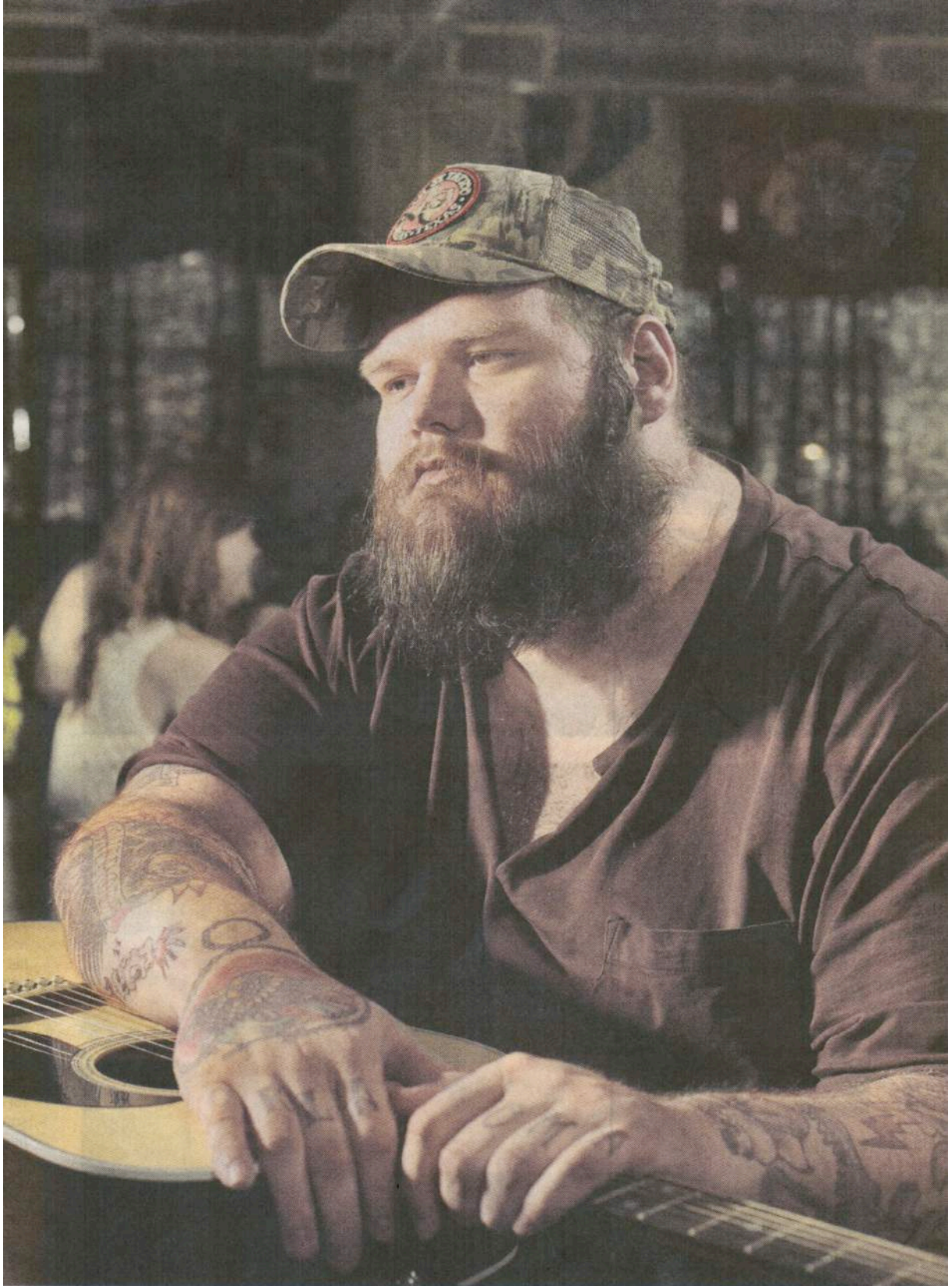


THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Friday, July 3, 2015

MUSIC & MOVIES

# 'I'm So Damn Good at Sorrow'



BY STEVE DOUGHERTY

**AS HE INTRODUCED A TUNE** titled “You Don’t Care For Me Enough to Cry” at a recent New York City club date, Oklahoma singer and songwriter John Moreland told the audience something he’d learned about the song: “It’s too sad for Dallas-Fort Worth morning television.”

