

From the Heart

Oklahoma songwriter John Moreland finds a little light on *Big Bad Luv*

by MATT HENDRICKSON

JOHN MORELAND'S FRANK SONGS about crushed hearts and suffocating loneliness have earned him a reputation as a fearless songwriter who can make grown men cry. At a late-night show at Columbus, Ohio's Newport Music Hall, a lubed-up crowd goes silent as he strums the opening chords of "Sallisaw Blue," a song from his new album, *Big Bad Luv*. He usually plays alone, but tonight he's brought along a friend, the multi-instrumentalist John Calvin Abney. Moreland leans over his acoustic guitar and into the microphone as his raspy voice sings the gripping chorus: "God bless these blues. Let's get wrecked and bruised and battered. I need you, come on, burn right through. Honey, show me I'm not shattered." He utters a quiet "thanks" at the end, and it feels like the entire room slowly exhales. No tears yet, but the night is still young.

The next day, Moreland cuts an imposing

swath as he steps into a nearby Thai restaurant for lunch. But he's a gentle giant, with a quiet demeanor punctured a few times by a hearty chuckle. "I guess making people cry was the desired result," he says wearily over bites of green curry. "It gets hard to keep writing like that, but I'm still trying to figure things out about myself."

Some recent milestones, however, have brightened his outlook. He got married last year. His wife, Pearl, is a visual artist whom he met at a folk-music gathering. And his career got a healthy boost from a 2016 appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Sheryl Zelikson, the show's music booker, caught one of Moreland's performances in New York and was instantly smitten.

The son of an engineer and a school librarian, Moreland was born in Texas before moving to Kentucky and then Tulsa, Oklahoma, when he was ten. His parents were strict Southern Baptists, but his dad introduced him to Neil Young and Creedence Clearwater Revival. He spent his teenage years playing electric guitar in local punk-rock bands, but as he grew older, his tastes broadened. He made regular trips to the

downtown Tulsa library to check out jazz and roots-music CDs. Gillian Welch's 2003 album, *Soul Journey*, with its spare instrumentation and Welch's lonely voice, struck a chord. "That was a real eye-opener for me, and I still have that CD," he says with a laugh. "I never returned it. It's been like twelve years."

Welch led to Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt as Moreland gravitated toward acoustic guitar. He recorded three records with a band before releasing his first solo project, 2011's *Earthbound Blues*, and toured by himself relentlessly, crisscrossing the country for weeks at a time, sometimes playing to ten people a night. But he poured those experiences into writing powerful and eloquent reflections of solitude and sorrow, following up with *In the Throes* and *High on Tulsa Heat* and becoming a favorite in music circles. Miranda Lambert, among others, is an avowed fan. "I discovered John Moreland's music during a time in my life when I felt all alone," Lambert says. "But when I heard how honest and sincere his songs are, they somehow helped me. His songs also taught me that it's okay to be honest about your feelings."

Moreland says that he wrote *Big Bad Luv*'s songs in chronological order, over the course of two years, and the mood indeed brightens over the eleven tracks. "Love Is Not an Answer" and "Lies I Chose to Believe" call to mind Bruce Springsteen at his most contemplative, while the playful shuffle of "It Don't Suit Me (Like Before)" strikes an unmistakable note of hope. "I wouldn't say that I'm writing happy songs now," he says. "But a lot has changed in my life for the better. I'm tired of beating myself up." ©

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GOSPEL FUNK FROM THE COMO MAMAS

In late 2015, the Mississippi gospel trio the Como Mamas—Ester Mae Wilbourn, Angelia Taylor, and Della Daniels—traveled to New York City to perform at Harlem's Apollo Theater as part of Daptone Records' Super Soul Revue. Before the trio left for home, they holed up with members of the Daptone house band to record *Move Upstairs*, an album that is as thrillingly funky as it is holy. On classics such as "Out of the Wilderness" and "99 and a Half Won't Do," Wilbourn's seasoned rasp, Taylor's soothing coo, and Daniels's fierce energy ride pumping rhythms and hypnotic guitar lines to spiritual bliss.—M.H.

WITH FEELING

A rapt crowd watches John Moreland perform during a show at the Roxy Theatre in West Hollywood, California.

