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Aaron Watson Puts The Cowboy Back In Country With 'Outta Style'

When **Aaron Watson** debuted at No. 1 on Country Albums on March 7, 2015, with *The Underdog*, he set a precedent as the first-ever self-released independent artist to start at the top on that chart.

He did it, of course, without substantial radio outside of Texas, and it raised a lot of eyebrows in the business.

"Everyone seemed so, so shocked," recalls Watson. "But the thing that people aren't factoring in is that we tour and we tour and we tour and we tour, so regardless of whether we're getting played on mainstream radio, we are still servicing those markets and we are still reaching out to those fans."

Considering the circumstances, the title *The Underdog* suited him nicely. And when Big Label/Thirty Tigers releases his next album on Feb. 24, it likewise will have an appropriate title: *Vaquero*. It's Spanish for "cowboy," and it's apropos for a Texan whose typical apparel — a western hat, jeans and boots — is direct from the **George Strait** catalog. The album was crafted with that in mind.

"Aaron said to me early on that he wanted to bring the cowboy back into country music," says producer **Marshall Altman** (**Frankie Ballard**, **Eric Paslay**). "And I have kept that in my head about this record. It was our goal to make sure that we weren't just nodding at those traditions but we were fully embracing them, meaning great story telling, big vocal out front, no programming, really. We were trying to make country music."

The first single from *Vaquero* — "Outta Style," released to radio via PlayMPE on Oct. 18 — makes that clear six seconds in when fiddler **Glen Duncan** introduces the instrumental hook, a big, bold, **Charlie Daniels**-size sound over a rhythm track that's built on **Tom Petty**-like pulsing guitars and a handclap pattern that mimicks **John Mellencamp**'s "Jack and Diane."

"A sawing fiddle makes people go crazy more than any other instrument I've ever seen," enthuses Watson. "I know this for a fact because I opened for **Kiss** at Cheyenne Frontier Days. My fiddler starting sawing on that fiddle, and there's thousands of people dressed up, their faces all painted like Kiss, and they went nuts."

Arriving at "Outta Style" and that fiddle signature was a lengthy process that harkens back to *The Underdog*'s chart debut. After Watson and his wife, **Kimberly**, got over the immediate excitement of that accomplishment, he took it as a challenge. He decided to push himself as a songwriter, regularly rising around 5 a.m., writing songs before he took the kids to school and fitting in more writing sessions whenever he had a break throughout the day. He penned about 80 new songs and recorded the best 14 during the fall in Nashville.

While Altman was under the impression the album was done, Watson went back to Texas intent on recording another song or two.

"We call it 'the bottom-of-the-ninth session,'" says Watson, alluding to the heroic late innings of a baseball game. "We record the entire album, and even if we feel the album's done, it doesn't matter. We have to go in and record the bottom-of-the-ninth session."

Which required more material. During the sessions, he had played around with an idea he had titled "Never Going Outta Style" — Altman had notated it in a production manual as "unfinished" — but it finally made sense when Watson took Kimberly out for dinner at the Perini Ranch Steakhouse in Buffalo Gap, Texas. It's a restaurant they frequented when they were dating, and in the glow of the candlelight that night, he was struck by the depth of his feelings for her after more than a decade together.

"The line hit me, 'The trends will come and go/The winds of change will blow/The way we love is never going out of style,'" remembers Watson.

When they went home, he went to work finishing "Outta Style." "Apparently it wasn't too much of a hot date," he jokes, "because I was writing a song after dinner."

He put plenty of himself into it, referencing his first car, a Monte Carlo; recalling how Kim believed in him when he was a "poor boy playing on some pawn shop guitar"; weaving his own jeans-and-boots style into the storyline; and giving a nod to **David Bowie**'s "Rebel Rebel."

"I just loved that 'Rebel Rebel' song," says Watson. "It's so classic. The verses, I don't exactly know what the heck Bowie's talking about, but the mood and the attitude of the song is so young, so youthful."

Watson put an exclamation point on the timeless theme in the bridge, citing **James Dean**'s fashion, **Steve McQueen**'s movie scenes and **Marilyn Monroe**'s smile as images that — like the relationship he's singing about — survive every trend.

Watson had Altman book his bottom-of-the-ninth session at Blackbird, but waited to introduce "Outta Style" until he could play it in person. Altman heard it for the first time at his own studio on Sept. 27 with Watson playing it on his guitar, and he was convinced it was a winner.

"Hearing him play it in the room, it had all this energy," says Altman. "And I [envisioned] the whole production, basically start to finish, the first time he played it for me."

The band had become accustomed to Watson's style throughout the album process, and it wasn't hard to find the right tone when they reassembled.

"Aaron really wanted to keep an eye on his live show and make a record that was going to [not just translate] live, but something that felt like it was an extension of what he had created in his live show," says Altman.

They nailed it on the fourth take with Duncan's ultra-country fiddle pitted against the Petty/Mellencamp foundation. That might not match every listener's view of the cowboy image, but it certainly fits Watson's sense of it.

"I listened to nothing but **Chris LeDoux** and **Garth Brooks** in the '90s," says Watson. "You'd have to go to, like, **AC/DC** to find a band that could rock out as much as Chris LeDoux, but at the same time he was a genuine, authentic cowboy."

The verses were delivered with punch and power, but the band turned it up a hair on the chorus, with drummer **Jerry Roe** adding some flash by leaning on the cymbals.

"Crash cymbals in particular are a great way to sort of accentuate the moment," says Altman, "and that crash is adding all this energy because he's not hitting them on the downbeat every time."

Watson brought the same level of energy to his final vocals, and Altman stacked a load of enthusiastic background vocals.

The single is off to a good start, moving to No. 42 in its third week on Country Indicator, which reflects early impact in secondary markets. He's hopeful that his bottom-of-the-ninth creation "Outta Style" could perform as a single the way that *The Underdog* did as an album.

"I want to be that guy — bottom of the ninth, two outs, down by one, runner on third — I want to be that guy that steps up to the plate," he says. "I believe that 'Outta Style' can be that game-winning hit. And if it's not, we're going to keep swinging." ●

