

Justin Townes Earle: Learning to be a better man

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 03 April 2012 09:46

Justin Townes Earle is the best young songwriter in the whole world and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowgirl boots and say that.



I'm paraphrasing a quote by Earle's famous father, Steve, who first used most of those words to describe the legendary Townes Van Zandt.

Steve named his son Justin Townes after his best friend, who died of alcohol poisoning on Jan. 1, 1997.

With the release of his fifth album, "Nothing's Going to Change The Way You Feel About Me Now, Steve's bouncing baby boy, now 30, is making a name for himself in the world of music, as well as making news for his battle with addiction and a much-publicized brush with the law.

Following his arrest after a show in Indianapolis in September of 2010, "he slipped so deeply into a cocaine psychosis it began to change his personality," according to an Associated Press story in October of 2011.

According to the AP story, Earle, who stands 6 foot 6 inches tall, was down to about 150 pounds, hanging out in the East Village of New York City "with an overriding paranoia brought on by an eight-ball of cocaine and a half-gallon of vodka every day."

Pretty soon, he would enter formal treatment for the 13th time.

It didn't take.

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He finally found success when a specialist in New York put him on Soboxone, an addiction-battling drug that's an alternative to methadone, the AP story says.

This time, the treatment seems to be working. He's eating right, exercising, is in a relationship and feels he's in "the best shape of his life."

Earle released his fourth album, "Nothing's Going to Change the Way You Feel About Me Now," last week to rave reviews. Some songs on the record were written during his backslide.

The AP story says, "After his treatment began, he went back and paid particularly close attention to the songs he wrote while high to make sure they stood up."

They do. In fact, these 10 songs are the best work he's ever done and here are the reasons why:

"Am I That Lonely Tonight," the first track, reexamines Earle's fractious relationship with his father.

In the lyrics, he finds himself "300 miles from the Carolina coast, and I'm skin and bones again," referring to his fragile physical condition.

The separateness he feels is palpable.

...

Sometimes I dream I've found a place where I won't feel so all alone.

...

Listen carefully for the line, "I thought I'd be a better man." It's a theme that pops up several

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times on the album.

The sound Earle uses for the record and this cut in particular, features both horns and saxophones and a great 17-second bass riff at the end of the tune. If you liked the soul music of the 1960s, this will trip all your triggers. In a good way.

Earle performed the second cut, "Look the Other Way," on "Late Night with David Letterman" last week. He apologizes for hurting his girl, but it seems to be a little late. Although he's trying to "be a better man," the affair is over.

The great lyrics, along with that soulful 1960s sound, drives the tune, completely with a great guitar solo.

Earle wrote the title cut for the album when he was doping.

"I think I was a lot meaner," he told the AP. "I'm a lot more unfeeling and mean when I'm junked out. ... It allowed me to write one of the meanest songs I've ever written toward a woman."

The song really does have some tough lyrics.

...

*When you lay down to sleep, that's when it will hurt the most
When you wake up alone and still smell my smoke.□□□
So drink up, baby, try and push me out
Nothing's going to change the way you feel about me now.*

*I know it's wrong, but I've got to admit.
I said some things I shouldn't have said.
I never loved you. I never loved you. I never loved, never loved, never loved.*

...

Earle heads to Bakersfield for "Baby's Got a Bad Idea," a rocking tune that only needs a pair of

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blue suede shoes and a poodle skirt to be complete. There's some great honky tonk piano work, some solid Hammond organ licks and a fabulous Duane Eddy-style guitar solo in the break.

The girls don't always get the raw end of the deal. In "Maria," seems that someone turned Earle's heart on end.

She's obviously moved on because she can look right through him, leaving him to ponder

...

*I guess Mama wasn't lying about the dangers
There can be inside one's heart
We're better off if we all remain strangers stumbling through the dark.
Ah, Maria.*

...

My favorite cut from the record is "Down on the Lower East Side," a bluesy lament to late night love and love lost.

