



JD Clayton – *Long Way From Home*

JD Clayton is the epitome of a Real Deal.

There's no artifice surrounding the Arkansas-born singer and songwriter. No glitz. No pretension or mythology. There's a refreshing lack of gratuitous posturing or creative conceit. Clayton is simply a guy who has things to say and does so clearly and without clutter -- but with an earnest and tuneful sensibility that makes listening to his songs on his new album *Long Way From Home* as easy as sitting in the cool breeze on your front porch.

Clayton's songs have a directness and clarity that are the hallmarks of a genuine craftsman, someone who's studied and practiced and chased a few different paths to end up where he is now. And it's not without grand ambition, either; Clayton sings in "American Millionaire" that "I'm workin' my way to be one of the greats," and he fully understands the diligence and dedication it will take to get there.

His musical journey began in Fort Smith, Ark., a town known for its true grit, resting on the banks of the Arkansas river and peering over into the farmlands of eastern Oklahoma. A place where the new south meets the old west. Clayton's father worked in real estate before becoming a pastor when the oldest of his three children JD was starting high school. Clayton was already well-indoctrinated into music by then; his grandfather played banjo in a bluegrass band and taught Clayton some rudimentary chords, his father could pick a few chords too. "He would sit there trying to learn Jack Johnson songs from a guitar tab book while 'In Between Dreams' played from a junky CD/Cassette player." Dad gave Clayton a guitar when he was eight years old, though it would be a few years before it took.

The church provided a powerful training ground for Clayton's music, too. With his multi-instrumental skills, including drums and piano, he was a natural to become a musical leader, playing and eventually singing during the services. In high school, he and a friend auditioned to sing for their graduation ceremony, which proved to be its own pivotal moment.

"It was so amazing. I went to a big high school so there were probably three thousand folks in the stands," he says. "And it wasn't a song meant for worship. It was the first time in my life, that I can remember, performing a song to entertain people. I was just enamored by the whole thing." At the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, he met a dorm mate in his Music Appreciation class, and the two began writing songs together, formed a band called Small Town Symphony. The group built a following, but Clayton had other plans.

"I guess I realized during my sophomore year that nothing was going to happen until I started to record music correctly," he says. Nashville seemed the best place to do that, especially since he had a childhood friend living there and working in a publishing industry building tracks for artists. Clayton would leave Fort Smith in the wee hours each Friday, get to Nashville early afternoon, record demos and then come back home on Monday morning. Nothing panned out but it taught Clayton a lot. During his senior year of college Clayton found, via Instagram, producer Thomas

Dulin; the two first met shortly after Clayton graduated and went on to collaborate on his 2018 Debut EP, *Smoke Out the Fire*. "That was a pivotal moment for me," he says. "I finally had music I wrote and recorded, from start to finish." Clayton and his girlfriend (now wife) Claire relocated to Music City in order to capitalize on his upward trajectory. At least until March of 2020.

As with so many artists, the pandemic was the worst of times that Clayton managed to turn into the best of times, musically. The coffee shop JD was working at shut down, so he signed on with a landscape company working on heavy commercial and residential projects. "I would be in the back of the truck driving with the crew from job to job. I would throw in my headphones and try to write a song or I would listen to old albums from top to bottom. I constantly listened to The Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Creedence Clearwater Revival. I was so enamored by the production choices and musicality of those records. I really think I began to develop an ear for that sound."

The impact of that on Clayton's own music was enormous. "Arkansas, where I'm from, is the natural state. So I felt like I needed to get back to my roots and start making music that felt natural and organic," he explains. "Production needed to be basic and simplistic with a focus on the story and the song. We would plug in a mic, set it in front of an amp, and let the player share their own story with their instrument. Now, that's making music."

Clayton co-produced *Long Way From Home* with Dulin at his studio, The Planetarium, near Nashville's Berry Hill neighborhood. The 10 tracks reflect the immediate, live-in-the-room approach that marked Clayton's favorite music, from the acoustic-tinged optimism of "Hello Good Mornin'" to the rustic stomp of "American Millionaire," the honky tonk swing of "Goldmine," the anthemic drive of "Heartaches After Heartbreak," the psychedelic British flavors of "Cotton Candy Clouds" and the classic, Bakersfield-leaning country of "Different Kind of Simple Life." Clayton's take on the early 20th century standard "Midnight Special" hails from Creedence Clearwater Revival's version but with plenty of Clayton's own stylistic touches. And "Long Way From Home," sitting smack in the middle of the album that bears its name, finds him speaking directly to his mother about the struggle and quest to make his music career work, declaring that "these dreams of mine just don't end."

"When you're from Fort Smith, Arkansas you're expected to graduate high school and either start work for a manufacturing plant or move off to college with the hope that you'll be back one day to work for the family business or get a desk job booking freight at Arc Best. It's pretty hard to explain how a kid from Fort Smith could make it in music, but I tried my best with these songs."

Clayton's recordings were mixed by Craig Alvin (Kacey Musgraves, Little Big Town, Hanson) at Cypress Moon studio in Muscle Shoals, Ala., and mastered by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound. But Clayton was alongside for every step of the process. "I'm really big about trying to learn how everything works," Clayton acknowledges. "I want to be a student of how it's all put together. It's just amazing that both the mix engineer and the mastering engineer, these Grammy Award winners, were kind and gracious enough to let me sit in and watch them work. It means so much more to me listening back to the album, knowing what all the little pieces are and how they were put together to make it sound the way it does." Clayton's mission now is taking that music out into the world and bring his intimate and impactful songs to an audience. "It's been one hell of a journey," Clayton reflects. "I can't wait to see what's around the bend."

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