



Pony Bradshaw
North Georgia Rounder

A devoted reader of fiction, poetry, and literature in general, Pony Bradshaw credits the rich imagery in his songs not so much to his appreciation for the songwriters who came before him but to his nearly lifelong commitment to reading. For this is a writer that draws from a wider well than just the Great American Songbook. With such vivid lyrics as “teeth stained red with Lebanese wine, long hair ... in sweeps of oil blacker than a cypress pool,” one might think he bases his characters on the people he interacts with in his home of North Georgia; but in fact, these are composite characters compiled from fragments he’s collected from various avenues, songs he usually starts with just a line or two and then cultivates for years. Bradshaw notes, “John Ciardi, the great translator of Dante, said ‘the true mark of any writer is in the choices he makes.’ That’s always stuck with me. In essence, our choices make poets out of us.”

These fragments add up to a remarkably cohesive 10-song collection on his latest release, *North Georgia Rounder*. Throughout the record, Bradshaw leads the listener through the woods, rivers, and mountains of Appalachia, the area he’s called home for the past 15 years. “It’s got its hooks in me,” Bradshaw says of North Georgia, and it shows, with songs that quickly establish a setting, much like the sense of place he initiated with the album’s predecessor, *Calico Jim*. The new album is a musical travelogue that includes stops along the Conasauga River, visits to the holler, and a few diversions — nearby Knoxville plays a supporting role, as do Louisiana and Arkansas. It’s an impressionistic journey of introspection and connection all at once — a modern-day rendering of the mythos of Appalachia.

Despite the album’s strong sense of place, a “postage stamp of native soil,” as William Faulkner once put it, the vicissitudes that come with being a touring musician also make their imprint on the work. This is very much a road album, and a document of the highs and lows found on the lost highway.

“Me and balance ... we’ve never really worked out,” he confesses, acknowledging the irony of his quest for order despite having chosen a path that is anything but. But as he sings in the moody yet catchy “Holler Rose,” “you’ve got to be willing to play the long game.” “If it’s worth it, there’s a beauty in suffering,” he explains. “It’s taken me a long time to realize that, but I’m thankful for all those terrible decisions I’ve made.”

“Every day, I wrestle with the moral consequences of being a touring musician,” he continues. “I’m always finding ways to make it okay to be doing this. I feel irresponsible sometimes,” he says, “because I basically make my living off the goodwill of others and chance. So I’m always trying to battle those two things.”

On the opening track “Foxfire Wine,” Will Stewart's tasteful, understated guitar leads and Philippe Bronchtein's atmospheric pedal steel provide the perfect backdrop for Bradshaw's impassioned vocals. Its swampy, bluesy intro followed by lines like “a hell of a heaven and a hell of a show” set the sonic and thematic template for what's to come. From that point on, till the album wraps with the aptly titled “Notes on a River Town,” not only do you see and hear North Georgia, you even smell and taste its hill-country and mountains.

“Safe in the Arms of Vernacular,” a pensive, melancholy track, showcases Bradshaw's talent for imagistic songwriting. When he sings about the “bonafide gas mask” his Dad brought back from Desert Storm and describes the Saudi Arabian sand as turning to “glass sharp as a sultan's sword,” one can see it vividly. As quickly as it sets the stage, the track shifts its focus to a waitress downtown. “Draped in Bedouin gown, smoking Kent cigarettes in the underground” in an attempt to “escape all those voices,” she drinks white wine — “Riesling room temp from a coffee cup,” to be exact. Clearly, this is no yuppified wine bistro for the leisure classes.

“I really enjoy records that are actual records of time,” Bradshaw explains. With this in mind, the artist looked to create an album that relied less on innovation and experimentation, aspiring to capture the songs' live spirit. He and his band did just that, making *North Georgia Rounder* — vocals, overdubs, and all — in just five days at Jason Weinheimer's Fellowship Hall Sound in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he had also tracked *Calico Jim* in 2020.

“The poet soon stops experimenting and innovating and starts his life's work,” Bradshaw says about his intentions making the new album, citing a quote from the poet Wendell Berry. A single album as a life's work may seem like a grand aspiration. But for Pony Bradshaw, *North Georgia Rounder* is just that — a life's work, and one that, as he describes it, is a culmination of “sweat and work and joy and pain and anger and patience and restraint.”