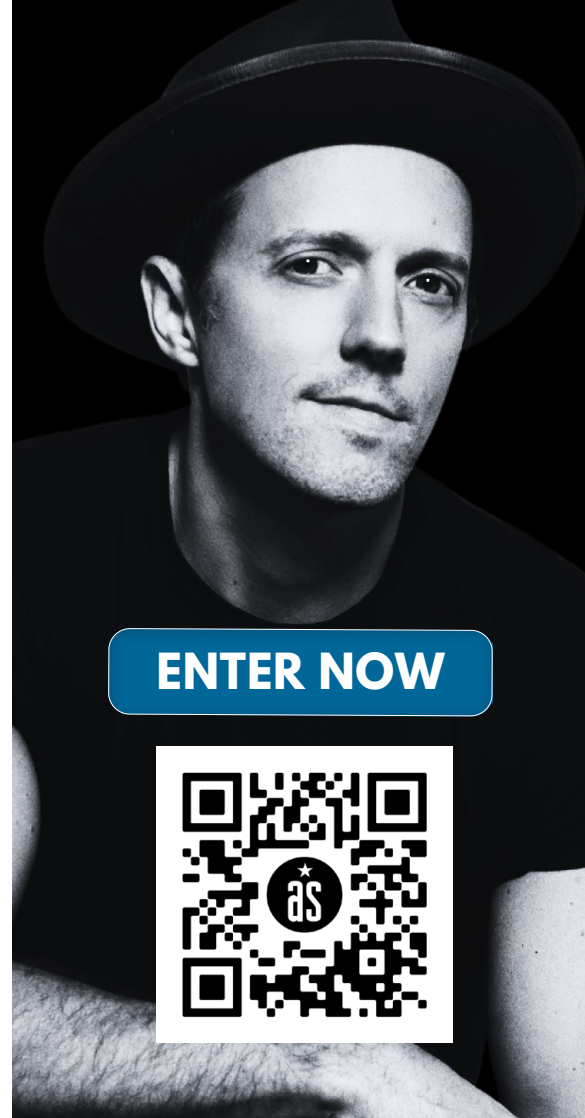
In a certain sense, a melodramatic mindset is also infused into specific songs—as expressed with the anger and antagonism found in “Cold Blooded” and the mix of hostility and happenstance that works through “Mood.” So, too, “Time is a Thief” is brimming with uncertainty, the result of the realization that time is an evasive entity that can never be completely corralled. (*I don’t wanna believe that I’m dying, Yet I can’t help but notice That I’m barely hanging on.*)

In that regard, *Time is a Thief* rings from a personal perspective that bears both honesty and introspection. In many ways, it could be considered a milestone of sorts, one that defines Broussard as an artist who possesses his own intuitive integrity. — L.Z.



get your songs in
front of judges like

JASON MRAZ



ENTER NOW



LYRIC CONTEST

1ST

“Jack Daniels or King James”

By Darren Wiedman

I've got a bottle on the counter
and a Bible on the shelf
One is always open when I need a little help
Every night, I pray, Lord, your will be done
But to tell the gospel truth,
there's no dust on either one
I call my shots by one of two names
Jack Daniels or King James

I've got an angel on my shoulder
and the devil in a glass
Both will share opinions when neither one was asked
Now, Jack is pretty smooth, but James is always right
Either one could help decide what I might do tonight
Come tomorrow, I'll praise or blame
Jack Daniels or King James

Timeless truth or 80 proof
Both tend to finish well
It shouldn't be this hard to choose
Between praising heaven or raising hell

I'm a regular at Hooters and a tenor in the choir
You can tell me I'm a sinner, but at least I'm not a liar
The battle rages on; neither side has won
James is very wise, but Jack's a lot more fun
This double life is hard to explain
Dipped in holy water but flirtin' with flames
Somewhere down the road, I'll need to pick a lane
Jack Daniels or King James
Jack Daniels or King James

Down the road, I'll pick a lane
Jack Daniels or King James
Then again, I may never change
Jack Daniels or King James

WHAT THE JUDGES SAY: This is as good as anything being written on music row. I loved it as soon as I saw the title, and the writing did not disappoint. 10/10 would listen to this one.

