

James McMurtry: A Songwriter's Sojourn

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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I hate to hear the vocals on my first record. I played pretty good guitar, but the vocals are ghastly.

– **James McMurtry**

While most songwriters are avid readers, James McMurtry didn't spend much time with his nose in a book when he was growing up.

"Books were wallpaper to me," McMurtry said during a recent interview from his home in Austin. "They were what covered the walls."

Before he became a household name with his Pulitzer Prize winning book, "Lonesome Dove," McMurtry's father, whom he calls Larry, was a rare book collector.

"Whenever Larry had books he couldn't fit into the store, he'd bring a car load home and I'd stack 'em in the attic for a penny a book," McMurtry said. "It made for very cool bubble gum money."

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McMurtry was born in Fort Worth in 1962, but was raised in Northern Virginia. He got into the music business after a failed attempt at college.

"A friend of mine was opening a bar in San Antonio," he explained. "I went down there to help him renovate it and started 'gigging out' in beer gardens for \$10 a night and free beer."

By 1988, McMurtry had begun writing. He gave a 4-song demo to his dad, who was writing a script for "Falling from Grace" for John Mellencamp.

"I had gotten to know some Nashville people who made their livings writing songs and I thought maybe I could do that," McMurtry said. "I thought if I had a Mellencamp cut, when I got to Nashville, they'd actually rent me an apartment."

McMurtry got a gig with Kinky Friedman, playing near the D.C. area, where his father had two apartments.

"I just happened to be sleeping in the one that had an answering machine," he said. "A call came in and it was Mellencamp calling for Larry."

McMurtry returned the call in a hurry.

"I went out to California and we had a meeting. Mellencamp asked, 'Do you have enough songs for an album, because I have time to produce a record.'"

McMurtry managed to get the songs together for "Too Long in the Wasteland," but he's not particularly fond of the end result.

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"I hate to hear the vocals on my first record," he said with a laugh. "I played pretty good guitar, but the vocals are ghastly."

When it comes to writing songs, McMurtry says they usually come in "a couple of lines and a melody. If it's cool enough to keep me awake, it's usually a good song."

One of McMurtry's trademark tunes is "We Can't Make It Here Anymore," a hard-driving anthem about tough times and a government too detached to care.

"That song was released two weeks before the 2004 elections," he explained. "It received a hostile reaction when I played it on an Austin radio show, but Stephen King played it on his station in Bangor, Maine, and it really connected. Our biggest market is in Bangor now."

McMurtry says that some of his songs need some time to mature.

"Usually I don't finish in one pass," he said. "I have to shelve it for a while and look at it from a different angle."



Although he was reluctant to tour in Europe, McMurtry sold out a lot of shows on his first trip to the other side of the pond recently. His new CD "Live in Europe" was recorded in the Netherlands and Germany.

When he's not touring, McMurtry plays a regular Wednesday night gig at the Continental Club in Austin. He also spends Thursday nights upstairs at the club's small "gallery," listening to jazz trumpeter Ephraim Owens.

When asked which of his songs was a favorite, McMurtry said, "There's some I notice because

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they mean something to me, but they don't seem to mean anything to anybody else. When I play 'Racin' to the Redlight' for an audience, it just seems to go right by 'em. They didn't come to hear that." [Click Here to listen to 'Racin' to the Redlight'](#)

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To learn more about James McMurtry, log on to: www.jamesmcmurtry.com