



Corey Smith is obviously connecting with his audience, but it's not marketing savvy that sells, it's the music, and that's where he truly shines. The Georgia native melds country, rock and blues into a sound that is all his own. That distinctive musical flair combined with Smith's pensive, well-crafted lyrics and soulful Southern voice has earned him an enthusiastic legion of fans.

"I think it's a little of everything," says Smith in describing his innovative style. "We don't live in cultural bubbles anymore. We're all exposed to many different types of music through TV, radio, and now especially the internet. I like to think my songs reflect the variety of musical styles that have impacted my life in Georgia. Gospel, country, blues, rock, hip-hop – strands of all these are there."

That diversity is especially evident on his newest project, *Hard-Headed Fool*. "The songs on it are very different from one another production-wise. I tried to incorporate a larger cross-section of my musical influences into this record, while addressing common themes, lyrically, to glue the songs together."

Smith grew up in Jefferson, Georgia, soaking up an array of music from George Jones to Lynyrd Skynyrd to Nirvana to Tupac. "I graduated from high school with about 50 or 60 people. It was a fairly small community, but the kids came from a lot of different backgrounds," says Smith, who currently lives about a quarter mile from his childhood home. "One of the cool things about Jefferson is that it's so close to Athens. We'd hang out there on the weekends. It's a very eclectic college town, almost like taking a little cross-section of a major city and just putting it right there in the middle of rural Georgia. People from all over the world come to school there. Sure we lived out in the country, but when we partied on the weekends, we went to this place that was almost cosmopolitan. That really had a big impact on me."

The lure of the 'classic city' proved too much for Smith to resist, and after a few years bouncing around smaller colleges, he headed back to Athens to attend the University of Georgia. Although he got his feet wet in the music business right out of high school, performing mostly cover tunes in local watering holes, he eventually decided to forego live performance and focus on his studies. He began to feel the emotional tug-of-war that most budding musicians feel as the desire for a creative career competes with the desire for security and normalcy. "I didn't like playing cover songs in bars, and the lifestyle of a struggling musician didn't particularly appeal to me. So I decided that what was most important to me was getting an education, building a family, and trying to have a positive impact on the world," says Smith.

While working towards a degree in Social Studies Education, Smith spent much of his spare time improving his songwriting skills and testing out new tunes for friends at the all-too-frequent keg parties taking place at their apartments. "I enjoyed playing my songs in those settings and learned very quickly that the way to get people to listen was to grab them with lyrics that hit close to home. I had to get their attention with meaningful lines that made them want to hold off on the keg-stands and listen for a while. It was a very fun way to learn too."

After graduating from the University of Georgia in 2001, Smith took a job teaching Social Studies at North Gwinnett High School in the northern suburbs of Atlanta and soon thereafter, married his college sweetheart, Shannon. With a demanding teaching career and domestic responsibilities, Smith found it harder to find time for writing. Nonetheless,

his songwriting was therapeutic and served as a fitting pressure valve for coping with difficult times. He even showcased many of his tunes for students on Fridays. "I was always pleasantly surprised at how warmly they accepted my music and the encouraging remarks they made," Smith recalls.

Smith speaks very highly of his teaching experiences, but as fate would have it, he quickly found himself being drawn back into the music business he thought he had left behind. On impulse, he entered a songwriting competition and won the chance to record his first album, *Undertones*. "It was a really raw acoustic album that I thought would be a demo," he says. "I recorded it and sold it to friends and family and pretty soon it spread all over Georgia. I got calls from bar owners who wanted me to come and play shows. So I'd go to new towns, meet new people, and learn about

other opportunities to perform. One thing just kept leading to another. It wasn't like I had a master plan so much as I was just being guided in that direction. Eventually, I knew music was what I was supposed to do."

*Undertones* birthed the college anthem "Twenty-One" – a nostalgic tune which tells the story of a young man's desire first to know, and then to sustain, the carefree lifestyle associated with young adulthood. One of the most requested tracks online and at live shows, "Twenty-One" evokes full-blown sing-a-longs accompanied by fans waving in time with the acoustic melody. "I'm Not Gonna' Cry", originally written as a gift for graduates of Dawson County High School in Dawsonville, Georgia, has struck a soft-spot with high school students across the country. The song has garnered immense popularity through the internet. In 2007, over 200 schools chose the single as their graduation anthem, many even reciting the lyrics as they turned their tassels to signify the milestone.

Encouraged by the reception he was getting, Smith wrote and recorded his sophomore set, *In the Mood*, in 2004. The subsequent release revealed a young man basking in the haze following his college years. Popular at live shows, tracks like "Drinkin' Again," "Skin of My Teeth," and "The Wreckage" evince an artist who is in the process of growing up, yet still reliant on past routines and revelry ideals to cope with the pressures of settling down.

The birth of his first son, Aden Ryan, marked a turning point in Smith's personal and professional life that is clearly evident in his 2005 release, *The Good Life*. Although popular tracks such as "If I Could Do It Again" and "Carolina" contain the nostalgic, booze-laden imagery characteristic of much of Smith's writing, the album as a whole resonates with a familial pride and sense of fulfillment that is refreshingly new. It serves as a fitting testimony to the changes that often accompany fatherhood and reveals a maturing artist who is learning to share his inner world more effectively with his audience.

"I have such a personal, intimate relationship with the songs," he says of his music. "As I've matured, the songs have matured. People ask me what my favorite song is and every time my answer is, 'The most recent song I've written.' I feel like with every song I'm a little bit closer to explaining who I am."

His diligent tour schedule and overwhelming response from fans were proof to Smith that his personal and professional paths were finally in sync. In September 2006 his second son, Noah Guthrie, was born. The new challenges and joys in life inspired Smith to be even more enthusiastic about and dedicated to his career in order to provide for his family.

The songs on his new album, *Hard-Headed Fool*, showcase a confident young artist in full command of his gift. Always a very visual songwriter, Smith's lyrics have even greater depth and poignancy than before. The title track is about a man coming to terms with his choices in life. "It's about learning from my mistakes, growing up, and becoming an adult," says the man who has led many a rowdy crowd partying in the bars of North Georgia, but has struggled to tame his own wild streak. "Life's about making our own decisions and facing the consequences. Sure, we're all hard-headed. We've all done things that we knew we shouldn't have done, and it seems like there is always a price to pay. But we don't have to wear the past around like a heavy coat. The album, I think, is largely about that. It's about being human. It's about dealing with our selves and our mistakes and trying to turn them into something good."

As the Internet has leveled the playing field in more ways than one, helping independent artists connect with audiences just as easily as their major label counterparts, Smith has been at the vanguard of the indie movement, utilizing MySpace and other tools to stay connected to his rapidly growing fan base. Yet, even as technology has provided a stronger platform for independent artists, Smith says, "It really starts with a song. We haven't created some magical formula. It's just about writing songs that, for one reason or another, connect with people and impact their lives."

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