-Hannah Ellis, Judge

2ND

“Love Lies”

By Corben Champoux, Meagan
Brianne Allen & Jolyn Marie
Bistodeau

This car won't start until I hear that seatbelt click
Your nose grows longer every time you tell a fib
Too much TV and you'll go blind
Santa's always watching, so be nice

If you tell the truth, I swear I won't get mad
That kid just wants to be your friend; that's why he laughs
Your stick figures on the fridge are works of art
Thunders just God bowling in the dark

Love lies
In the spilt milk on the table
Love lies
When the truths too hard to handle
Tucked in a twin-size bed with a butterfly nightlight
That's where love lies

Don't ya dare call the plumber, I can fix it
Those skinny jeans from college still fit perfect
That casserole you burnt still tasted great
Didn't notice that your hair was turning gray

Love lies
In the supper on the table
Love lies
When the truths too hard to handle
Tucked in a queen size bed, sleeping side by side
That's where love lies

We're still pretty young; we're not too old to drive
Age is just a number, just a state of mind
And heaven ain't so far away
You can let go now; I promise I'll be okay

Love lies
At an empty breakfast table
Love lies
When the truths too hard to handle
Buried underneath that live oak, still sleeping side by side
That's where love lies
That's where love lies

WHAT THE JUDGES SAY: I really liked this one. I love the verses. All the examples used are so simple but so effective, and they make you think about what we do and say for love.

-Mae Muller, Judge

3RD

NOVEMBER
DECEMBER

WINNERS

4TH

"Those Broken Things"

By Katie Rose

IWay back when I was just a kid
My granddad took me
to the Pull n' Pick,
Found an old bike there needed fixin'
Had a rusted chain,
the brakes were missin'

As we loaded it in the back of his truck
He said, 'Some folks might call it junk'
But with a lick of paint
and a bolt or two,
You'll have something
just as good as new

He said, 'Just because it's broken,
That don't mean it ain't no good
Just because it don't look,
The way you think it should
Don't mean it ain't worth savin'
Cos honey, you might just find,
Sometimes, those broken things
Can breathe a second life
Sometimes, those broken things,
Are the sweetest surprise'

A few years down the road,
I met a boy, and I took him home
Granddad said, 'Girl,
what am I missin'?
That boy ain't nothing,
what are ya thinkin'?

Yeah, he drives an old hand-me-down
Grew up without his mumma round
This ring was all he could afford
But I've never felt more adored
He said,
'Well, whatcha waiting for?'
Yeah, just because it's broken,

That don't mean it ain't no good
Just because it don't look
the way you think it should
Don't mean it ain't worth savin'
Cos honey, you might just find
Sometimes, those broken things
Can breathe a second life
Sometimes, those broken things,
Are the sweetest surprise'

And now I'm busy raising
My own family
I still see the wisdom
In the words, he said to me
Those cracks can show the beauty
That some folks never see
And for all those broken things
That make my life so sweet
I send a prayer to Heaven
To thank my granddaddy

He taught me just because it's broken,
That don't mean it ain't no good'
Just because it don't look
the way you think it should
Don't mean it ain't worth savin'
cos honey, you might just find,
Sometimes, those broken things
Can breathe a second life
Sometimes, those broken things,
Are the sweetest surprise.

**WHAT
THE JUDGES
SAY:** I love the message
beyond this one. I'm all
about a positive song; the
lyrics are colorful and warm.
It gives you perspective and
makes you feel like you're
right there in the song.

