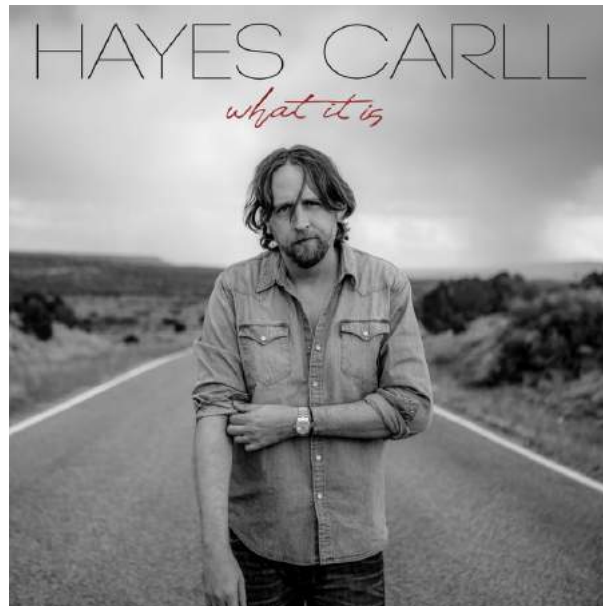


By STEVEN WINE

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Review: Fiancee helps Hayes Carll deliver his prettiest work



Hayes Carll, “What It Is” (Dualtone)

Dysfunctional relationships abound on Hayes Carll’s new album, from the one-on-one wounds described in the opener “None’ya” to the cultural divide of “Fragile Men.” Even so, there’s a sunny lilt to the sardonic Texan’s familiar warble on the title cut, and a sweetness to the 12-song set that suggests it benefited from a woman’s touch.

Carll’s fiancée, singer-songwriter Allison Moorer, co-wrote half of the material on “What It Is” and also co-produced the album. Perhaps she had a hand in the album’s most moving moment — the surprising, cinematic swell of a string orchestra midway through “Be There,” a lament on distrust.

Carll also uses strings elsewhere, and horns as well, broadening his palette to achieve a wide variety of musical styles — from the banjo shuffle of the title cut and the fiddle boogie of “Times Like These” to the boozy Stones-y romper “Beautiful Thing.” There’s even a flute on the closing pledge of devotion, the lovely “I Will Stay.”

The common denominator is Carll’s deft lyrical touch. He can deliver wry social commentary, such as on “Fragile Men” and “Wild Pointy Finger,” without antagonizing anyone. And regarding domestic issues, he knows how to make the personal universal, which is why “Jesus and Elvis” becomes much more than just a song about a bar.

That’s “What It Is” — Carll’s prettiest album, and perhaps his best.