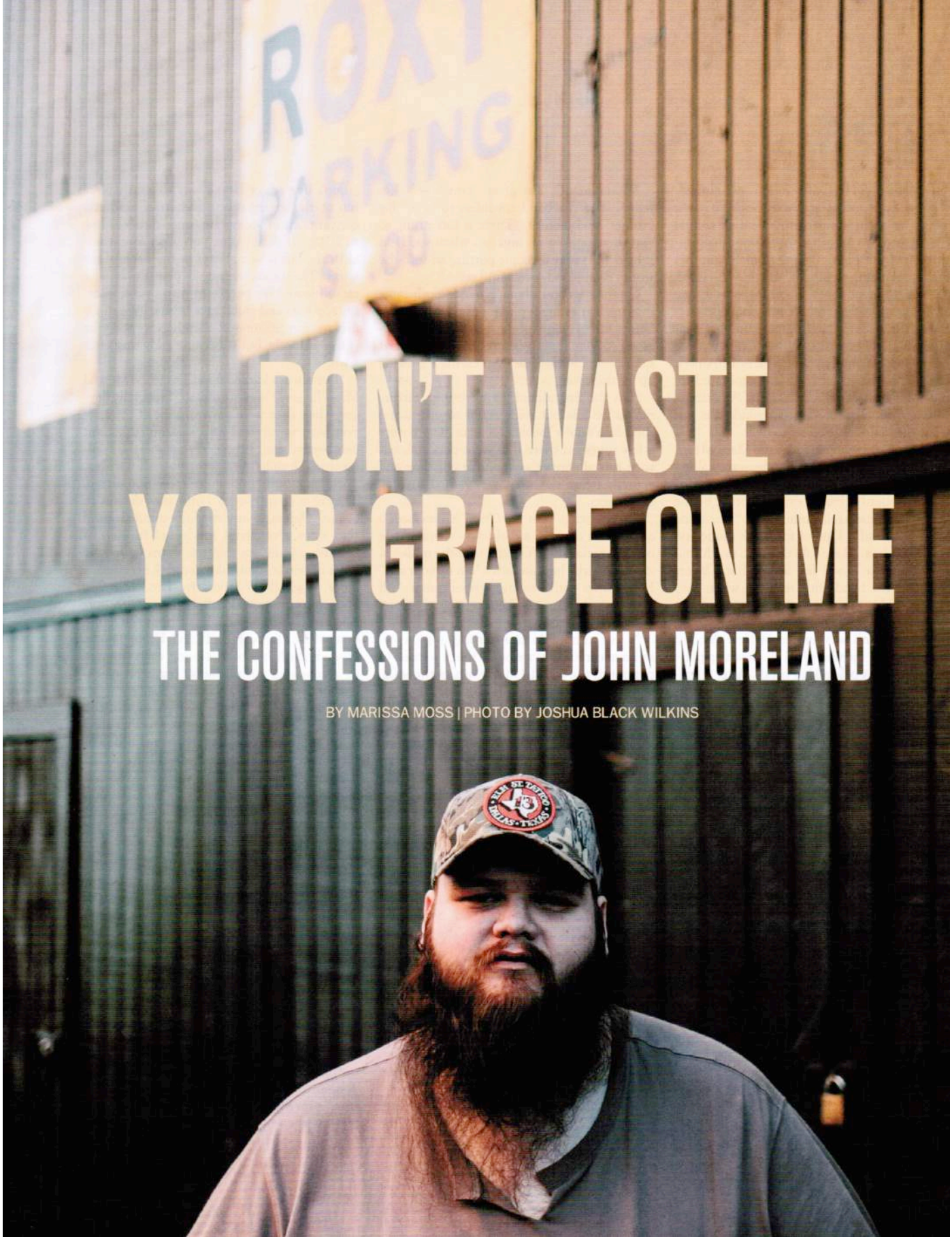


SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2015



# DON'T WASTE YOUR GRACE ON ME

## THE CONFESSIONS OF JOHN MORELAND

BY MARISSA MOSS | PHOTO BY JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS



**I**F JOHN MORELAND were to show you around his hometown of Tulsa, he'd probably start with a swing by the Woody Guthrie Center, a simple brick museum dedicated to Oklahoma's original acoustic "This Land Is Your Land" troubadour on the edge of downtown.

