Written by Jeff Ignatius
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If you listen to the self-titled second album by Whitey Morgan & the 78’s and think the band makes outlaw country sound easy, Morgan probably wouldn’t object.

When he described finding his sound, Morgan – the stage name of Eric Allen – said, “It was difficult until I realized that ... limitations can be a beautiful thing.”

He said his band – which will perform at RIBCO on January 21 – initially tried to sound like country from the middle part of the 20th Century, but they didn’t have the chops to pull it off. It was only when they embraced the relative simplicity of the outlaw-country movement – personified by artists such as Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings – that things started to click.

I jokingly suggested that the problem was that he was too ambitious, and Morgan didn’t take offense and didn’t think I was kidding; he agreed.

“You don’t need all that extra fancy shit on there,” Morgan said, citing the importance of a beat, good guitar leads, and good vocals. “The simpler the better.”

There’s more rawness and energy in Whitey Morgan, he said, than in the old-school stylings of Dale Watson – what his band originally aspired to. “They’re perfect,” he said, but “we’re not them. We’re louder. There’s a little more aggressiveness to it.”

Morgan is only 34 years old, but you’d never know it from listening to his seasoned baritone. SavingCountryMusic.com called him “the closest thing to Waylon you can see these days. There’s a lot of bands that try to ape the Waylon sound with the thumping bass drum and the simple two-note bass line, but Whitey & the 78’s have found a way to re-create that soul, that swagger that Waylon’s outlaw band had, and Whitey ain’t afraid of taking his own leads.”

The All Music Guide said the band’s members “embody the spirit of Waylon, David Allan Coe, Hank Jr., and Johnny Paycheck from the ’70s. That said, this is no mere tribute band; they also have an unsentimental, rock-and-roll attitude from the rust belt’s DNA. This isn’t ‘alt-country’ or Americana.”

It might seem odd that someone so young – and from Flint, Michigan, no less – would so effectively carry on the outlaw-country tradition. But Flint in its factory heyday attracted a lot of Southern families, Morgan said.

“Every factory in Flint was surrounded by bars, and half of them were playing country music every night,” he said. “But that was in the ’60s and ’70s. It’s definitely not like that anymore. There’s only about two factories that are still open.”

That was before Morgan’s time, but his grandfather was one of those good ol’ boys, and at eight or nine years old the boy learned his chords picking along with him.

Like many teenagers, Morgan preferred power chords over country, but when his grandfather passed away when Morgan was 16 or 17, he inherited his Gibson and his record collection – and he began learning about the artists who made the songs he played as a kid.

This was about the same time that Johnny Cash released his first *American Recordings* album with producer Rick Rubin – which meant that liking or playing country music wouldn’t necessarily make one the object of scorn in high school. “We kind of discovered that at the perfect time,” Morgan said. “It was coming back into the mainstream enough for us to pick up on it.”

Whitey Morgan & the 78’s features seven Morgan originals and four covers, and Morgan said the record “wasn’t as well planned out as I’d hoped.” Only a few of the songs had been written when they started recording – “I’m like a supply-and-demand kind of writer. I write when I know I need to write. I guess I waited a little too long to start writing.” – and they recorded three or four songs they’d never played before.

“Those are my favorite songs on the record,” Morgan said, returning to that idea of simplicity. “The good part is that you don’t have a lot of time to overdo things.”

Whitey Morgan & the 78’s will perform on Friday, January 21, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show begins at 9 p.m. and also includes Fifth of Country. Cover is $5.

For more information on Whitey Morgan & the 78’s, visit WhiteyMorgan.com and MySpace.com/whiteymorgan
.