

Jubal Lee Young “*On A Dark Highway*”

“I’d been holdin’ back, playin’ it a little safe. I think with this one I finally put it out there.”

So says Jubal Lee Young of *On A Dark Highway*, his fifth album and a bold, hard-rocking departure from his outlaw folk-country past. Young says he took his sweet time making this record—more so than any album since his debut.

Drenched in soulful organ courtesy of Michael Webb and layered with female back-up singers led by Young’s academically-trained vocal arranger (and musical partner) Amanda Preslar, *Dark Highway* marks Young’s debut as primary lead guitarist in his band. “Because of the time constraints on albums two, three, and four, I didn’t play much guitar on ‘em. This time we cut the bass and drums and I retreated to my dad’s house and recorded the vocals and guitars and stuff. I’m playin’ almost every bit of guitar on this album.”

Young’s propensity for tinkering with guitar riffs, solos, and licks is boundless. Throughout, he seeks a certain ragged but right sound.

“I’m just slow, a little bit of a perfectionist,” Young says. “It’s easier to be objective when its not you playin’ the part, and Thomm’s a great player, so it was always easy for me to just play the acoustic and ask him to play this or that part. But with me playin’ it I will get into perfection mode and play it fifty times until I hit the way I want it to be hit.

“You can’t put another human being through that,” Young chuckles. “In order for me to make a guitar record the way I wanted it to be I had to make it sort of a solo thing, where I am driving myself crazy but not responsible for driving anyone else crazy. There’s a fine line between having something be right and the way you want it and some kind of technical perfection. When it’s right, it’s right.”

The bulk of *Dark Highway*’s songs are geographical. Young says the motif emerged on its own during the process. He has clocked tens of thousands of western and southern heartland miles on his vehicle over the last couple of years and that white line fever comes through in the images—suicide coyotes and buffalo ghosts, to name but two—and rode-hard-and-put-away-wet characters in these songs, all but two of which are his own sole compositions.

The state motif also guided his selection of the two covers—one each from his illustrious songwriting parents. From his dad Steve Young (“Seven Bridges Road,” “Lonesome On’ry and Mean”) there’s “White Trash Song,” a two-fisted whiskey-soaked North Georgia barndance; from mom Terrye Newkirk (“Come Home Daddy”) there’s the lovely, lilting waltz tribute to the Sooner State in “My Oklahoma,” a song he has been demo-ing since he was a kid and on which today he sounds uncannily like a younger version of his father.

“Under a Rock in Arkansas” is less likely to be adopted as a Chamber of Commerce mantra, though certainly many of us envy and can relate to the song’s narrator’s desire to flee the non-stop drip-feed of bummers on cable news, the dubious pleasures of an ex-girlfriend-haunted local bar, the dead-end job, and the incessant march of bills and debts and start fresh with a new love on the shores of Lake Ouachita. (Put it on a playlist alongside John Prine’s “Spanish Pipedream.”)

Young’s on-and-off home state of Tennessee gets a hard-rocking salute in “Sweet Home Tennessee,” which harks back to his years working for Nashville’s once-stellar KDF radio, a side of himself that is as ever-present as it has been under-recorded. “I had someone tell me the other day it reminded them of Lenny Kravitz,” he says. “Fine. I love Lenny, but that sort of thing has always been under-represented on my albums. I just love that sort of riffy, groove-y, blues-based gut-wrenching kind of stuff.” (It put this writer in mind of the midnight “safety meetings” of staff during his short-lived early 1990s stint as a barback at downtown Nashville’s Ace of Clubs, back when Lower Broad and the rest of the center of Music City was still seedy and dangerous.)

Young heads south of Red River to salute Lone Star State women (“Texas Girls”) while “Texas Pirate Radio” celebrates its patchwork of maverick country radio stations. Just outside of most of the big Texas cities (and even inside some of them) Texans can hear great independent country music and impeccably-selected oldies hand-picked by DJs who checked out of the Nashville system decades ago. “It’s a tribute to the DJs and the Texas radio system in general. It’s definitely its own entity,” Young says. “You’ve got your Clear Channel stations down there but I think more so than other states you’ve got more of a fiercely independent segment of stations that are playing great music, whatever they want, and that is a good thing.”

Love songs are the other streak of ore in this mine of songs, the richest of which (to these ears anyway) is “My Kind of Crazy”: Infectious and twangy *Revolver/Rubber Soul*-style power-pop that shifts gears from verse to bridge to chorus steady and easy as the rising and falling of a marathon champion’s lungs. Lyrics such as “Whatever kinda trouble you are, I get the feelin’ you’re worth it” flow effortlessly into “Kiss me baby, you’re my kinda crazy” along the way.

Dark Highway is about learning to accept your own limitations, striving to be the best you can be, and embracing the fact that you will always fall a little short as both a person and a musician. That is, so long as you can emerge with head held high, knowing you’ve battled honorably and with courage.

“It’s never gonna be exactly the way you want it—that’s a hard lesson you’ve gotta learn when you’re making records,” he says. “My dad won’t listen to any of his own records ‘cause all he hears are the imperfections. Although I hear a few things I’d like to change on *Dark Highway*, in large part I am pretty damn happy with this record. Tryin’ to go for that pure technical perfection, you kinda drain the life out of things, but if you can get to ‘pretty damn happy,’ that’s a good time to quit.”

— John Nova Lomax