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Presenting Parker Millsap: A Smoky Okie With Americana Hustle

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Parker Millsap has plans. Lots of them. Presently, though, his biggest concern is trying to keep one of his mixed-breed dogs from having a family cat for a snack.

That's as complicated as it gets at the moment for a spry 21-year-old Oklahoman with a wealth of talent in his front pocket and tons of ambition in the back of his mind.

Later this month, he's heading for Nashville, where the smoky Okie will make his **Grand Ole Opry** debut Sept. 16. Then Millsap will take the **Ryman Auditorium** stage the next day as one of the nominees for best emerging artist at the **Americana Music Honors & Awards** show.

With an embraceable **self-titled debut album** that's been out only eight months, Millsap displays unbridled enthusiasm while discussing his future and just about anything else. Yet his small-town, old-time religion upbringing (born and raised in Purcell, pop. approximately 6,000) keeps his head out of the clouds and feet firmly planted on the ground.

Among an impressive list of fellow nominees that includes Hurray For The Riff Raff, St. Paul & The Broken Bones, Sturgill Simpson and Valerie June, Millsap looks forward to returning to the Ryman, where he opened for **Old Crow Medicine Show** in front of a sellout crowd last New Year's Eve. But he doesn't have any preconceived notions about what it will do for his career.



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In this series of profiles previewing Americanafest 2014 in Nashville from Sept. 17-21, three scheduled performers will offer some impressions of the Music City and let visitors know what to see and do during their stay.

PART 1: THE ROOKIE
PARKER MILLSAP

Ryman Auditorium, Sept. 17, 7-9:15 p.m.
Mercy Lounge, Sept. 18, 10-10:45 p.m.

"For me, it's like, well, it means you have to do better next time,"

he said with a laugh over the phone last month from Guthrie, his residence for about a year that's 60 or so miles up Interstate 35 from his parents and many other relatives in Purcell. "Like now there's other people paying attention. So (I better) write better songs."

Millsap sounds as excited as he appears onstage, an outgoing lad blessed with boyish good looks that start with an Elvis upsweep. There's also bountiful energy, a vivid imagination, real sex appeal and two-thirds of a name left of one that read Jonathan Parker Millsap on his birth certificate.

With mom Andie and dad Tim (whose high school best friend Tim Parker was the source for his son's middle name) in the crowd, Millsap also will perform during the Americana show while accompanied by upright bassist Michael Rose, who he's known since eighth grade at Purcell Junior High, and fiddler Daniel Foulks.

While Rose, 23, is considered the best driver of their recent 12-passenger tour van upgrade, Foulks, at 37, is the grandpa of the group, Millsap said.

The classically trained Foulks studied jazz in college, listens to Nirvana and eats vegetarian, but played in a Norman, Okla.-based outfit called **Mark Phillips & IIIrd Generation Bluegrass Band** for 14 years.

"They're a bunch of hillbillies who eat McDonald's every day and smoke cigarettes and drink 30 packs of Natty Light," Millsap joked. "I think he's just excited to be with a group that will eat at vegetarian restaurants."

Not that Millsap and his band are too hoity-toity to hang with the common folks.

He and his girlfriend Meg, who works at the local newspaper, stay busy with their pet pooches Mavis and Levon, one of whom was in the middle of that playful dog-and-cat fight. "It's weird," Millsap said. "They don't mind. They'll just like roll over and the dog ... he doesn't really bite, he just tries to lick them to death."

One of Millsap's favorite places to play (see below) is **the Station Inn**, a bluegrass haven on 12th Avenue South where he made his Nashville debut in 2013, then returned in July for his first headlining show in the Music City.



Despite his high-profile appearances, Millsap wouldn't classify any of them as a major break.

"I don't know, I feel like I'm still waiting for it," he said humbly. "... I feel like, if I admit that there's some sort of break, then that'll give me a reason to relax. I don't really want an excuse to stop trying harder, you know."

Opening for OCMS, then joining them on the Ryman stage was surreal -- "The place sounds great, it feels great. I grew up playing in church, so it kinda felt like that," Millsap said -- and he expects his upcoming Opry appearance to be almost as intriguing.

"I didn't really grow up on classic country or anything," Millsap said. "But a lot of the

music that I listened to was influenced by classic country, that kind of thing. My manager Norm (Parenteau) said, 'Hey, you wanna ... is that something you'd be interested in?' And my response is always like, 'I'll play anywhere. Like give Mike and Dan a few beers and a meal; we'll go anywhere.' (*laughs*) I'm pretty excited about that. I guess we're opening or playing on the same bill with, I think, Rascal Flatts. It's always interesting to me when you get put on bills like that to ... it's always like, 'Is it gonna work? Are they gonna like you?' "

Millsap primarily plays acoustic guitar, first picking up the instrument at age 9. He became more ambitious after his father bought him Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* album a couple of years later. Upon hearing more of Slowhand's earlier work with John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers, Millsap plugged in and cranked up the volume.

