

# DEPARTMENTS



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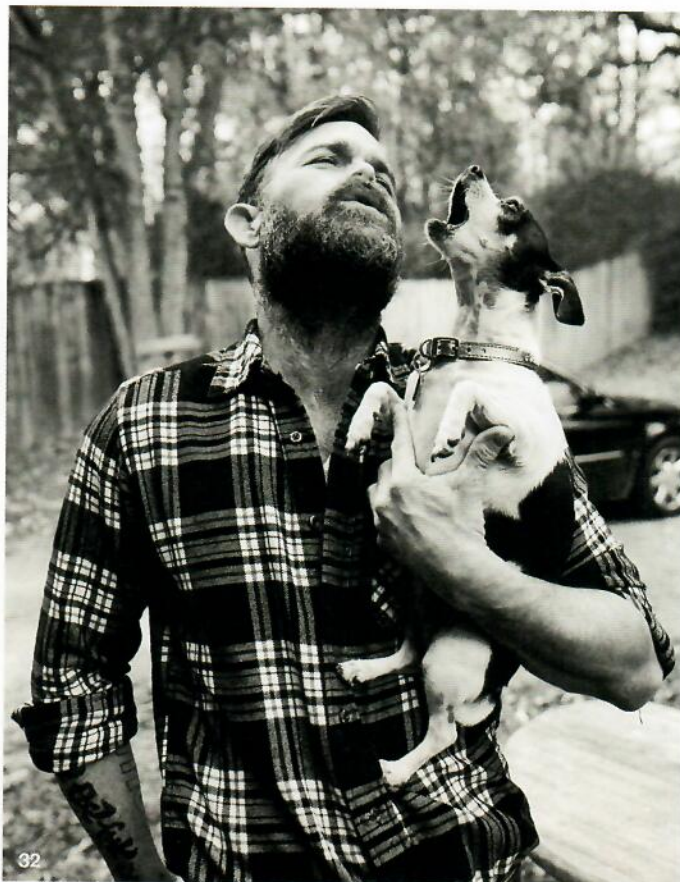
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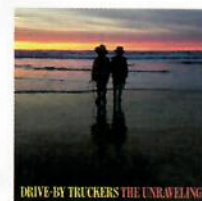


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## The Truckers Return

New music from the Athens, Georgia-formed favorites



### Drive-By Truckers THE UNRAVELING

If you're a fan of Drive-By Truckers, chances are you know the band's political leanings. If not, then the seminal Southern outfit's twelfth album, *The Unraveling*, won't leave any doubt. That said, the album doesn't beat you over the head with polemics. Rather, blistering numbers such as "Armageddon's Back in Town" and "Slow Ride Argument" come from a more emotional, nuanced place. Even the overtly titled "Thoughts and Prayers" and "Babies in Cages" find cofounders Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley gazing inward, offering deeply personal takes in trying to make sense of where we are and how we got there.—M.H.

MUSIC

## Country Redemption

AFTER BATTLING ADDICTION, WAYLON PAYNE RETURNS WITH A STUNNER OF AN ALBUM FIFTEEN-PLUS YEARS IN THE MAKING

By Matt Hendrickson

Waylon Payne is waiting for me in the lobby of the FieldHouse Jones hotel in East Nashville, and I'm late. Dodging laptop-toting millennials, I find him posted up against the wall with a bemused grin as he hands me a cup of coffee. Wearing tight stone-washed jeans and a checkered long-sleeved shirt, Payne is stick thin, with enough weathered creases in his forty-seven-year-old forehead to clue you in that he's made some bad decisions and had his share of hard luck.

He's eager to play some songs off his forthcoming new record, *The Prodigal*, and what better place than his car? Soon we're in his off-white 2006 Lincoln Town Car named Jewel ("make sure you write that she's part of the Designer Series," he says with a laugh), pulling

*Singer-songwriter  
Waylon Payne at  
his home just outside  
Nashville.*

into traffic headed downtown. A tiny straw basket dangles from a chain on the rearview mirror. Payne's mother, the country singer Sammi Smith, called it a "burden basket," where one could metaphorically unload the weight of life's daily struggles. "She had one her whole life," he says. "The jingles moved us gently down the road." We pass Lower Broadway, where country superstars Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton have opened their own humongous venues. "This used to be one of the coolest places in the world," Payne growls. "I came here in 1994, and the honky-tonks were filled with the greatest pickers. They all bounced between the porn store over there and then Tootsie's, which was just...I mean, I spent the night in there so many times."