-Paul McDonald, Judge

"Like Father, Like Son"

By David Corey

I'm the unholy seed
Of a fortunate son
A jack of all heartbreaks
And master of none
I did all I could
But the damage is done
A five-and-dime martyr
Like father, Like son

The apple will fall
And the bruises will come
Promises broken
And arguments won
An origin tale
I can never outrun
Nothing to barter
Like father, Like son

Chorus:
Hey Ho! Off we all go!
Prodigal misfits
With pennywise souls
Ho Hey! What can we say?
There's no rest
Or running away

Now I'm the old bastard
Who answers the call
Anger in silence

And
holes
in the
wall
The kidnapper's
ransom
Is written in blood
A new generation
Like father, Like son

There's dust on the wall
Where my picture is hung
Something like love
On the tip of his tongue
Betrayal as real
As the air in his lungs
All the same riddles
Like father, Like son

(Chorus)

The future has ended
The past has begun
To the top of the hill
Then I'm back to square one
I pray for the day
But the day never comes
I'm aging away
Like father, Like son

**WHAT
THE JUDGES SAY:**
These lyrics are stunning,
and I can hear melodies
when reading along. They are
very relatable and feel classic
in many ways. The lyrics tell a
story and feel very honest and
uncensored.

-Chris Pierce,
Judge**HONORABLE MENTIONS**

"American Portrait"
By Douglas Romanow,
Sam Hatmaker & Benita Hill

"life of the party"
By Cat Flint, Tory Grace & Tyler Bank

"Opening Night"
By Dan Hulse

**"One Foot on the Gas
(The Other in the Grave)"**
By Alex Perkins

"Little Bit of Cowboy"
By Maura Streppa, Gloria Anderson &
Daniel Ethridge

"Honky Tonk Hair"
By Mary Zalla, Bill DiLuigi
& Taylor Borton

"Two Hands and Six Strings"
By Tim O'Connell

"Always again"
By George Ballard

"The Pedal on the Right"
By Elizabeth Grace

"Lost in the Machine"
By James Leonard

"Living For the Weekend"
By Micah Kosares

AMERICAN SONGWRITER LYRIC CONTEST Q&A

1ST PLACE

“Jack Daniels or King James”

Written by Darren Wiedman

Interview by American Songwriter

What made you decide to enter the American Songwriter’s Lyric Contest?

I won a contest with this song in my local songwriting group, so I thought I’d see how it did against a larger pool of songwriters.

How did you feel when you learned you won?

Lucky. There are so many great songwriters that enter this contest. To have a winning lyric is a great honor.

What was the inspiration for your submission? Why did you want to write it?

The inspiration was daily life. We’re all torn between doing the right thing and doing what we want to do. So, I thought the song had a universal truth that a lot of people could identify with. Plus, after coming up with the line, I’m a regular at Hooters and a tenor in the choir, I knew I had to finish it.

What’s the story behind “Jack Daniels or King James”?

Every day, I try to spend at least 10 minutes coming up with hooks. Usually, it’s a complete waste of time. But this day, the thought of ‘Jack Daniels vs King James’ popped into my head. I liked the implied tension. As a Christian, that daily battle between good and “evil” is always at the top of my mind. The song isn’t autobiographical. I don’t drink Jack and haven’t been to Hooters in about 20 years. But I am no angel.

Have you written music for this lyric? If so, how would you describe it?

This is a mid-tempo Country song. I’m a better lyricist than a musician, so the best word to describe the music would be “adequate.”

How long have you been writing lyrics?

I think I was 23 when I made fun of my dad for listening to country music. I told him the songs were corny. He told me to

write something better. So, I gave it a shot and was hooked. (I also started loving country music soon after.)

What keeps you motivated as a songwriter?

Feedback. I have goals. I have daily action steps to help me achieve those goals. But I don’t always do those steps. Only when I have something to write for—a TAXI submission or my monthly songwriter group or a contest—can I get focused enough to write.

Who are your all-time favorite songwriters, and why?