"On the wall outside, there is a giant mural of Woody, and I always laugh when I drive by," he says, calling during a brief period of downtime before he hits the road again, during which he's mostly been catching up with old friends and watching Cincinnati Reds games. Guthrie famously wielded a guitar with "This Machine Kills Fascists" scrawled across the body, but he's still a legend in the state that's only voted for a Democratic president once since 1948. "It's a giant mural of a socialist in one of the most conservative states in America. It's only okay because it's Woody Guthrie, but I think a lot of people just think of him as a folk hero and don't really know much about him."

Moreland can relate, after all. Being a songwriter often goes hand in hand with being misunderstood; maybe that's why you start writing songs in the first place, or maybe it's just something that happens once people start attaching their stories to your own. The folk art is often built on confession, and the act of singing along to nothing but the sound of your own strums is one as intimate as a first kiss. So people have taken to the 30-year-old Moreland as their vehicle of doldrums-delivery du jour – since the release of his third record, *High On Tulsa Heat*, this spring, he's opened for Dawes, Jason Isbell and Langhorne Slim, even bringing audience members to the brink of tears during one particular show at East Nashville's the 5 Spot (in a town where tears of jealousy are probably more common). Then there's that "Cheer Up John Moreland" Instagram page, dedi-

cated to making the seemingly bummed-out Oklahoman turn that frown upside down: pictures of kitties, rainbows, various memes.

John Moreland is not sad. His songs are not all sad, either. But in the age of meaningless GIFs, Auto-Tune and mash-ups designed more for Arby's commercials than record players, his work simply makes you feel – and visceral is often mistaken for miserable. Moreland's work is the kind that swells throats with lumps, and we've just forgotten that introspection, beauty and wonder can sometimes do this just as effectively as sorrow. There is no emoji for wistful nostalgia or dangerous love, but there is music for them.

"I've had people tell me I make them cry," he says. "But that doesn't mean [my music] is sad. I want to dig deep because I don't have it in me to write about surface-level stuff, and I think people equate that with sadness. That's not sad, that's just emotions. That's what 'feeling stuff' is like." He laughs. Yes, John Moreland laughs. A lovely, warm one at that.

Moreland's been bubbling around Tulsa's "small but weird" music scene for some time now, in various incarnations: first, in punk and metalcore bands, and then as a singer-songwriter, once his tastes turned more to Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt than anything too head banging. He's a devoted Earle fan, but it wasn't necessarily the type of music itself that led him to abandon pedal boards and power chords for shows seated atop a trusty stool with an acoustic guitar – it was the craft of songwriting itself.

"I've been playing in bands since I was 13," Moreland says, "and I've always been the default songwriter. I always had a band, or was starting a new band, or had something I was writing for. The reason I do it now is different. It's not because I'm in a band and we need material – it's because if I don't do it, I start to feel

really bad, and I have a lot of emotions and thoughts that get tangled up in my head I need to let out."

And yes, those emotions are sometimes solemn ones, but the subject matter is sometimes beside the point. It's one thing to write a sad lyric – heck, Lady Gaga has plenty of them – but it's another to remember how to package it in a way that actually has the ability to take listeners to that uneasy place where memories attach themselves to verses. These songs aren't sad for the sake of being sad – they're sad because they're honest. And that hurts the most.

"If you don't know me and you are basing everything you know about me on my music then, yeah, I can understand that, I can understand how you could draw the conclusion that I must just be bummed out most of the time," he says. "But I'm not. It's a little weird to sometimes feel like I'm being reduced to this one-dimensional sad guy. But it messed with me a lot at first. A review once said, 'trading in defiance for sadness' on my last record [*In The Throes*]. And I was like, 'Oh Julia' is still totally defiant."

"I just wanna let you know, I think I'm finally free," he sings. "Tell the congregation not to waste their grace on me."

There's a way Moreland evokes rather than explains in his lyrics – take "3:59 a.m.," also off of *In The Throes*: "My pockets are empty, I don't own a thing/ But I'd take a diamond from the sky and put it in your ring." There are romantic couplets and then there is this, which is a love song the way love actually is: layered with highs, lows and letdowns, and battling its maturity against the enduring childhood of so many lives. "I still use your old alarm clock/ Every morning I get further off the course," he sings on "Cherokee," one of the best songs about longing to come down the pike in recent memory.



Because what he plays is technically folk music, he's often lumped into the "Americana" category of the Pandora/iTunes machine, but what Moreland does has much more in common with Elliott Smith, Tom Waits and Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road," or even Daniel Johnston, who all relied on lyrics set amongst a nearly acoustic-punk sensibility to help transport those stories to the most personal of places. Maybe it's his hardcore roots, but Moreland's fearless when it comes to his compositions: he doesn't rely on a weepy fiddle to make a song feel despondent, or create a crescendo of guitars to conjure excitement. He does it the old-fashioned way: through words, set to quiet, uncomplicated plucks.

