

TRAIL MIX

Down on the Farm

SCOTT MILLER RETURNS WITH A NEW RECORD

BY JEDD FERRIS

SCOTT MILLER EMERGED IN THE EARLY crop of alt-country songwriters with the V-Roys—the popular roots-rock group that broke out of Knoxville, Tenn., in the mid-90s and recorded three albums for Steve Earle's E-Squared Records before disbanding at the end of the decade. A prolific tunesmith, Miller has since kept cranking out albums, either solo or with his band the Commonwealth. But these days the music business is a tough nut to crack, so in 2011 Miller made a big life change. He left Tennessee and moved back to his native Virginia to take over responsibilities on his family's cattle farm, located in the small town of Swoope, near Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley.

Now Miller, a self-described "workaholic," finds time to write songs between long days fixing fences and baling hay. His latest album, *Ladies Auxiliary*, will be released on November 3 via Miller's own F.A.Y. Records. The title comes from Miller being backed solely by women on the new effort. Personnel includes skilled fiddle Rayna Gellert, formerly of Uncle Earl, and bassist Bryn Davies, whose resume includes work with Guy Clark, Jack White, and Peter Rowan. Recorded in Tennessee during separate sessions in Knoxville and Nashville, the acoustic-driven album was produced by singer-songwriter Ann McCue, who also provided guitar accents. Lyrically, Miller is at the top of his game, blending humor and wit to deliver social commentary and tell character-driven tales of struggle. He recently took a break from farming for a quick chat with *BRO*.

WHAT'S A TYPICAL DAY LIKE ON THE FARM?

I'm up early and out here everyday;



there's always work to do. The farm cuts back my ability to tour, because I have to be here during specific times of the year. In January, February, and the first part of March, I'm feeding, so I try not to leave. From the middle of May to the middle of June it takes me about a month to get the hay baled. I'm not down in Nashville, shucking and jiving like I used to be. When it's time to get a record out I start scrounging hard.

SO WHEN DO YOU INCORPORATE SONGWRITING?

I'm still figuring it out. I always keep notebooks and a small recorder ready in case a melody comes to me. Then it's just a matter of making time. Back when I lived in Tennessee and music was my job, I would write everyday. I've also been co-writing. [Folk duo and husband and wife] Robin and Linda Williams live down the road in Middlebrook, and we get together every Wednesday to work on some songs.

HOW DID LADIES AUXILIARY COME TOGETHER?

At first I went down to Knoxville and just did the basic tracks with Bryn

Davies on bass. Then I went down to Nashville and asked Ann McCue if she would produce it, and it all came together. I have been steering towards sparse arrangements, and sonically I love what these players did with the songs.

With this one I was trying to give myself plenty of time to live with these songs and get the lyrics right, because I always want to go back and rewrite everything. Lyrics are my thing. I've never really been a musician. I play enough to get by.

"LO SIENTO, SPANISHBURG, WVA" IS A COMICAL TALE ABOUT GENTRIFICATION. DO YOU HAVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH THE TOWN?

It started as an idea about Swoope, which is getting built up. When they built the bypass through Augusta County, that's when I started getting pissed. There are areas all over this region where money came in and hillbillies were taxed out. That's my Scotch-Irish knee-jerk reaction to rich people.

HOW DOES BEING A MUSICIAN NOW COMPARE TO THE OLD DAYS WITH THE V-ROYS?

Back then it was before the music industry went to shit. It was four or five major labels, and they dictated what was played on the radio. If you were water they drilled the hole and poured you in it. That's just what people got. Now I compare it to being like water on pavement. There's so much music, and it's spread out, so you just have to see where it sinks in and follow it. That's the only way guys like me can make a living. At the same time, it's been very freeing that I can now reach my fans directly.

WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED FROM ANOTHER MUSICIAN?

When I was first living in Knoxville and just starting to play, I opened up for Mike Cross and asked him for advice. He told me to take an aspirin and run my hands under warm water before playing to loosen up my fingers. Then, he told me to get a car with air conditioning, so you're always ready to play when you show up to a gig. I just played a show down in Balsam Mountain, N.C., and my air conditioner went out. When I got there, I felt like I'd been put in a sack and beat up. Mike Cross was right. 🐾