I started to make a list, but ultimately, it comes down to the song, not the writer. I will mention three though: Roger Miller because my dad used to sing his songs when I was a kid, so he was my first exposure to classic country music. Don Schlitz and Jeffrey Steele—I’ve had the privilege of meeting both of these guys, and I’m amazed by their talent, humility, and willingness to help aspiring writers.

What’s next for you?

It’s back to the action steps—writing hooks, practicing guitar, and trying to get a little better every day.

What would you tell other songwriters who are considering entering the Lyric Contest?

I’d say get feedback from others first. If your lyrics are well-received from people who are not afraid to tell you the truth, start submitting to contests. And don’t get discouraged if your song isn’t recognized. Contests are very subjective. I guarantee there were many songs good enough to win this month’s contest. It was just my turn. ★



MEET OUR 2024 JUDGES

CASSADEE POPE cassadee.com

LEVI HUMMON levihummon.com

CHRIS PIERCE chrispierce.com

MAE MULLER maemuller.com

HANNAH ELLIS hannahellismusic.com

JIM LAUDERDALE jimlauderdalemusic.com

MARC BROUSSARD marcbroussard.com

DECLAN MCKENNA declanmckenna.net

RICK NOWELS ricknowels.com

PAUL McDONALD thepaulmcdonald.com

JAY KNOWLES thedayknowles.com

EMILY WEISBAND

JENSEN MCRAE

SHARON VAUGHN



CHOOSE YOUR CATEGORY



2024 SONG CONTEST

LYRICALLY SPEAKING

Lyric Structure: Your Film Score in Action

Imagine that, instead of the familiar terrifying soundtrack to *Jaws*, you hear smoky saxophone music underscoring the shark attack. Or maybe even a song from *The Sound of Music*. Imagine what that would do to the scene. Yup, a film score tells you how to feel about what you're seeing. A different score would create a different feeling.

Your lyric structure is like a film score: it tells your listener how to feel about what you're saying. How you put it together, all by itself, creates a feeling. That's why it's important to pay attention to the elements of lyric structure:

1. Number of lines
2. Lengths of lines
3. Rhythm of lines
4. Rhyme scheme
5. Rhyme types

Study them. Find out what they can do.

When James Taylor gave a clinic at Berklee several years ago, during the Q&A a student asked, "Mr. Taylor, what is your favorite song you've written and why?" "Easy," he answered, "Sweet Baby James," because of the way I handled the rhymes." I love that his answer had to do with, not *what he said* in the song, but *how he put it together*. The first three sections are a clinic on effective use of structure. Take a look at (or listen to) this little beauty, written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time.

Here are the first three sections:

Sweet Baby James

*There is a young cowboy, he lives on the range
His horse and his cattle are his only companions
He works in the saddle and he sleeps in the canyons
waiting for summer, his pastures to change*

*And as the moon rises he sits by his fire
thinking about women and glasses of beer
And closing his eyes as the doggies retire
he sings out a song which is soft but it's clear
as if maybe someone could hear...*

*Goodnight you moon light ladies,
rock-a-bye sweet baby James
Deep greens and blues are the colors I choose
won't you let me go down in my dreams
And rock-a-bye sweet baby James*

There's a bittersweet quality to the whole song, a sense of nostalgia for something lost long ago, and the way JT has put it together echoes and supports (even creates) that feeling. Here's the first section, something I've referenced in previous articles:

There is a young cowboy,	
he lives on the range	a
His horse and his cattle	
are his only companions	b
He works in the saddle	
and he sleeps in the canyons	b
waiting for summer,	
his pastures to change	a

This feels, in my terminology, *unstable* primarily because of its *abba* rhyme scheme, something he noted in his clinic. I've noted, in other articles, how *abba* floats, refuses to resolve, and leaves you hanging in space. BTW the first two lines are five bars long, adding to the instability. Listen to it again. How does it make you feel? Yup, a sense of longing. Now compare it to this:

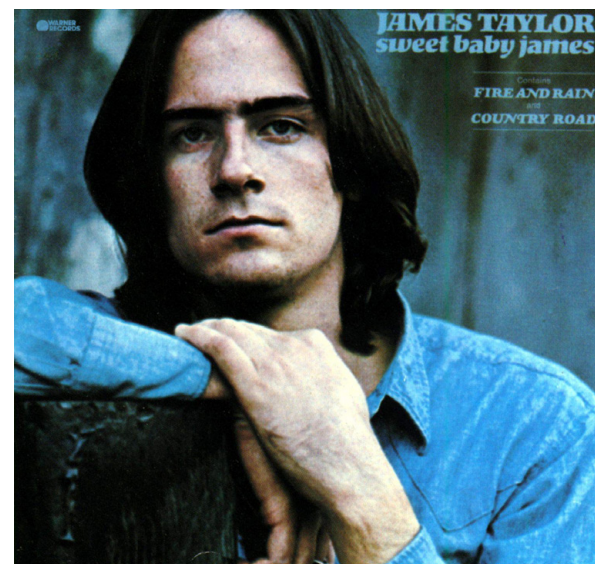
There is a young cowboy,	
he lives on the range	a
His horse and his cattle	
are his only companions	b
He's waiting for summer,	
his pastures to change	a
He works in the saddle	
and he sleeps in the canyons	b

Ah, the life of a cowboy. I want some of that! This structure, like a film score, tells you how to feel, and the feeling here is stable. The meaning is the same, but the solid *abab* rhyme scheme creates the stable feeling.

In section two he uses two techniques to create the feeling of longing—line lengths and number of lines:

	# stresses
And as the moon rises	
he sits by his fire	4
thinking about women	
and glasses of beer	4
And closing his eyes	
as the doggies retire	4
he sings out a song	
which is soft but it's clear	4
as if maybe someone could hear	3

The *abab* rhyme scheme and the four equal-length lines feel stable, but the fifth line (an odd number of lines) destabilizes the structure, more so because it's shorter than we expected. It leaves us wanting more, looking off into the distance. The extra line creates a spotlight, as any extra or



extended line would, emphasizing his loneliness. A different technique to create, again, a sense of longing. Note also the section is an unusual 20 bars long, with a 2-bar turnaround.

Now, the chorus, which is built on Common Meter (Mary Had a Little Lamb) using internal rhymes in line three:

	# stresses	rhyme scheme
Góodnight you		
móonlight ládies	3+	x
róck-a-bye		
swéet baby Jámes	3	a
Deep gréens and blúes		
are the cólors I choose	4	bb
won't you lét me		
go dówn in my dreams	3	a
And rók-a-bye		
swéet baby Jámes	3	a

Again, there's an odd number of lines, with the surprising last line turning on spotlights and destabilizing the section. More importantly, JT uses *consonance rhyme*, dreams/James, to destabilize his chorus, yet another technique to open the gate, making us once again *feel* a sense of wistfulness and longing. Note, too, how the rhythm of *móonlight ládies* lengthens the note on *moon*, drenching the idea in longing. And it's 20 bars long.

Each section uses different tools to create the bittersweet feelings that make "Sweet Baby James" the little masterpiece it is. The more tools you have in your toolbelt, the better able you'll be to express your feelings. Treat your structures like a film score, and you'll not only add emotional colors to your song, but you'll take your listener on a deeper emotional journey. ★

PAT PATTISON is a professor at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches lyric writing and poetry.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENTS

BY LEE ZIMMERMAN

A look at some select releases that may be found well below the radar, but likely won't be confined there for long...

