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*“That’s the thing about ‘Mr. Saturday Night,’*

 *it’s all happy... until you get to the hook.”*

*--* Jon Pardi

“The thing that makes a Jon Pardi song isn’t what you think,” cautions the Country Music Association and Academy of Country Music award-winner. “It isn’t all drinking, and partying, and cowboy stuff. So many neon songs we turned down – and there’s still plenty of neon on here – but it’s gotta be something different and say something more.”

With *Mr. Saturday Night*, 14 songs steeped in losing, a little loving and what’s in between, the California-born and raised honky tonker considers a recording three years in the making. For the 37-year-old showman, who takes his time to create a true album, music that matters should never be rushed.

“I always remember when a Strait record came out, I was so excited,” Pardi begins. “You count the days ‘til you can get it; then when it’s finally out, you live inside every note. I still listen to those albums today. It taught me to make something that stands the test of time – which means slowing down. When people just eat music every week for the next TikTok craze, those who love real music keep listening.”

A classic old school country record, *Mr. Saturday Night* digs beneath the surface in new ways as it returns the genre to an era of buckle-polishing dancefloor encounters, yowling bar-room revelers and the occasional strong, silent type ballad. Along the way, David Ball, Keith Whitley, Brooks & Dunn, the Eagles, Buck Owens, Gary Stewart, Merle Haggard and the Red Dirt vanguard of “Ragweed, Charlie Robison, Chris Knight and Randy Rogers” inform the songs.

From the breezy, falling-in-love California shimmer “Santa Cruz,” the erotic slink of denial “Your Heart Or Mine,” the open plains tough guy surrender “Hung the Moon,” or the romping “Fill ’Er Up,” Pardi moves through *all* the gears of country *and* Western with an ease unseen in today’s Nashville.

“The true sound is not having the band play something you think you want, but play what’s *your* sound,” he laughs. “It’s who you are, not something you’re trying to be. With this music, it’s what I was born and raised on, what all my memories are made of. California’s got its own kind of country, kinda like Texas – and when the dust settles, really, they’re cousins.”

Pardi Country, beyond plenty of drinks and the whirling fiddles, has a toughness to it; it’s a guy’s guy take on working hard, loving hard and facing the consequences like a man. If it’s not always easy, it’s reality – and that reality is what forged Haggard or Johnny Cash’s place in the music.

“I’ve been writing so long in town, the writers all know me,” says Pardi. “They know it’s gotta have some backbone and some grit, but I’m also not just a tough guy. I’m someone in a relationship a woman can trust to be there and support her.”

That attitude tempers “Last Night Lonely,” the straight-forward walk-up that suggests a man worth keeping, or the slow fiddle-laced late-night encounter “Neon Light Speed.” On the Strait-invoking “Day I Stop Dancing” pledge of love eternal, Pardi demonstrates alternative ways to signal devotion.

Just as he’s still throwing the good timing party – the tumbling “Workin’ On A New One” that punctures swearing off hangovers, or the double break-up “New Place To Drink” with its signature ‘90s Brent Mason guitar licks – he’s found the undertow to those throwdowns. Rather than just drink and drown, the new album from the unrepentant Cali-tonker acclaimed by *The New York Times, Cowboys & Indians, Variety, Rolling Stone*, NPR and the *Los Angeles Times*explores what drives those hardcore Friday and Saturday nights.

“I feel like the country music I listened to trained me that this is what we do when we’re lonely *or* going out. It’s what life sounds like, and how you carry it around with you,” offers the man whose “Dirt On My Boots” was a CMA Song and Single of the Year nominee. “Lonely is a great feeling, a great songwriting feeling – a lot of this life is on the road, hotels rooms and highways. There are all kinds of lonely. But lonely’s always there. For me, and a lot of people, I mask it with having fun and going out.

“A true artist, I guess, you live what you want to feel, so you *know* it. I’ve been there. There’s plenty to go into the songs.”

