

BY BARRY MAZOR

SINCE HIS FIRST ALBUM, “Flowers and Liquor,” was released in 2002, a certain self-generated picture of Hayes Carll has become the prevailing, if slowly evolving one. A singer-songwriter out of the literate Texas country/Americana borderline scene, he has veered between energetic, comic, often self-deprecating songs along the lines of one of his models, Ray Wylie Hubbard, and more dawdling, somber storytelling ballads, reminiscent of another predecessor he’s often been compared with, Townes Van Zandt.

Over most of those 17 years, Mr. Carll’s vocal phrasing would often bend in surprising, quirky ways, and his accompaniment varied from sparse folky picking to raucous rock. He’d sing about life on the road as a performer and about falling apart, or falling down drunk, as often as any in that arena, and about girlfriends more than most. It all held together, a high percentage of the time, because his tunes have been more melodic than most in that twangy singer-songwriter vein, and his varied observations sly and detailed, whatever the tone.

His strengths have been recognized. He had an attention-grabbing comical and slightly controversial song in 2008’s “She Left Me for Jesus,” written with Brian Keane, that won him the Americana Music Award for Emerging Artist of the Year in 2010; and a commercial breakthrough with his predominantly lighthearted and



‘What It Is’ is the most upbeat album yet from the ever-evolving country/Americana artist Hayes Carll.

often pounding 2011 album “KMAG YOYO.” That one also introduced his honky-tonk weeper “Chances Are,” which went on to be nominated for a 2016 Country song Grammy, as recorded by Lee Ann Womack.

His 2016 album “Lovers and Leavers” was different—a sonically sparse and generally somber post-divorce set of songs that scrutinized the hard-traveling troubadour life, the drinking and the failed relationships, and concluded that he’d had about enough of

them all. It’s taken nearly three full years for him to arrive at the follow-up album, “What It Is,” set to be released Feb. 15 (Dualtone), and this one is something else again.

Produced by his singer-songwriter fiancée Allison Moorer along with Nashville’s Brad Jones, who’d overseen two of his most successful previous outings, “What It Is” finds Mr. Carll as assured in his singing, point of view and interplay with his backing musicians as he has ever been presented on record. The music is acoustic, with

the country quotient increased, but this time appealingly varied—with fiddles and banjo, pedal steel and piano, horns and even, on several numbers, a small string ensemble, as appropriate. The vocals are startlingly clean and clear, yet no less expressive for dropping some of the familiar shaggy embroidery.

There’s solid evidence that his personal and musical relationship with Ms. Moorer has made a significant difference; in addition to co-producing the album, she’s collaborated on the writing of half the

album’s dozen songs, paired with Mr. Carll alone or along with Adam Landry or Matraca Berg in addition. These include such actually happy yet thoughtful relationship songs as “None’Ya”; the roots rocker “Beautiful Thing”; and the banjo-driven title number, which celebrates the replacement of what had been with “What It Is.”

There’s still room for teasing and negotiating, as in “Be There,” which starts mischievously and quickly turns direct, simple and pleading: “You act like we were meant to be—like country songs in Tennessee. / Baby, I need to believe, because I want you so bad.” There’s room for of-the-moment social commentary, too. “Fragile Men” addresses gents finding difficulties adjusting to 2019 conditions, as a string section swells behind Mr. Carll: “It must make you so damn angry; they’re expecting you to change! Nobody wants to let you see what you want to see.”

The closer, self-written, is a beautiful and gentle reassurance to a lover that he won’t be splitting, hard as that might be to believe, all past behavior considered. He tells her very simply, and directly, “I Will Stay.” There is a new song about falling, as in any number of previous Hayes Carll collections, but this one, this time, trips along into “I fell down into the American Dream; sometimes sunshine shines on me.” It seems so. And it sounds convincing.

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