"If the American music business made any sense," MSNBC host Rachel Maddow tweeted in 2013, "guys like John Moreland would be household names." Moreland joked in a podcast that was probably the first time his father, as conservative as the state he lives in, ever agreed with the ultra-liberal television anchor.

"John's songwriting is quite possibly a di-

rect reflection of how the rest of us, as songwriters, wish we could write," says musician and photographer Joshua Black Wilkins, who played with Moreland at that tear-inducing 5 Spot gig. "Each song is touching, honest and painful. Unlike most artists, his records and his live performances are nearly identical in effectiveness. I want to stay on his good side so he doesn't resent me for being so inspired by him."

Moreland keeps the line between performance and recording so tight because he tends to produce and record everything himself – and it's something he's been both praised and criticized for. Even after signing with Nashville's Thirty Tigers, he's kept control over most of his career, from distribution to art direction. Only recently has he let some of the day-to-day leave his hands, like hiring a booking agent to handle his touring schedule.

"There's something cooler about getting some friends together and doing what you can with what you have," he says. Some reviews of *High On Tulsa Heat* wished that Moreland had enlisted a flashier producer,

or that his songs "deserved" some expert engineering (the website *Saving Country Music* called it "lazy and uninspired"); he eschews that notion. Though it's now common practice for even fledgling bands to search out a studio maven much more well-known than they might ever be, Moreland doesn't take much from the process of farming out his tracks for some sort of expert polish.

"Those kind of records have never been that interesting to me," he explains. "I like stuff that feels free and off-the-cuff, and has roughness around the edges. But people want somebody they can name drop. It's so hard to get noticed anymore, and they want someone who can get people's attention who they can be attached to. That just doesn't mean a lot to me."

There's not a lot of aggressive grabbing for attention in what Moreland does, across the board, which is part of his appeal. It all comes down to that emotional component – it's a word that comes up in nearly every conversation about his work, particularly if you're able to move past the simple talks of

just "sadness." "John puts so much of himself into every song then delivers it with so much emotion," says Sammy Brue, a 14-year-old wunderkind who has found a sort of mentorship in artists like Moreland, Wilkins and Joe Fletcher. "He changed how I approach songwriting."

Live, there's humility to his performances; though he often closes his eyes when he sings, he manages to keep the audience in an intimate grasp. He's often seen with his glasses on, dressed simply. Moreland would likely be the first to tell you he's not designed for glamour shots, but he is interesting to look at: he's a large man, and doesn't try to adorn himself in anything other than what one might wear to drive a truck or fetch a paper. With his guitar resting on his abdomen, there's no big band or light show: this is it. And it's enough.

"John's audiences are beyond attentive,

mesmerized or even hypnotized," says Terry Rickards, who books the 5 Spot and witnessed first-hand how he transformed the usual crowd, spoiled by music, into falling completely captive. "The 5 Spot is a chatty place. Most Nashville audiences are. From the first strum of line check to "thank you, good night"... not a peep. None." Rickards recalls one evening when Dave Rawlings stopped by to catch Moreland's set – for the second time that day. He drove to Franklin and back just to witness a few more of his songs. "I believe he told John he was going to steal some of his stuff," recalls Rickards.

There's a magic mix in that "stuff" that imbeds itself so deeply into the gut. There's no Music Row formula to what Moreland does, only lyrics that exist somewhere between the realm of narrative and poetry; not exactly storytelling, but full

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of lines that are crystal-clear evocation. He describes his method more as "stream of consciousness," where the emphasis is more on feeling than simply leading the listener through a story. There are sketches that unfold, but blanks to be filled in, too. And, often, very little agenda.

"Sometimes I don't know what [songs] are about until years later," he says. "I don't get a lot of satisfaction out of sitting down and saying, I'm going to write a song about this topic. I'll have moments at a show where I am playing a song and I'll think of something new, maybe that's what that means. There is a lifelong process of uncovering where this stuff came from."

And maybe that's the reason for all those tears: everyone's on a lifelong search to uncover the source of our emotions, and to hit the bass notes of day-to-day existence in a tone that rings the same for us all. When we hear someone singing those lessons, we stop. We become silent and we listen to the often sad, sometimes totally defiant, songs of John Moreland. Because that's what feeling stuff is like. ★