“They were like ‘Whoa, that song’s a bummer,’” Mr. Moreland says later. After some back and forth between his management and the station, Mr. Moreland’s appearance was canceled by mutual consent. “I didn’t want to get up at 5 a.m. anyway,” he says.

The incident came on the heels of his discovery this past fall of an Instagram account called @cheerup-johnmoreland. The site is full of pictures of puppy dogs in pajamas and cute cats in funny costumes posted by fans.

## ‘I don’t write songs about bein’ at the bar and seein’ a pretty girl.’

—John Moreland

“I follow it now and I think it’s funny,” Mr. Moreland says. “But my initial reaction was ‘Oh, man, that sucks.’ Your whole existence reduced to this guy who is sad all the time.”

The perception won’t be instantly dispelled by “High On Tulsa Heat,” his latest self-produced solo album of mostly sad, but also starkly tuneful and soulful songs. The record has won widespread critical praise, admiration from other performers and gigs this summer opening for touring Americana stars Dawes, Jason Isbell and Patty Griffin.

With tunes like “Hang Me in the Tulsa County Stars” (“My heart is growing heavy from the ever endless hurt”), and “Cherokee” (“It hurts too bad to go”), the album also cements the 30-year old’s reputation as a poet of emotional pain.

As he sings in the tune that flunked out on morning TV: “I’m so damn good at sorrow.”

“The thing that makes me want to write songs are usually the negative emotions,” says Mr. Moreland, who confesses that he’s actually often quite happy. “But then, I’ve never been having a really great day and thought, ‘Oh man I have to write a song about this.’ I don’t write songs about bein’ at the bar and seein’ a pretty girl. I want to dig a little bit deeper and I think people translate that as sad—even when it isn’t.”

“I don’t really know the difference between sad songs and happy songs,”

says Dawes frontman Taylor Goldsmith, who became an avid fan of Mr. Moreland’s after hearing his album, “In The Throes,” from 2013. “There’s a catharsis with a good sad song that can put a smile on your face.”

Mr. Isbell says he admires Mr.

Moreland’s emotional honesty, comparing with it his own former band, the Drive By Truckers. “His music reminds me a lot of what we were doing in the Truckers early on. Not necessarily how it sounds but the attitude behind it.”

For Mr. Moreland, that attitude comes not from the Southern rock tradition that spawned the Truckers, but from two genres not often associated with folk-tinged roots music—hard-core punk and metal.

“Outside the show, drinking Ny-

**O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A** John Moreland’s knuckle tattoo is from hardcore days.

Quil and honey, trying to conjure up some rock ‘n’ roll,” he sings in “Sad Baptist Rain,” an up-tempo tune from his new album that mines his own teenage past.

Inspired by a Nirvana CD given him by an older cousin, he learned a couple of guitar chords and began to write songs at age 10. From then on and into his 20s, he played guitar and wrote songs for a succession of hard-core bands unlikely to get bookings at the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival or the Newport Folk Festival, both of which Mr. Moreland will be playing in July.

The conversion was aided by his father’s record collection. “My dad always listened to Neil Young and CCR (Creedence Clearwater Revival) and Steve Earle, so I grew up hearing good songwriters. I went back and listened to all his records.”

He soon began churning out songs solo, recording them himself and posting them free online. “I didn’t have money to get CDs made and sell them at shows,” he says. Word-of-mouth spread over message boards and Facebook. Several of his songs appeared in “Sons of Anarchy,” the long-running TV drama about motorcycle outlaws.

“It got to the point where I could count on there being like five people at every show who were excited that I was coming to their town. It was enough of a morale boost to feel like I should keep doin’ it.”

He likes to play small, intimate venues—his huge frame standing out in the setting. “His is an against-all-odds story,” says Nashville singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier. “He’s been propelled by the power of his songs, not by the power of any kind of music-biz push.”

Though Mr. Moreland’s new album is distributed by an established indie label, Thirty Tigers, it was very much a do-it-yourself production that he and friends recorded at his parents’ house in Bixby, Okla. when they were out of town on vacation. “My favorite music is not something you can achieve by going to the nicest studio and getting all the best players. There’s a vibe from friends making music together that I think is cooler.”

At Mr. Moreland’s solo show at New York’s Rockwood Music Hall, vestiges of his hard-core past (letters tattooed on his fists spell “O-K-L-A H-O-M-A”) and newfound success were in evidence.

He not only had CDs for sale, he had an assistant to sell them.

“That’s my mom,” he told the audience. “She’s all right. But just so you don’t think I’m a horrible son, she volunteered to work the merch table.”