



Josh Rouse Finds *Happiness* With Laid-Back Songs

Written by Jewly Hight April 5th, 2013



Almost a decade ago, [Josh Rouse](#) took a leap so big, it was hard for a lot of people to wrap their heads around it. The Nebraska native and, at that time, Nashville resident picked up everything and moved to Spain to start a new life with a new family and a new language. Around that time, he started finding more exotic sources of musical inspiration, too.

But no matter where Rouse is doing his songwriting these days, several songs on his new album, *The Happiness Waltz*, express a desire for contentment that feels comfortably close to home.

CMT Edge: I've noticed that when you've done interviews with anyone in the States, they've tended to quickly...

Rouse: To ask "What's Spain like? Why are you in Spain?"

Yeah, exactly. But you've been over there for several years now and made several albums in that time, so the fact that you live in Spain isn't really news anymore. At this point, what's your perspective on how being overseas has shaped your work, your sense of yourself as a performer and the way you're perceived by others?

That's a huge question. We'd better take this by parts.

Go for it.

You said something about other people's perceptions of me as a performer.

Right. Do they view you as the worldly guy, the bilingual guy?

I think there's a bit of that transcontinental vibe. Right after I moved from Nashville and I made the *Nashville* record — even while making the *Nashville* record [in 2005] — I got heavy into bossa nova and heavy into Brazilian music, especially the '50s and '60s stuff.

It had nothing to do with Spain. Brad Jones, my producer, started making me these compilations, and I fell in love with it and went deeper and deeper and eventually toured Brazil. I had a lot of fans there I didn't know about. That style kind of incorporated into what I was going. I became a big [Joao Gilberto](#) fan and wanted to play guitar like him.

The '70s have been a big influence on me, but it's always a very listenable pop sound, the songs, very easygoing. When I incorporated different time signatures and Latin things like that, I definitely think it threw my fan base for a loop. Some people really liked it, some people didn't. They were like, "Wow, he's changed. This is different."

I'm from Nebraska, but I've never felt a big sense of tradition or "Here's where I'm from, and I'm gonna do music that's from here," you know? "I'm gonna do Dust Bowl ballads because I'm from Nebraska. That's who I am, and these are my roots." I've never been a real rooted person. I've moved around a lot. So I've always felt not like a gypsy, but I've developed my own thing. And it's gonna morph a little bit.

You mentioned the characterization of your music as mellow or easygoing, but that shouldn't be confused with musical laziness. It's very nimble music that you're making. It has a light touch and subtlety to it.

Yeah. I'm not an aggressive person. I've always made pretty laid-back music because I'm that type of person. I'm not neurotic or hyper or a rock person. I mean, I've been doing music for 15 years and watching different trends in the music business or watching music change. When people make music or get up onstage, they put on a persona or want people to think, "This is who I am." Eventually, the real you ends up coming out, somehow, in the music. ... In the lyrics or even in the performance, all the fronts kind of come down, and it's just you.

I can get distracted myself, stylistically, going, “Oh, I want to do this.” But at the end of the day, it’s still me singing the song and something about my life or what’s going on in my head comes out.

There are songs on *The Happiness Waltz* that mention things like parenthood or the grey in your hair. Youthful passion and facing mortality are seasons of life that have always lent themselves to dramatic songwriting. Do you find it at all difficult to talk about what comes midway between those extremes?

It’s just where I’m at, you know, in my life. Maybe when I was in my 20s or 30s and writing songs and putting out records, I wasn’t wearing my heart on my sleeve as much as I do now. I wasn’t as direct. I think now I’m a bit more direct.

Now I’m just taking care of two little kids and having a good time, but it’s also hard. All my free time’s been gone. It’s a lot of work. It’s beautiful at the same time. ... And your relationship changes. ... This whole record is about that. Once kids are in the picture, your relationship changes. It changes everything, even your view on the world, bringing two new lives into the world. And it also has to do with happiness in general, how the pendulum swings from joy to pain every day and trying to deal with that, find some kind of balance in life.

When you write songs like “It’s Good to Have You” or “Our Love” and talk about domestic contentment, are you primarily thinking of your own experience, or do you also see yourself as expressing what a lot of people want — expressing shared desires?

It’s definitely universal. I’m speaking for my own experience, but I think the themes are universal. Everyone that I talk to that’s around my age, we all want to be happy. There are a lot of books written about it. I think we live in a very modern world where there are a lot of distractions. Our mind is always somewhere else. ... And that can lead to a lot of stress and a lot of unhappiness. I’m trying to just find a good spot and stay there, and that’s hard to do. ... Songwriting is kind of my escape. After I write a song, even if it’s not a good one, it’s like I’ve just taken a Xanax or something.

When you wrote and recorded half of your *El Turista* album in Spanish, what sort of response did you get from Spanish-speaking audiences?

Critically, it was horrible. It did not get good reviews in Spain, that record. Which is a shame because I think it’s a really good record. Outside of Spain, it did really well. I think people liked it. I think the fans liked it. It was something different. I was ready to do that.

You can’t win sometimes. If I just keep making records that kinda sound like the same thing, it’s, “Oh, he’s doing the same thing.” Or if you change, it’s like, “Oh, we want the old Josh Rouse.”

We play shows, and people ask for those songs, even in Spain. I think the people liked it more than the critics. The critics in Spain are really rough. ... And if an American comes over there and attempts to sing in Spanish, it's like, "What are you doing? You're an American. Play American music."

You did a version of the fiddle tune "Cotton-Eyed Joe" on that album. How'd you come up with your breezy, jazz interpretation of the song?

There's a guy named [Terry Callier](#) — he just died, actually — and he did a jazz-folk album in 1960 or something like that. Maybe even '59. It's real minimalistic and beautiful. He's got an amazing voice. My version is kind of like his. ... I'm a big fan of '50s jazz-folk.

A decade ago, you made your 1972 album that highlighted the soft rock feel that was popular around the time you were born. When you were a kid or a teenager, did you get that kind of music? What drew you to those musical styles back then?

My preteen years or early teens, [I was] rebellious. I was into punk rock or English stuff, [the Smiths](#) and [the Cure](#). ... [But] I grew up in rural Nebraska. We listened to an AM station that still plays the same songs that they played back then. I was always listening to new stuff, but in high school, the '70s came back, and it seemed like they came back for a long time. My friends and I, we always kinda liked that music. I always liked the easy listening songs that were on AM. I thought, "These are good songs." You could go, "Oh, that's a little cheesy." Or, "It's not edgy." But the truth is, they were really good songs. After my first record, I said, "I just want to do softer, subtler music." It's the kind of stuff I like to listen to. And I've kind of stayed there the whole time.