

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Blue Grass resident David G. Smith calls himself a “50-something,” and on Saturday he’ll mark the release of his first solo full-length album at the Redstone Room.

It’s undoubtedly a late start, but Smith said in a phone interview this week that he has genetics on his side. Two of his grandparents made it to their mid 90s, and one lived to 105. So by his calculation, “I have a 20-year career ahead of me.”

It’s off to a good start. *Non-Fiction* is a solid debut for the longtime songwriter – acoustic rock that’s sometimes funky and sometimes gentle, smartly produced and performed with conviction.

Best of the bunch is the third track, “Fear,” a plainspoken love song about triumphing over nagging doubts. It’s sung (with Smith joined by Mary Gauthier) and written with economy, insight, humor, and grace: “Fear / That son of a bitch / Always talkin’ that negative shit / With a godless voice and a Judas lip / But you know what got me here.”

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Smith is at his best in soulful mode, as on the push-and-pull seduction of opening song “Her Body Won’t Lie.” He’s also strong in the country-music tradition of jokey drinking songs played straight: “You can argue if you wanna / That the devil was behind those see-through pajamas / But you’re the reason God made tequila.”

Smith lived in Nashville in the late 1980s and returned to Iowa in 1989, and he worked for the State of Iowa for 21 years before devoting himself full-time to a music career last year.

But his day job financially supported his songwriting, and he’s been “plugging” his songs since the late 1990s, making monthly trips to Nashville’s Music Row.

“I guess I have what you’d call a life sentence as far as writing songs is concerned,” he said. “It’s been the consistent thread throughout my life. The artist thing has taken a back seat at times.”

Smith has licensed roughly 20 of his songs over the past six years, including Rissi Palmer performing a song he co-wrote, “Mr. Ooh La La,” on her 2007 self-titled debut – which appeared on Billboard’s country-album, indie-album, and Heatseekers charts. “Made for You,” which Smith co-wrote with Jackie Kavan and Mike Willis, won the county category of the 2008 International Songwriting Competition.

He estimated that he has a catalog of 800 songs, and roughly half of those he’s never pitched for other artists. But he didn’t do anything with those songs.

At a songwriting retreat in late 2009 in Costa Rica, Smith was encouraged to record his own material by workshop leaders Gauthier, Darrell Scott, and Beth Nielsen Chapman. He said he played a number of songs that would end up on *Non-Fiction* – “Devil Don’t Get Your Soul” and “Ageless” – but it was “Fear” that got the most response.

Smith explained that the song was a workshop assignment; participants and leaders alike had to write a song dealing with the topics they’d been discussing. And when he performed it, “by the second chorus, the entire room was up clapping, singing to the song,” he said. Nielsen

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Chapman said she would pitch it to Tim McGraw, and Gauthier volunteered to sing on it.

Three months later, Smith said, he was in the studio, and now comes *Non-Fiction*. The title is meant literally – all the songs are based on Smith’s or others’ experiences – but it also alludes to the songwriting mantra of “three chords and the truth.”

Although he said his musical career at this point isn’t lucrative, he’s giving a portion of his sales to two causes: Boys Town and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. Wherever he plays, he also contributes to a local cause. In the Quad Cities, he said, he’s donating his time to the River Music Experience for one-on-one sessions with songwriters.

This is all part of that “life sentence” he referenced. “I have tried to walk away from it,” he said. “A couple of times.” But “I don’t get any high from anything else as much as I do in just finishing a song that I know has hit the mark.”

David G. Smith will perform at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport) on Saturday, May 21. The free show starts at 7 p.m.

For more information on Smith, visit HeyDaveMusic.com.