Written by Jeff Ignatius Tuesday, 22 June 2010 07:13



On the day he's playing a Daytrotter.com show at RIBCO, singer/songwriter Dale Watson will release *Carryin' on*, and the album seems a natural fit for a guy who's been a country-music relic from the beginning. That's a compliment, by the way.

Since his 1995 debut *Cheatin' Heart Attack*, Watson has been writing and performing country songs in a style out of fashion for decades. But it wasn't until this new album that he was able to combine his own songs with musicians from the era he emulates.

His band for *Carryin'* on was assembled by steel guitarist Lloyd Green and included Hargus "Pig" Robbins on piano and Pete Wade on guitar -- all noted session players active in the 1960s and beyond.

While Watson's regular band -- with which he'll be performing in Rock Island -- is adept at old-school country, the 47-year-old said in a recent phone interview that people his age and younger simply can't beat the old-timers: "It's just something you have to have lived to play."

But it's not as simple as gathering some living legends in the studio. "Sometimes their talent has waned so much that you don't even recognize the player anymore," Watson said. "And sometimes you run into people who are not nice, either, and are hard to work with. Lloyd is the exact opposite of all of that -- the man is a sweetheart of a guy and he plays as good as he ever has. ... And he picks the guys that are in his league, the guys who know how to play this type of stuff. That is an art that is gone. ... They [younger players] cannot grasp the subtlety and the way to play this kind of music."

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Rounding out the ensemble were a few whippersnappers: bassist Dennis Crouch and fiddler Glen Duncan. "It was a half-and-half mix of the old guard and the new guard, but the heartbeat was Lloyd Green and his choices," Watson said. Duncan, he added, lent the proceedings a more-contemporary feel -- "That's icing-on-top stuff; it's not the core of the music" -- but Crouch is "as good as Junior [Roy M. Huskey] was ever. ... He's got the best ear, and he doesn't get busy. He is an avid student of the style."

Watson emphasized that *Carryin'* on doesn't try to mimic the past: "It's not like we went and tried to remake an old record. ... It's not retro at all. I'd like to think it's sonically up to par with what's on the radio."

The singer financed the recording himself, and he said it cost "more than the last four records I did put together. But it's a dream record for me. ...

"It's the record I've always wanted to make, but I never could for several reasons, mainly for money's sake, and I was always depending on record labels for that connection to these musicians. Over the years, I've made that contact myself, but by the time I was able to do it, record companies didn't want to use older musicians that played on older records and do this kind of music."

Once *Carryin' on* was finished, label Entertainment One picked it up and reimbursed Watson for the production costs. But paying for it himself was risky. "It took me putting my money where my mouth is to show them that this would make a good record," he said. "It's very scary. But ... that's what I had to resign myself to. ... If I lose it all, I lose it all. At the end of the day, I've got something that I've always wanted to do."

And Watson said he's pleased with the results, a function of his band, the modern production, and his own maturing songcraft and singing: "It is the best record I've ever done."

Ironically, a key element of making his best record was letting other people make it for him. Watson didn't play any instruments on the album, and he didn't dictate the players' parts. "That was really hard," he said of letting go of his control-freak nature. But "I trusted Lloyd and the

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people he chose. You get guys of this caliber, you don't want to go in there and try to make them play like you would play it."

One only needs to hear "Tequila, Whiskey, & Beer, Oh My!" to verify that *Carryin' on* shows a songwriter in top form. Combining a drinking song, an "Over the Rainbow" fiddle melody, the Winkie-guard chant, and plenty of other

Wizard of Oz

motifs, the song is clever and unforced. ("I think I'm seeing monkeys fly / I ain't in Kansas anymore / I tried to stand up but I just clicked my heels." (Watson said he wrote the song on-stage in Chicago: "I have kids, so I've seen that

Wizard of Oz

movie a lot of times.")

It's not all fun, as the title track is a gentle admonishment to a mirror: "While you're out there making more wrinkles / Your family's making more memories every day / You'd think that you'd know better / Than to still be carryin' on this way."

Watson said his touring band works to re-create the songs as faithfully as possible, but don't expect fidelity. "Live honky tonk is a lot different than record honky tonk, the venues we play," he said. "We're going to try our best to do it close to the record, but ... I'm not going to be a stickler about it."

He'll also take requests from a catalog that includes roughly 300 originals and 100 covers, giving fans an opportunity to hear what they want.

Just don't ask for anything you could hear on today's country radio. A longtime critic of Nashville -- "I do bash an industry that has let its identity absolutely disappear" -- Watson said he keeps up with what passes for country music these days "just to keep an informed argument."

But he said he's a little gentler now, because many people "think old country music is Garth Brooks, Clint Black. They really don't have a reference."

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On the other hand, he noted, "the niches are coming back to life, because people who really like it know where to find it now. All it takes is a Google search."

That's doesn't keep him from fretting, though. "I've probably got the dinosaur syndrome," he said. "I do worry that it's just going to disappear."

That's unlikely as long as Dale Watson is around.

Dale Watson will perform on Tuesday, June 29, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 8 p.m., and the bill also includes Fifth of Country. Tickets are \$10 and available from RIBCO.com.

To listen to Watson's Daytrotter.com session, visit RCReader.com/y/watson.

For more information on Watson, visit DaleWatson.com or MySpace.com/dalewatson.