Tom Evans

I Am Myself

(Y&T Records)

Tom Evans was a formidable force within the ranks of Badfinger, writing many of the iconic songs the Beatle-sponsored band shared with the world early on. Like bandmate Pete Ham, he took his own life. Although Evans was a relatively late arrival and remained with the group into the early '80s, his input is sometimes underestimated compared to Ham and the original band's sole surviving member, Joey Molland. Y&T Records has now allowed his legacy to linger, courtesy of 21 solo demos recorded between 1967 and 1970. With full permission and cooperation of Evans' estate, the label is repeating its success with the release of Ham's demos, *Gwent Gardens*, and a Ham tribute collection titled *Shine On*. Badfinger buffs ought to find it essential. (badfingerlibrary.com)

Scott Southworth

Only Dead Fish Go With the Flow

(Independent)

One could consider Scott Southworth the heir apparent to the late Jimmy Buffett in terms of uptempo, good-time music made specifically to keep the party going. Long known as a popular country crooner, Southworth shifts his sounds south of the border and into Caribbean environs courtesy of rousing and rollicking offerings like "Beaches Be Crazy," "Cicada Enchiladas," and "Time Flies When You're Having Rum." Like Buffett, Southworth is a super storyteller with a wry sense of humor, and the new album proves no exception. The songs "Woman On My New Tattoo," "Sunburn For Christmas," and "Dead Fish" sound like songs that Buffett may have intended for a future offering had he not passed. To Southworth's credit, the music is energetic, engaging, and expressive, thanks in part to Buddy Hyatt's pristine production. Yet even a ballad like "Wish I Was Here" manages to share a certain heartfelt sentimentality, all well in keeping with the overall tropical tone and treatment. (scottsouthworth.com)

Nick Taylor

Not Alone

(Independent)

Nick Taylor's debut album, aptly dubbed *Not Alone*, offers a formidable introduction, an assertive set of songs that brings to mind the emphatic approach of such timeless Americana icons as Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson and Johnny Cash. Nevertheless, Taylor's clearly his own man and his demonstrative delivery and resolute delivery inform every one of the songs in this set. They veer from the gentle reflection of "Futures Past" and the evocative strains of "3AM on the Interstate" to the effortless embrace of "Carry You Home" and the heartbreak and happenstance that define "Broken Souls." The sway and sashay of "Getting Along" finds equal footing with the heartfelt "Kentucky Girl," the determined "Heart on the Run," and the eloquent "Songs About the Glory," a song that effectively sums up the sentiment overall. *Not Alone* is driven by determination, honest emotion and absolute intent. This powerful and persuasive offering clearly suggests Taylor has a promising career ahead of him. (NickTaylorMusician.com)

Stephen Clair

Transmissions

(Rock City)

Stephen Clair knows that it takes an extra effort to make a mark in a world where there's no shortage of talented singer/songwriters. As a result, he's received stellar reviews throughout his career, not only due to his songwriting skills, but also as the result of his rich arrangements and ability to create sounds flush with instant engagement. His sense of humor and self-deprecating attitude also give him a presence and personality that allow him to consistently connect with his audiences. He's released 11 albums over a little more than 25 years, the latest of which, *Transmissions*, offers a varied set of songs which run the gamut from the earnest enthusiasm of "Waiting Around" and the cool groove of "Ve-

Not Alone

NICK TAYLOR



gas Sunrise" to the precise pop of "Blue and Red Lines," the uncommonly quirky "Fritz" and the new wave noir of "Naomi's Phone Is Dead." It's Clair's most diverse record yet. In that regard, these *Transmissions* make for an unexpected encounter. (stephenclair.com)

Scot Sax

Modest Cathedral

(Independent)

Scot Sax can best be described as a true pop practitioner. His early work with the band Wanderlust, which had the distinction of being signed to RCA Records, demonstrated that early on. He is, as his bio states, "a rock & roll lifer" with a songwriting Grammy to his credit. His new album *Modest Cathedral*—a seven-song EP—arrives on the heels of co-writes with artists like Lily Hiatt and Aaron Lee Tasjan, among others and boasts a certain sense of urgency replete with big beats, infectious melodies and a bold blend of styles that incorporate everything from power chords, steady grooves and a propulsive pulse with a distinct hip-hop influence. It takes its name from a type of reverb often used in film editing, something Sax knows well, given the fact that he's established himself as a videographer and filmmaker with numerous festival entries and a best director award to his credit. Recorded in only two days, certain songs such as "Love Is a Simple Song," "Lateral Movies" and "I Was There" are as infectious as they are emphatic. (scotsax.com)

the rough draft.

