

MAGNET EXCLUSIVE: PREMIERE OF HAYES CARLL'S "WHAT IT IS"



The cover of Hayes Carll's sixth release (see below) pretty much says it all. The stark black-and-white format doesn't do its subject any favors—and neither, quite frankly, does the foreboding desert-highway setting. It's a classic take-it-or-leave-it moment, with the Grammy-nominated Texas singer/songwriter looking oddly nonplussed, like he's just stumbled out of the tour bus after a long night on the road.

"We spent a couple of hours outside Santa Fe, walking around and trying to find beautiful backdrops," says Carll of the shoot with photographer David McClister. "We took photos where I looked happier, but I'm not sure we had any other image that emotionally fit the record better. I just hope I don't look bad."

After a rough divorce, a recent engagement to fellow singer/songwriter Allison Moorer (Steve Earle's ex) and a career that's had its share of twists and turns, Carll—at 43—may finally be in take-it-or-leave-it mode. That's the basic sentiment behind *What It Is* (Dualtone), its title track available here for download. "What it is is right here in front of me, and I'm not letting go," he sings on the chorus, his sober resignation goosed by the tune's propulsive shuffle. It's as much a declaration of renewal as a coming to terms with reality.

"It's not over-the-top joyful, and it's not under-the-ground depressing," says Carll. "It's the point of my life I'm at."

Carll is an acquired taste. His melodic sensibilities and one-dimensional singing—while loaded with warmth and character—won't bowl you over. But his honest, dry-witted infatuation with everyday revelations sneaks up on you. The guy has a way of making hay out of life's bittersweet ironies, and it certainly helps if you have more than a passing familiarity with the Texas troubadour lineage for which he owes a debt of gratitude—names like Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, John Prine and Jerry Jeff Walker.

"I was waiting tables in Galveston, and one night I was walking down this alleyway and heard music coming out this place," says Carll, who started his career in the late 1990s playing covers in bars along Texas' northern Gulf Coast. "It was a place where people actually wanted to listen to the music—not just get hammered and hear 'Magaritaville.'"

That spot was the Old Quarter Acoustic Cafe, the Galveston version of the legendary Houston listening room that nurtured Van Zandt, Earle and Lucinda Williams in the '70s. "I totally soaked it in, doing open-mic nights and tending bar."

More than 20 years later, Carl has assembled a loyal enough fan base to sustain a career—and without having to pander to any sort of predetermined Lone Star aesthetic. "There's a lot of guys who get into this trap where they're huge in Texas," says Carll. "They have tour buses and play for thousands of people and make a whole lot of money, but that doesn't necessarily translate once you cross the border. I never had that issue because I was never really successful like that in Texas, so it put me in the position of at least being able to see the world before going broke."

Focused, confident and slightly eccentric, *What It Is* sounds like it's coming from a guy who's definitely been around. "There are two themes throughout the record—part of it's about me, and part of it's about the world around me," Carll says of the album, which was coproduced by Moorer and Brad Jones (Matthew Sweet, Josh Rouse). "When I was younger and knew less, there was a false confidence. The more I dig in and try to connect with the world around me, the more I realize I don't know. But I feel like I'm in a good place and heading down the right path."



—Hobart Rowland