

Parker Millsap: 'Dangerous' rising star in Americana Music

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Ask Oklahoma native Parker Millsap about his songs and he'll tell you he isn't thinking about the long haul.

"I don't write with longevity in mind, but I hope they last longer than just one album cycle," the 21-year old said recently during a telephone interview.

Millsap grew up in Purcell, Okla., listening to Taj Mahal, Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen – and a lot of blues.

"My big guys for blues were Mississippi John Hurt and Robert Johnson," he noted. "Later, it was Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters."

"And in church, I heard a lot of gospel," said the artist, who grew up Pentecostal.



Religious threads run through Millsap's music. His self-titled album, released in February, contains titles like "Old Time Religion," "Truck Stop Gospel" and "Forgive Me." The tunes dive deep into theology, but retain a tongue-in-cheek approach.

"There are things that bother me in the world," he said of the depth of his subject matter. "Hopefully, I get those out in a song or on stage."

Millsap says "Truck Stop Gospel" gets the most reaction when he's playing before a live crowd.

"Every once in a while, someone will throw their hands up and say, 'Amen,'" he said.

He also performs a mean cover of the Negro spiritual, "You Gotta Move," during performances, adding some smoking vocals that would make Howlin' Wolf proud.

Millsap has made a believer out of local Americana/roots music lover Tom Green, who became a fan after witnessing Millsap's prowess up close and personal.

"I first saw Parker during Woodyfest at Okemah," said Green, a retired attorney. "My initial impression was: He's dangerous."

Green says Millsap's father, Tim, didn't like hearing that, but Green meant it in a good way.

"I was thinking of Elvis and his gyrating, singing and [good] looks," Green explained. "Add in some edgy lyrics – that's what I call dangerous."

Critics have hailed Millsap for his wisdom and have crowned him, along with fellow Okie John Fullbright, as the brightest stars in today's Americana music – the heirs apparent to artists like Woody Guthrie, Guy Clark and Townes VanZandt.

"People say I'm ahead of the game," he said. "I feel two steps behind all of the time. I guess that's the artist's curse – trying to play catch up with yourself. I try not to think about it too much. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing at 21."

Again, the youngster laughs.

Green, however, is quite serious when it comes to Millsap's songwriting skills.

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"Lyrics are most important to me," Green confessed. "Parker just has that ability to take good old 'merican' words and spice 'em up with some combinations. They're like a dose of Woody's Red Dirt, with no sugar added."

Millsap looked to his guitar teacher, Travis Linville, and Mississippi John Hurt, to learn finger picking, but ended up a style all his own.

"When I took lessons from Travis, I was probably 14 and just couldn't wrap my head around it," he confessed. "I was just strumming chords. When Travis went on the road, I just sat down with his records and figured it out."

Millsap also took on the harmonica.

"Man, this is a fickle instrument," he said. "My bass player, Mike [Rose], showed me the first few things. I still don't know what I'm doing, but I can fake it."

While he's been singled out for his exceptional writing skills and mesmerizing live performances, right now Millsap's heart lies elsewhere.

"I get pegged as a singer/songwriter a lot," he said with a gentle laugh. "But, really, I just want to play rock and roll."

Touring with Millsap is his high school friend, Michael Rose on bass and Daniel Foulks on fiddle. A piece of the rock and roll puzzle is missing, right?

"What's more rock and roll than going out there without a drummer?" he asked, laughing again.

The youngster's been reading up on rock and roll, including The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards' autobiography.

"He says that what people don't realize is that, at the end of the day, they're not doing it for anybody but themselves," he explained. "As selfish as that is, I kinda feel the same way. That's why I do it. I love to perform. I like to connect. That's what it's all about. I can get inside everybody else's head and let them in mine at the same time. I like that connection and it feels goods to me."

With a successful record and a full touring schedule that includes stage time with Patty Griffin, Parker Millsap's career is rolling along in greased grooves and that suits him fine – for the moment.

"I probably sound happy because I'm hanging out with my dog," he said at the end of the interview. "I just want to write good songs and play rock and roll in between."

For more about Parker Millsap and to check out his tour dates, please visit parkerfillsap.com

To listen to Parker Millsap and his band perform "Truck Stop Blues," visit <http://youtu.be/HvQb2NPV-4E>

To listen to Parker Millsap and his band perform "You Gotta Move," visit <http://youtu.be/nPW6WyxeqKU>