

Slaid Cleaves: 'Makes records ... tries to be good'

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Saturday, 15 October 2011 10:46



Musician Slaid Cleaves doesn't want anything standing between him and his fans. The Maine-born singer/songwriter prefers the one-on-one contact of small, intimate venues rather than the carnival atmosphere of a large arena.

Cleaves kept it simple when preparing to record his first live CD, "Sorrow and Smoke: Live at the Horseshoe Lounge" (Music Road Records - \$15.51 - Sept. 6, 2011).

"The Horseshoe doesn't have a stage," Cleaves said during a break from his current four-month tour. "We moved two tables over, brought in a PA, some recording gear, a light and set up in front of the Budweiser sign."

The informal setup suited Cleaves just fine.

"I wanted a certain amount of control, but I wanted the character of the Horseshoe to come through," he said. "What we were able to capture was the great tradition of Austin audiences. It was respectful, but it wasn't precious."

Recording at the Horseshoe is a great step forward for Cleaves. Although he moved to Austin in 1991, it was "many years" before he worked up the courage to come in through the door.

He overcame his reticence, however, and in 2000 recorded a song called "Horseshoe Lounge" on his CD, "Broke Down."

"Broke Down" was a watershed moment for the young songwriter, receiving rave reviews and winning awards. After the success of "Broke Down," Cleaves began "tireless touring" of the U.S., Canada, England and the Netherlands.

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"I'm doing about 120 nights a year now," he said. "I wish it were less. I'm constantly short on new material. Being on the road is so arduous. I'm not at the back of a tour bus. I'm doing most of the driving. It makes songwriting impossible. If I did 40-50 dates a year, I'd have more time to write."

Cleaves writes thoughtful songs accompanied by beautiful, heartfelt music, but they don't come easy.

"It's been a long time since they came easy," he laughed. "These days it's a very long and arduous process."

Songwriting comes in three stages to Cleaves.

"Every great songwriter will tell you that you need to jot down ideas, whether it's a phrase or a rhyme, and save it for later," he advised. "That's the first step."

The second phase is setting time aside to look over the notes, get some framework and hammer away at it.

"The third phase is something I've been doing for 10-12 years now," he said. "I keep re-writing it, line by line, word by word, until it gets to where it needs to be."

Cleaves says he knows when the song is ready because "I get a little lump in my throat. If it chokes me up, I know I'm on the right path."



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A listen through “Sorrow and Smoke” reveals an easy, laid back, deceptively simple approach to rich and complicated songs that cover some of life’s toughest lessons — love, loss and the ravages of war. The guy can sing the heck out of a tune, too.

“No Angel Knows” is a bluegrass-infused lament about love gone bad and gives the listener a hint of Cleaves’ impressive yodeling skills. He knew if he was going to do country songs like Hank Williams he was going to have to learn to yodel.

“What got me started [yodeling] was David Letterman,” he said. “Slim Whitman was on one night and he yodeled. Letterman asked him how to yodel and Whitman told him. I started listening to his music.”

Cleaves was working a day job at the time and used his commute to practice his new skill.

“I didn’t want anyone to hear me until I had some control,” he said with a chuckle.

After moving to Texas, Cleaves befriended yodeling legend Don Walser.

“I asked him to sing a song slowly,” Cleaves explained. “His yodels were so fast I couldn’t even process them. Breaking it down really helped.”

“Smoke and Sorrow” also has a three-song set of yodeling songs, “Horses,” which Cleaves wrote, “Texas Top Hand,” written by Ray Benson and Walser, and Walser’s “Rolling Stone from Texas.”

When asked how he felt after doing the three songs in a row, Cleaves laughed and replied, “Yodeling’s not hard on my voice. It’s hard on my lungs. I usually have the band play something while I recover.”

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While the titles of his songs ("Sinner's Prayer," "Below," "Broke Down," and "Breakfast in Hell") are sometimes on the other end of happy, Cleaves is remarkably funny. During the recording of "Smoke and Sorrow," someone yells out a request for "Below," which sets the singer on a humorous tangent.

"Somebody wanted to hear the song, 'Below,' which I haven't done in a long time. This is scary. This is an old song. I just got finished doing a new record and all the new songs are in the set, and that means we have to drop a few old songs. What happens is the old songs get jealous. They try to embarrass me." (The song comes off without a hitch on the CD.)

At one time, Cleaves wrote his own bio: "Slaid Cleaves. Grew up in Maine. Lives in Texas. Writes songs. Makes records. Travels around. Tries to be good."

If "Sorrow and Smoke" is any measure of Cleaves' talent, I'd say he captured himself perfectly, especially on the "tries to be good" part.

For more information on Slaid Cleaves, log on to www.slaid.com

Click [here](#) to watch a video of Cleaves during a radio station interview and then performing

"Green Mountains and Me"

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If you want a chance to hear Slaid Cleaves up close and personal, he'll be in concert at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 25,

Rock House Films, 3006 Cole Avenue, Dallas. Tickets are \$30.

For more information, call 214-744-4242