

TROUBADOUR

PONY BRADSHAW DOESN'T WANT TO RAMBLE ANY LONGER

After establishing a restless reputation with his 2023 breakthrough *North Georgia Rounder*, the Americana songwriter tries to settle down: "I'm not some character"

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Pony Bradshaw completes a three-album cycle about Southern Appalachia with his latest LP, 'Thus Spoke the Fool.'

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Pony Bradshaw, the rising Americana, alt-country, and indie-folk troubadour, knew he needed to switch gears. The spotlight had been getting just a bit too hot after his 2023 breakthrough album, *North Georgia Rounder*, and he found himself looking both inward and out across the crowds at his live shows — questioning just exactly who they think they’re coming to see.

“These shows we do now, folks come to hear the ‘North Georgia Rounder’ himself. But I’m not some character,” Bradshaw, 44, tells *Rolling Stone*. “I’m writing songs and making up stories about the area I live in; it’s not me. I don’t necessarily want to dispel the myth [of a tortured artist], but I’m just a normal guy that likes to tell stories.” (*RS* celebrated Bradshaw’s restless spirit last year.)

He channeled all of that self-analysis into his latest album, *Thus Spoke the Fool* — the title coming from Nietzsche’s book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Bradshaw laughs that he sees himself as the fool. “I don’t know anything,” he says, “but I’m going to continue talking and writing.”

Thus Spoke the Fool, however, is no gag. Its underlying theme is based around the experiences of the Cherokee people, native to the area of North Georgia where Bradshaw has lived for two decades. In the album track “The Long Man,” he details some of the Cherokee history and their relationship with the Coosa River.

“Anything we’re interested in seems to be something that we want to make part of our lives,” Bradshaw says.



On this day, Bradshaw is in East Tennessee, not far up Interstate 75 from his home in rural Georgia. He’s in the Volunteer State visiting his two teenage sons. He also has a stepson. “It’s a bit strange. I had to stopped posting about my kids on social media and stuff like that ’cause it’s getting all mixed up now [with my career],” he says. “But I want to be a good dad, too.”

Stability is at the core of Bradshaw’s current soul searching. Originally from East Texas, he was, in fact, born a rambler, bouncing around the country in search of adventure and maybe an education. Instead, he landed in the United States Air Force. Later in life, at 25, he picked up an acoustic guitar and began to learn the instrument, but he’d always been writing. Bradshaw would scribble down in haste his restless thoughts and emotions, or whatever voices and images he came upon on the open road.

That ability to observe, as well as a sponge-like nature of absorbing stories, led to a tenure as a small-town journalist in Georgia. In the meantime, he was also testing out his poignant melodies at local open mic nights and nearby front porches. Folks were drawn in by Bradshaw's sorrowful tone.

"If you want [a career] for a long time, you do have to be honest," Bradshaw says. "You're going to have to be able trade on your name forever. If you're a chameleon, people won't trust you."

With Bradshaw's deep dive into the twisted, complicated history of North Georgia and greater Southern Appalachian — from moonshiners to social injustice to the Cherokee people — he resurfaced with an idea for an album trilogy steeped in the history of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"I didn't grow up here," says Bradshaw, who spent the last 10 years reading about his adopted home. "A buddy said to me, 'It makes more sense you could see and appreciate [the history] in a different lens than people that grow up here and kind of take it for granted.'"

Kicking off with 2021's *Calico Jim*, then *North Georgia Rounder*, *Thus Spoke the Fool* ties a bow on the trilogy and also Bradshaw's appetite for that lyrical and musical direction, at least for now.

"There's other things I'd like to make and stretch my legs out a little bit in different areas musically," Bradshaw says. "I won't be turning completely different, just not so specific to North Georgia."

"I'm steadily building my own philosophy," he continues. "Maybe by the time I'm 50, I'll have something figured out." 📀