The slow-rolling title track juxtaposes the high-spirited life of the party with the desolate guy who goes home to face what he’s lost. “It was the last song I played at the last meeting for this album, and everybody was like, ‘Where’d you get *that?!’*

“I’d had the song for two-and-a-half years, but it’s so different I hadn’t shared it. Almost a Sinatra or Dean Martin thing. Nobody’d heard it, so there was the usual, ‘I hope it’s not on hold...’ The head of A&R at my label said, ‘I guarantee it’s not on hold’ – because it’s so different – and it wasn’t.”

That same stoicism permeates the halting “Raincheck,” a puddle of steel guitar that soaks up a failed attempt at moving on. “That’s my Keith Whitley ‘Between the Devil and Me’ song. We’ve all been there, trying to get over someone and not quite getting there...”

In a world of shallow partying, Pardi considers not just the consequences, but the pain that comes with it. Having been the good time guy, he also recognizes for an artist to grow, he must look a little deeper and reach newer understandings of the moment.

Not that Pardi’s gone serious. “Longneck Way To Go,” his sweeping collaboration with hipster country force Midland, considers the collision between drinking her off your mind and just going hard. “That song is such an anthem for us to come together, because Midland is the other band who’s really standing up for this music that’s being left behind. They’re so stylistic, especially about the music and write as a band for their band... To me, this shows what country used to be.”

That inner Gary Cooper or Steve McQueen hasn’t dulled Pardi’s sense of humor. He closes the album with the unlikely “Reverse Cowgirl,” a yearning call to a woman who’s taken off, featuring Sarah Buxton vocals and two-time and current CMA Musician of the Year Jenee Fleenor.

“Bart sent it to me, and said, ‘Dude, don’t look at the title...’ But I did, and I wouldn’t even *listen* to it,” Pardi remembers. “Then we had some people over, and I played it as a joke. One listen in, we couldn’t stop listening! The girls loved it... It’s romantic, but it puts a smile on your face; makes you happy, sad, laugh all at once. Plus, when you hear that fiddle, you’re right back to Strait in the ‘90s.”

Country in the ‘90s is suddenly vogue. For Pardi, he’s steeped in it. His authenticity pushes him, co-producers Bart Butler and Ryan Gore to create something a little more honest, a little richer in the roots.

“You gotta know the right players,” the man whose *California Sunrise* and *Heartache Medication* were #1 *Billboard* Top Country Album debuts, plus CMA and ACM Album of the Year nominees. “There’s people who *want* to play country music, they just don’t get to. The whole computer thing really changes the way music’s made and feels, and that’s driving the modern country.”

Start there, keep going. A sold-out three-night run at New Braunfels’ famous Whitewater Amphitheater saw Pardi, Rhett Atkins and Luke Laird thinking about Texas, chilling out and what makes that kind of music so compelling. “Smokin’ A Doobie” emerged.

“We had rented a house and watched this crew member kinda slipping down to the banks of the river, just grabbing a moment and firing up. Rhett out of nowhere started singing ‘*Smokin’ a doobie on the Guadalupe...’* The song fell out! I don’t think it was 40 minutes before we were done.”

In a Willie Nelson world, the sentiment shouldn’t be scandalous. But Pardi knows some people may still be shocked. “I don’t smoke that much and don’t carry it with me, but if someone’s passing a doobie? Sure. It’s that whole ‘Margaritaville’ thing of letting go of the day, just chilling out and letting the worries float away.”

The problem and the solution, the torque and the release. For a guy who still gets excited about heavy equipment, it makes sense. Rather than fit in with today’s sound, Pardi doubled down. Willing to do the heavy lifting for his kind of country, it’s not a matter of going along, but carving out a path that feels true.

“Some songs are easier for me to put down some chords and lyrics than try to describe it,” he explains. “The songwriters know who and what I am, and they bring me great stuff. I have plenty of time to work on the songs I do write. Together, that creates the best possible Jon Pardi album I can make.”