

When I was a kid the desert was just beyond the edge of my town. Before my family moved to Nashville, we lived in the San Fernando Valley, in Thousand Oaks. One day my brother Carl and me woke up and got dressed for school, only to hear my dad say, “No school today!” Then he got us all in the car and pointed our ‘68 Volkswagen squareback toward that strange, alien landscape known as Joshua Tree. As the houses, palm trees, and Ralph’s supermarkets disappeared, we suddenly felt like we were on the moon. It would come back to me, years later, when the U2 album came out, and I felt like I was in on a secret. The ancient trees twisted toward a wide, clear blue sky. The radio blasted the country station. I can still feel the wind in my hair in the backseat. No seatbelt. And I still see the pride on my dad’s face when Emmylou Harris’s new Number One smash, “Born To Run,” came on the radio. My dad was her guitarist and background vocalist at the time and would be for years to come.

As a recording, “Born To Run” had what I call “moxy” - it stood up on its hind legs, made you take notice. It didn’t sell you any sentimentality. It didn’t lay the frosting on too thick. It spoke to my ten-year old soul. It was restless. It wanted more. More freedom, more love, more motion. I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. And to think that I knew the people that made it! My dad’s voice was weaving underneath Emmy’s. It thrilled me. My dad wasn’t always around. He was a touring musician, putting food on the table for his family. But there are a few moments that stand out in memory. This was one of them. His aviator glasses, which I wasn’t allowed to touch, his thinning hair blowing around. His beaming smile, hearing himself on the radio. And I was beaming too.

I knew enough back then, to know that people wrote songs. They didn’t just appear, fully-formed. And I knew that the man who had written this song was a tall, very tall, kind Englishman named Paul Kennerley. He always wore a suit, had rockstar hair like Jimmy Page, seemed to laugh a lot, and had piercing blue eyes and a sort of wicked smile. I was kind of afraid of him, but he gave my brother and me candy whenever we would visit his house. One time, after we all moved to Nashville, he gave me some watercolor paints. He knew I liked to draw.

What he didn’t know was that one day, I wanted to do what he did. What we felt, driving out to the desert in that ‘68 Volkswagen, blasting “Born To Run, well, I wanted to make people feel that same thing.

At one point we lost touch. Paul and Emmy split up. Over the years, decades really, I’d send him whatever music I would make. I’m not sure I even knew what I was after, but I suppose I was looking for some kind of validation from a guy who had always loomed large. Occasionally I’d see him around Nashville. One time we were both in line to see the movie “U-571.” I asked him, “Can I sit with you?” Obviously reluctant, he said, “I suppose so.” Poor guy wanted to lose himself in a boyhood U-boat drama. Here comes this kid, won’t leave him alone. Then I started having hits, and one in particular, “Hometown Girl” by Josh Turner, caught his ear. Paul Kennerley called me up and said, “Come by my apartment!” Damn.

We began “humming and strumming” as Paul calls it, around 2018. An album I had worked on, Kacey Musgraves “Golden Hour,” had just come out and was getting some notice.. I guess Paul figured, it wouldn’t hurt. We kind of started getting to know one another, who we’d become, who we still were. He liked my voice, and he was vocal about it. He said, “I wish I’d known you could sing like this!” I was kind of thinking, well, I gave you all my albums, but nevermind.

Three years into it, and many, many wonderful conversations, a few arguments, and lots and lots of “humming and strumming” later, I realized that we’d written an album of material. Song by song,

working with one of my biggest heroes, we'd really done it. I wasn't sure what we had. Maybe I was too close to see, but I remember my publisher, Carla Wallace, saying, "This stuff is so good!" I approached Paul, that same Paul Kennerley who brought Carl and me candy, who got me a set of paints, about maybe putting out a record of all these songs that came into the room when we were together.

Yeah, I'm still that kid. I can feel the Santa Ana winds, I can feel the desert heat. I can close my eyes and go right back there.