BY NICOLLE GALYON

There are two types of songwriters. The first one sits quietly in a room with others for extended periods of time, working out the next right lyric in silence. This writer might not look like they are even thinking, but in fact, they are in deep conversation with their inner dialogue. This writer is the equivalent of the overachiever who sits in the back of the classroom quietly and then stoically walks to the front of the class and shows his or her work after every “r” has been crossed and every “i” has been dotted. This writer has edited and re-edited their words countless times before they finally show their masterpiece to the class—not in pencil, but with such certainty that they might as well be documenting their lyrics with a tattoo needle on someone’s skin. This writer is a final drafter. By the time they throw out a line in the songwriting process, it is perfect. It is final. It is complete.

I know this because I am married to and co-write with one (his name is Rodney Clawson; maybe you’ve heard some of his songs?). So many of the GOATS of our writing generation are this way—the stories are endless of one Craig Wiseman walking out of the room and then walking back in with a song-of-the-year verse completed top to bottom. The final draft-er is impressive, intimidating, and mystical.

And then there’s the rest of us. We are the fawns with shaky knees awkwardly wobbling through a field of ideas. We pitch our concepts by saying words like “This probably isn’t it...” and “This is probably crazy, but what if it was...” and “I don’t know what this is yet...” and then we bravely brainstorm in real-time, our titles and our lyrics with half-hummed, barely-developed melodies. We audition our rhymes while they still have blank spaces. And we pitch our titles without hooks. And like a crazy abstract painter, we splatter 99 different options on a canvas before our head even has time to figure out where we’re going. We are swimming upstream in the stream of consciousness. We are wearing our worst ideas on our sleeves. We are unafraid to be wrong out loud. And we are willing to look stupid for the sake of making something great. We are the rough drafters.

And that is the only way I know how to do it.

Someone recently asked me how I know when a song is complete, and I

“We are the fawns with shaky knees awkwardly wobbling through a field of ideas.”



laughed and said, “You’re assuming I’ve ever actually finished one.” I guess I have written thousands of songs and have a catalog to prove it. But who’s to say any of these are actually “finished.” I remember in 2013 when Natalie Hemby, Miranda Lambert, and I were writing what would go on to be the title track “Platinum.” I had a family emergency and abruptly announced that I had to leave earlier than expected. To this day, I don’t remember if we ever even attempted to write a bridge to that song—or if, in haste, we just quit writing because I had to leave. And that was that. The song made the record as is. But maybe it was just a rough draft.

A few years later, I co-wrote a song with the duo Dan + Shay and Jordan Reynolds called “All To Myself.” We wrote it. We liked it. We kind of put it on the shelf. Then, a year later, Dan Smyers opened the files back up and completely changed the entire vibe and production on the song. It was nothing like the original. That song ended up being a No. 1 off their self-titled album, but I swear the day we wrote it, I can only take credit for being a part of the rough draft.

The longer I write, the more I am convinced that our job isn’t to finish songs, it is to merely make them exist. Once it exists, it gets to take on a life of its own. Then, the universe decides if it loves it or not. Some of the best songs exist in the form they do because someone ruminated on an idea for six months. Some are the way they are because someone had to leave early to go to a doctor’s appointment. Some are like this article, and become the final draft because it’s just time to pick the kids up from school. ★

Photo by Claire Schaper

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