Written by Jeff Ignatius
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It would be incorrect to say that Scott Miller gloated, but he sounded genuinely pleased with his good fortune. He decided to self-release his 2009 album *For Crying Out Loud*, and that allowed the Tennessee-based singer/songwriter to do the proverbial more with less.

"It's not about making more money; it's about keeping your money," Miller said in a phone interview last week. "Before, you're making these records, and you're making 12 percent on the dollar on those. And now I make it all. I can sell half as much and make twice as much, as dumb as that sounds."

And here's that which borders on gloating: "I'm sorry it was such a hard year for everybody else; it was a good year for Scott Miller."

The 42-year-old Miller -- a respected roots singer, songwriter, and guitarist who also fronted the similarly respected V-Roys (championed and signed by Steve Earle) -- will be performing a solo

acoustic show on Tuesday, March 30, at the Uptown Neighborhood Bar & Grill in Bettendorf. And he seems comfortable in his "top of the middle" status -- a phrase he borrowed from drummer Jimmy Lester that means "you're not selling millions, but you're not selling paltry amounts. And you can live here."

For Miller, that meant tapping into his fan base when he decided to go independent after four albums on the Sugar Hill label. He said he raised the money to make *For Crying Out Loud* by selling 1,000 guitar-and-vocal demos with handmade covers for $20 apiece.

That process is one example of the extra work involved in being an indie artist. "I took over the dining-room table for about three months, and I could do about 50 [covers] a day," he said. "Clip things out of magazines, or stuff from the road, or tour passes. Anything I could tape on the front of these things to make them individual and different."

I asked him about capitalizing on fans' love -- technically exactly what he did -- and Milller halfheartedly objected. "That sounds mean," he said with a laugh. "'Capitalizing on their love.' I was a Russian major. I can debate this shit."

That mock offense aside, Miller said he was confident that his fans would snatch up the demos. "They want to see you win," he said.

And the $20,000 he raised got him through the recording, pressing, and promotion of the album, making every copy he sold pure profit.

"For a farm boy who grew up in Virginia -- which means we live in the past -- I'm trying to look as forward as I can," he said.

Miller said he wishes he'd left the world of record labels sooner. "I can put emphasis on that record whenever I want," he said. And "I don't have to get in line with other artists."

He added that running his own label isn't much more work than what he did with Sugar Hill. He's doing some new things -- such as stuffing envelopes to send a single to radio stations -- but he said it's a small burden. "What's a day? ... Eventually there's going to be basketball on, and you can spend the day and be glad to."

Talking about music as a business ignores the songs, and neglects that *For Crying Out Loud* is a solid vehicle for Miller's talents. His local paper said the album "rattles and hums with confidence, dry wit, and tenderness in all the right places."
No Depression
said that the album features his trademark "no-nonsense rootsy rock and roll ... and ... a way with words that few other Americana songwriters can match."

That wordplay is rarely showy. On "Let You Down," it's simply a phrase with contradictory meanings when used in different contexts: "But I will let you down, believe me / I will let you down / I will let you down real easy / I will let you down."

And on "Claire Marie," Miller's cleverness is nearly invisible, using mostly one-syllable words.

That was the goal in writing that song, but Miller said he doesn't have a particular method. "I've tried, I think consciously, to not develop a pattern, because songs are everywhere," he said.

For his two most recent albums, Miller said he rented a one-bedroom apartment in Knoxville. "I put a table and typewriter in there and a guitar," he said. "No phone. No computer. And I go in there every day for about a month or two. And write."

He's been a collector of antique typewriters since he found and cleaned up his great-grandfather's 1898 Underwood, which he took to college. "I like the sound, and I like the commitment" of a typewriter, he said. "When you decide on a word and you *plack* it out on a big ol' antique typewriter, [it's] like bacon and eggs: The chicken's involved but the pig's committed."

That's not to say he knocks out finished songs. Miller is a big believer in editing -- paraphrasing Earle, he said, "You use your eraser more than you use the pointy end of your pencil" -- and the

songwriting day starts by typing a single-spaced page. "Then you go back and start looking for thoughts and patterns and stuff in there," he said. "Hopefully you've got melodies already. Those are always in your head. And you start figurin' out how to put these things together."

At the end of the process, he staples together the different versions of the songs. "I've got a file per song," he said.

And he doesn't stick to one particular typewriter, he said: "It's like guitars sometimes. One says, 'I got a song in me.'"

Miller said he's written a lot of songs based on history, but *For Crying Out Loud* features his first attempt at a song based on a movie: "Double Indemnity." "Those are difficult to do," he said. "You're hemmed in with your details."

But the biggest restriction Miller puts on his songwriting is adding to his catalog songs that he can *feel*.

"Nobody wants to see you up there miserable," he said. "I've got to be able to sing something every night. And mean it. And like it. I've seen Van Morrison breeze through 'Moondance.' I didn't pay my money for that. And nobody wants to pay their money for that. That's the constraint. The rest is just trying to rhyme 'rain' and 'pain.'"

Scott Miller will perform a solo acoustic show on Tuesday, March 30, at Uptown Neighborhood Bar & Grill (2340 Spruce Hills Drive in Bettendorf). Tickets are $10, and the show starts at 8 p.m.

For more information on Scott Miller, visit TheScottMiller.com or MySpace.com/thescottmiller .