It reminds me of dancing at a teen club in Pittsburg. They had soul bands, kids trying to sound like recording artists. This tune reminds me of the last dance with its muted horns and mournful organ solos.

You're hot, sweaty and barefoot. Your hairpiece came off hours ago, and you're about to go parking with a guy who looked really good on the dance floor.

You move in nice and close, and then your hormones go crazy to the lazy beat of the music. Yes, the 1960s were full of good times, and we have Earle to thank for bringing back the memories with a simple song.

...

*Well the midnight's on Manhattan
11th Street and all alone*

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*Counting cracks beneath my feet
'Cuz my head is hanging low*

*In the streetlights all down deep
Shining on the falling rain
Shadows dance across the street
The wind seems to whisper her name*

*But in this tired old town
Another sleepless night
Keeps me wandering around
Down on the lower east side*

*There's a star up in heaven
Shining down from up above
And this city's unforgiving
When you've got no one to love*

*Well, it's more and more these days
I find I need a place to hide
And it's easy to get away
When you're down on lower east side.*

...

Earle knows how to write an "I'm Sorry" tune about as well as anyone in the business. He's probably had a lot of practice.

In "Won't Be the Last Time," he tells his girl he deserves everything she wants to throw at him. He doesn't even remember how he got home, let alone what happened. He's been a total jerk and he feels bad about it, but he can't promise it won't happen again.

No wonder girls love him and grown women want to feed him Sunday dinner. He's the quintessential bad boy who needs to be rescued from himself.

...

*The first time I found love
I was young and I was mean
I took just what I wanted from that pretty little thing*

...

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Now, it's early Sunday morning and he's wishing for sleep, with his hands down in his pocket, "shaking like a leaf." The world is closing in and he's resigned to battling addiction from now on.

If you sing the lyrics to Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" over "Memphis in the Rain," they almost fit. The horn/sax section back up the vocals with a driving beat, transporting the listener back to the 1960s. Earle's voice cracks, but it's an enhancement rather than a distraction.

...

*I know what they can do to me and
I won't let them make a fool out of me.
Things are starting to get strange.
Passing through Memphis in the rain.*

...

On first pass, "Unfortunately, Anna," seems like a song Earle just tossed into the mix without much forethought. It's the story of a taxi driver who picks up a lady of the evening on a rainy night. On second, third and 12th pass, it's obvious that this is a world Earle knows well. The narrator and his passenger have experienced a life full of heartbreak most of us will never know.

In "Moving On," Earle really bares his soul, warts and all. He just lays it all out there.

...

*Well, I woke up wondering where I was at
Just like I always do*

...

*I talked to my mom today.
She seems like she's doing fine.
I tell her I'm getting sick again
And we both pretend we don't know why.*

...

*Then she asks me how my father's been
And we both pretend we don't know why.*

...

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*I just can't stand myself alone.
30 years of running has left me standing with my back to the cold.□□□
And it's left me wondering if I've ever really learned a thing at all.
But, I'm trying to move on.*

...

*Maybe I should go back to the night it all began.□□□
Maybe I should trace my life to the night my folks first met.
Maybe I could find the night my father broke my mother's heart in half.*

...

*But I'm trying to move on.
Trying to move on.*

...

No matter what happens now, Justin Townes Earle has shouldered the heavy burden of his musical heritage.

Now, it's time for him to take his incredible gifts and carve out a place for himself away from the shadow of his dad and away from the ghost of Townes Van Zandt.

With the new album, the kid has taken great strides toward a life free of torment. He's earned every minute of happiness that comes his way.

Justin Townes Earle will be in concert at Club Dada, 2720 Elm Street, in Dallas on May 5.
Tickets are \$17 in advance, \$25 at the door.

For more information about Justin Townes Earle, visit his [website](#) .

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To watch a clip of Justin Townes Earle performing "Look the Other Way" on David Letterman, click [here](#) . Not sure who was playing the upright bass for this gig, but it definitely isn't Bryn Davies, who usually tours with JTE.

To watch an acoustic clip of "Am I That Lonely Tonight," click [here](#) .