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TALK OF
THE SOUTH

MUSIC

**Take a Ride
with Big Velvet**TEXAN PAUL CAUTHEN
LETS IT ALL FLY ON COUNTRY
COMING DOWN

By Matt Hendrickson

Paul Cauthen is speeding down I-20 toward his home in Tyler, Texas, after a recent recording session in Dallas. A self-confessed car guy, he and his father have been buying and selling cars (and motorcycles and boats and pretty much anything else with an engine) since he was a kid. His ride today is a Mercedes-Benz C 300 4MATIC turbo coupe that he bought used for a steal. “It’s a machine, dude,” he says, cackling. Back in Tyler, he keeps a storage building filled with vehicles ranging from a Range Rover to a Dodge Ramcharger—and he’s on the hunt for a growling Chevelle SS.

Cauthen is one of modern country music’s most charismatic figures, a mix of Memphis-era Elvis, James Brown, and Bruce Springsteen—that is, if the Boss were six foot four and grew up in East Texas. He—or his alter ego, dubbed Big Velvet after his baritone (“It’s got swagger,” he says)—plays legendary beer-soaked live shows, backed by a smoking band. “I want people at my shows to be like, *God dang! That was a grease fire, man!*” he says. “I want people to be blown away. When you connect like that, you know that you have done your job as an artist—to feel like what you did kind of readjusted somebody’s mind or soul or spirit.” His new album, *Country Coming Down*, is a bombastic ode to excess. In the greasy country rap-rock of the infectious first single, “Country as F***,” Cauthen has plenty of fun with lyrics that shout out Lil Nas X and Tim McGraw and everything from CB radios to Piggly Wiggly.

With a wink and a hefty dose of satire, the album’s raucousness hits full stride with stompers like “Country Clubbin’” and in the exquisite psychedelic desert pop of “Champagne & a Limo.” But for a time, the hedonism in Cauthen’s life was no joke. He spent two years living hard in Dallas’s Belmont Hotel, bruised from a broken relationship, medicating himself with alcohol and cocaine (“boogie sugar,” he calls it). He chronicled the stint in his 2019 album, *Room 41*, a bleak, harrowing collection of songs that made you wonder if Cauthen would make it out alive.



On *Country Coming Down*, his third full-length release, it’s clear that Cauthen still loves the party—but this time, he also knows when to leave. The album’s achingly beautiful last three songs—“Till the Day I Die,” “Roll On Over,” and the title track—are Cauthen at his most reflective and vulnerable. If he’s no longer burdened with the wreckage that *Room 41* recounted, he also hasn’t forgotten its lessons.

It seems safe to say that Cauthen’s sturdier foundation has something to do with his now wife, Elizabeth NeSmith, a fashion designer he met at a Brooklyn dive in 2018. In short order, he persuaded her to move to East Texas with him, and they now live in the house that Cauthen grew up in. “Elizabeth was like, ‘This is just where we need to grow our family—to keep it humble and stay small as long as we can.’ So we promised each other that.”

And he’s carrying on some old family traditions in more ways than one. Cauthen comes from a religious upbringing and first started singing in church, but his musical lineage extends even further back. His maternal grandfather hung out with Sonny Curtis, guitarist for Buddy Holly & the Crickets, and gave Cauthen his first guitar. “Everything I do is like my granddad,” he says. “He built churches for a living, and he was a song leader in the church. And every morning he’d get out a legal pad and write down one or twenty or fifty things he had to do, then cross them off. I’ve never owned a computer in my life. I just said, You know what? Not gonna do it. I’ll be one of the old ones. That’s how I roll.”

Cauthen in his hometown of Tyler, Texas. His new album is out in April.

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