"But then once I started writing songs, I kind of got tired of just playing guitar solos," Millsap said. "I was a better guitarist when I was like 16 than I am now probably. *(laughs)* As far as a lead player. As a rhythm player, I'm definitely better now. But as a lead player back then, that's all I did all day. I played electric guitar solos. I'd go to my room and just play and play and play and play and play. And now I'm more worried about writing songs than masturbatory guitar playing." *(laughs)*

The chances of Fasthand going back to electric any time soon are remote, Millsap said, unless ... the band makes a key addition.

"For me, it's this weird thing. If there's no drummer, I don't want to play electric guitar. And I know there are people that can pull it off, but I prefer to play acoustic," he said, noting his finger- and thumb-picking styles make him play a lot harder. "As soon as we can afford a drummer, you'll see more electric guitar."



Maybe by that time, Millsap will make other lifestyle changes, but right now he prefers the lower cost of living his Sooner State offers. To paraphrase a familiar phrase: You can take the boy out of the small town ...

"I can see Nashville, eventually," Millsap said regarding his next possible home. "I like Oklahoma, though. My whole family's here. I grew up within a few miles of all my grandparents and aunts and uncles, so I kind of like it. Now I'm an hour and a half from anybody, but I like being this close, you know."

So let's re-paraphrase that. You can take the Jonathan out of the boy's name, but this Millsap is here to stay.

TRIPPING OUT WITH PARKER MILLSAP

The artist shares his thoughts about Nashville and more. His edited responses:

What do you remember about your first trip to Nashville?

"I played the Station Inn with Shawn Camp and Ketch (Secor) and Critter (Fuqua) from Old Crow Medicine Show, like a songwriter in the round kind of thing (as part of the Tin Pan South songwriter's festival in April 2013). And that one show has kind of been a catalyst for a lot my happenings thus far."

For a music fan visiting Nashville for the first time, what should be at the top of their to-do list?

"I love the Station Inn because it feels kind of like a dive bar ... and there's a lot of bluegrass history there. ... You know Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley, a lot of bluegrass greats have played there. It's just the kind of place where they have Coors and Coors Light and like PBR and then maybe one, like you know, nice beer. *(laughs)* And then they serve pretzels, like really cheap, greasy pizza and there's like a little sign that says, 'a thing of popcorn.' It actually says that: 'a thing of popcorn.' A buck fifty. And 'a thing of popcorn' is one of those things, you know those red plastic baskets that they pour French fries in? It's like one of those. ... And the ladies who work there are pretty entertaining. The lady who works at the front, I think her name is Ann. She calls herself the 'short bitch' because she's like 4-foot-6 or something. She's tiny but she's ... this wonderful little foul-mouthed lady. *(laughs)* The first time I went, I got there early and, you know, I was just hanging out and I started talking to her. Somehow the concept of church came up and she said, 'I go to church.' And I'm like, 'Oh, really. Where do you go to church?' She said, 'I go to the church of the who gives a holy shit.' So, anyways, that's enough reason for me to go there." *(laughs)*

What's still on your wish list of things to do in Nashville?

"I've never been to like a big show in Nashville. I'd be interested to see what that crowd's like at a big show. It's funny. You go to Nashville, the guy who's checking you in at the hotel almost is definitely a better guitar player than you are. ... And I'd be curious to see what an arena show is like in Nashville. There's that big Bridgestone Arena. I think it was, not the last time we were there but the time before that, we were there and Taylor Swift was doing like three or four nights at the Bridgestone Arena. And so she had all of her buses parked around the block. In particular, I'd be curious to see someone like Taylor Swift, who's a huge Nashville star, in Nashville. Just to see what it's like."

What are some of your favorite haunts in town?

What are some of your favorite haunts in town?

"Mostly when I'm there, I'm either hanging out at my manager's office (Parenteau also represents Old Crow Medicine Show at [Slipshod Management](#)) or at this producer's house that I know. Usually one of those two places. Oh, there's a Thai restaurant called the Thai Phooket. And it's like two double-wide trailers that they've sawed holes in and built together. But it's really good Thai food."

Who are you looking forward to seeing perform or meeting at the AMAs?

"Well, Lake Street Dive is playing right after us (Sept. 18 at [the Mercy Lounge](#)). ... And I've seen them once before. They put on a great show. I always love seeing John Moreland (11 p.m. Sept. 17, [High Watt](#)). ... He's another Okie. He's from, I think, Sand Springs, which is up by Tulsa, but he lives in Norman now. He's just a knockout songwriter."

What's next for Parker Millsap?

"So there's (his first official) music video that should be coming out the week of the Americana show. We shot a music video for 'Truck Stop Gospel.' It's pretty cool. I hope people like it. We did it in L.A. It's telling the story of the song. Like this trucker who's also a preacher. ... Then we'll be releasing a single and a B-side on a 7-inch and digitally sometime later this year, I think. And probably touring a lot."