We glide down Music Row, which I offer used to be a hotbed of creativity but now seems more about the



## A SIP OF SOUTHERN ELEGANCE



## TALK OF THE SOUTH

commerce of country. “But don’t forget Frank Liddell,” Payne says, referring to the famed producer who maintains an office on the block and cohelmed *The Prodigal*, a devastatingly powerful twelve-song redemption project that traces Payne’s journey from a twenty-something in the grips of drug addiction to a sober middle-aged man eternally grateful to be here. In the car, Payne puts on the album’s gritty opener, “Sins of the Father,” before switching to the eerie, delicate grandeur of “After the Storm” followed by the longing of “Santa Ana Winds.” “I call it *The Prodigal* because it’s my thoughts after this journey away,” he says. “I came back to myself.” Payne lingers at an intersection for a few extra seconds, rubbing his hand over the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin. “I owe a lot to Frank,” he says. “And he isn’t the only one.”

Born in Nashville, Payne comes from country music royalty: Smith’s 1970 hit, “Help Me Make It through the Night,” was an early pinnacle of that decade’s outlaw country sound. His father, Jody Payne, was a longtime guitarist for Willie Nelson, and Payne’s godfather—and namesake—is Waylon Jennings. But that’s where the fairy tale ends. His parents divorced when he was young, each of them spending months away while on the road. During the school year, Payne lived in Texas with an aunt and uncle who were strict Baptists. At age eighteen, he came out as gay, and he says the family disowned him. He bounced around Texas for a time before heading to Nashville to pursue music, playing honky-tonks six nights a week. Eventually, the singer-songwriter Shelby Lynne took him under her wing while he played guitar in her band. “She really brought out my own voice in terms of songwriting,” Payne says. “I love women singers because I think I missed my mama so much when she was on the road.”

But Lynne ultimately fired him because he kept screwing up. Payne had dabbled with drugs, but in 2001, after he had moved to Los Angeles, what started out as just partying turned into a full-blown meth addiction. Payne’s 2004 debut album, *The Drifter*, came and went with hardly a blip. Somehow, he kept it together enough to get some acting gigs, including a scene-stealing role as Jerry Lee Lewis in the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line*, despite not knowing how to play the piano (he managed to teach himself before film-

ing began). As most addicts have to do, he hit bottom, and in 2008, with the help of friends in Austin—including Willie and Bobbie Nelson—Payne began a yearslong journey to recovery. He says he did his last drug on his fortieth birthday, April 5, 2012, but it still took three more years before he returned to Nashville. “I had to make sure I was able to live on my own,” he says. “I had to learn how to do things like open my own damn checking account. It was terrifying.”

Back in Nashville, it was Liddell who encouraged him to start writing again. He penned songs for singer Ashley Monroe and cowrote two—“Use My Heart” and “To Learn Her”—for Miranda Lambert’s breakup opus, *The Weight of These Wings*, which Liddell produced. The raw, confessional lyrics of the Lambert tracks hint at Payne’s strengths on *The Prodigal*. He’s a man with nothing left to hide and everything to prove, with a literary frankness akin to that of Jason Isbell and a voice that combines the mournful richness of Roy Orbison’s with Willie’s dusty drawl.

“Waylon is one of those rare artists who when he plays you a song, you know it’s great on a bunch of levels,” Liddell says. “The melodies are so wonderful, his phrasing is unique, and he has a very concise way of conveying emotion and pain and joy. The day I met him, I just fell in love with the guy.”

Payne drives us back to the hotel, and what was supposed to be a forty-five-minute chat has turned into a two-hour gab session. During the conversation, he is at times angry, defiant, compassionate, and hilarious, an understandable fountain of emotion from someone who has fought like hell to get to this point. He laughs at the fact that it took sixteen years to release a second album, and he wonders if Nashville is ready for an openly gay country singer. But he really doesn’t give a rat’s ass. “I can’t change who I am to fit someone else’s expectations,” he says. He is single and has no interest in dating, which is fine because mostly he’s just happy to be making music again. “If I can be an example of a normal guy to an eighteen-year-old kid who got tossed out of the house for being gay, then wonderful,” he says. “But I’m forty-seven years old. I have nobody in my life except my Chihuahua named Petey, and he likes diamond collars and grass-fed beef every night. So Daddy needs to go to work. That’s all I want.” ☐