

Justin Townes Earle: 60 days clean and feelin' good

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 30 November 2010 13:04



Justin Townes Earle knows a thing or two about family traditions. He's the son of musician Steve Earle and was named for his father's best friend and mentor, the late Townes Van Zandt.

Both the elder Earle and Van Zandt publicly battled the demons of substance abuse. Steve Earle spent time in prison on firearms and drug charges. On New Year's Day, 1997, Van Zandt died as the result of a long-standing drug and alcohol habit. The younger Earle followed right along, using hard drugs by the time he was 12.

A gig with daddy's band ended when the elder Earle got clean, but the teenager continued to use.

After a near-death experience and several stints in rehab, Earle kicked the habit and began writing and performing on his own, releasing three records to great critical and popular acclaim.

In 2008, he was nominated as "Emerging Artist of the Year" at the Americana Music Awards, winning the title in 2009.

His 2009 CD, "Midnight at the Movies," was nominated as AMA's album of the year.

He earned a loyal fan base by touring constantly, staying on the road for up to seven weeks at a time. The frantic pace took a toll.

Earlier this summer, the 28-year-old Nashville native had a run-in at an Indianapolis show, spent a night in jail and promptly checked himself into rehab.

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"I'm 60 days clean right now," Earle said in a telephone interview from his home in the East Village of New York City. "When I decide to dive off, I dive off into the deep end."

Even though his personal life might have been out of control, Earle pulled himself together during the production of "Harlem River Blues."

"This was my first chance to produce my own record," he said. "It feels good in a lot of ways. Now I know I can do it artistically and monetarily. Keeping as much money at home these days is vital."

Earle records at the House of David, a legendary Nashville studio built by David Briggs, who played piano for Elvis.

"It's an amazing old residential studio," said Earle. "It has beautiful woodwork, stained glass and a spiral staircase."

Although he collaborates with engineers and fellow artists in the studio, Earle makes sure everyone knows who's boss.

"This is not a democracy," he said. "This is a dictatorship. I am the master and commander and you do what I say."

By the time his fourth CD, "Harlem River Blues," was released in September, Earle has lost his grip on sobriety. Clips of his performance at the release party in Nashville attest to his rekindled relationship with the bottle.

"I was admittedly a little intoxicated and having a very good time," he said with a laugh. "It's nothing new to me. I've had six years clean before. It's just one of those things."

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One thing Earle didn't let slide when he fell off the wagon was his wardrobe. The 6 foot, 5 inch Earle is known for his fastidious attention to his appearance. He was named one of GQ Magazine's "Style Stars" of 2009.

"It was very unexpected," he explained. "It's very rare that you see a hillbilly singer with a bunch of stars like Johnny Depp and Jay- Z."

Earle also has final say on what his band members wear during gigs.

"If I don't like what you're wearing, you're not going on stage," he said with a chuckle. "I make everybody dress up and wear suits."

On Friday night, Earle will bring his stylish trio, including bassist Bryn Davies and guitarist Joshua Hedley, to the Granada Theater in Dallas. The three have been touring for about a year.

"Bryn has been around for a long time," he explained. "We are lucky to have her on board. She could certainly be playing for a lot more money than I pay her."

In addition to doing songs from his four albums, including a heavy rotation of cuts from "Harlem River Blues," Earle performs an emotional a capella cover of Randy Newman's "Louisiana 1927."

"I'm a big Randy Newman fan," he said when asked about the song. "I love his style of writing. I love his blunt delivery. It's almost so unpoetic that it's poetic, you know what I mean?"

Good songwriting is important to Earle. He's especially partial to Woody Guthrie (1912-1967), the legendary folk musician who wrote "This Land Is Your Land."

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Earle pays tribute to his song writing hero on “Harlem River Blues” with two Guthrie-like tunes, “Working for the MTA” and “Wanderin’,” and he has strong words for musicians who aren’t familiar with Guthrie’s work.

“I don’t think you should be allowed to write music without a very good understanding of Woody Guthrie and what he stood for,” Earle said, turning serious. “Woody was the first one who really came out and made a mark for himself writing and singing. He wasn’t the first to do it, because he got it from the ‘Delta blues’ guys, but he was the first person to be a well-known singer/songwriter.”

Earle also admires Guthrie’s bravery when it comes to breaking the rules.

“He wasn’t afraid to get down into other cultures and see what they had,” he explained. “He was performing with Sonny Terry (1911-1986), Brownie McGhee (1915-1996) and Lead Belly (1888-1949) when that was a totally taboo thing to do.”

Earle excels at trashing taboos and pushing the envelope. His songs deal frankly with tough subjects like prostitution, substance abuse and suicide.

His ability to look at life’s darkest sides and hold them up for the rest of us to see is one of Earle’s most impressive gifts.

“You have those people who say they’re going to kill themselves,” he said. “They’re mostly drama queens. I think that people who really, really, really want to kill themselves rarely talk about it.”

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In the song "Harlem River Blues" Earle takes on suicide in a most uplifting manner. He hired a gospel choir to handle the back-up vocals, lending a prayer meeting atmosphere.

*Lord, I'm going uptown.
To the Harlem River to drown.
Dirty water going to cover me over
And I'm not going to make a sound.*

To emphasize the tune's importance, he added a 32-second-long a capella reprise to the end of the CD.

"It was the first song we recorded," Earle explained. "We walked in and I remember telling them that I wanted to reprise the song at the end."

Making good music and winning the latest battle with his demons are just part of what's important to Earle. Honestly is also critical to his happiness.

"I feel really good," he said at the end of the interview. "I'm writing [songs]. And, I've always thought it was better to just go ahead and tell the truth before people start making it up."

*For information on Earle's show at the Granada Friday night,
see www.granadatheater.com*