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STEWART EASTHAM

“Dancin’ with the dancers in the mansion.”

There is a sense of joy that permeates Stewart Eastham’s latest release, *Dancers In The Mansion*. While Eastham’s previous album (*The Man I Once Was*) was a portrait of a man in turmoil, his new album paints a much different picture. The inky blacks and saturated reds splashed across the album cover provide clues as to the revelry within. The album’s closing line, “Celebrate yourself with love tonight,” is evocative of the celebratory spirit found throughout the record.

This dynamic collection of songs elevates the Americana genre to new heights with its lyricism and innovative musical arrangements. The album opens with the smoky, horn-inflected “In The Morning” and closes with the disco-gospel of “Lift Your Soul.” “Pretty Little Songbird” brings the funk as “Leavin’ By Sundown” stands with the best of country-flavored classic rock. “2023 Miles” showcases a swirl of psychedelic country while “Old Lovers (In A Cheap Motel)” is reminiscent of classic pop. The slick grandeur of “Jackpot” is a direct descendent of Nashville’s late ’60s/early ’70s “countryopolitan” era, with its lush strings and background vocals.

This album marks Eastham’s first time co-producing his own material. Being so closely involved with every stage of the album’s production, he was able to really craft the songs so the musical arrangements best represented his point of view. “Being so hands-on with this album, I think the snapshot it presents is closer to my personality than anything I’ve done before,” says Eastham. “While the last album was me looking inward, this one is more me looking outwards. So, in a strange way, it probably gives a better a sense of who I am and what I find interesting or moving.”

Each song on *Dancers In The Mansion* has its own distinct personality, but Eastham and his cohorts made sure all the songs had one important element in common. This element is described by Eastham as the “head bobbin’ vibe.” As he put it, “I wanted to make sure even the slow jams made you wanna bob your head along to the beat.” Big, funky drums have always been a trademark of Eastham’s sound, but that big rhythm sound is more prevalent than ever before on this album. “I’m not sure if it’s because I started my music career as a drummer or perhaps because I grew up on classic hip-hop, but I’ve always been attracted to music with heavy drums,” he explains.

Lyricaly, *Dancers In The Mansion* highlights a more playful side of Eastham’s songwriting. There are several songs laced with his dark sense of humor. Songs like “Old Lovers (In A Cheap Motel)” and “Fruit Cocktail Cannery Blues” display a verisimilitude that brings a poignancy to their darkly comic tales. The title track is a madcap romp that may be the first shit-kickin’ country song to mention both “moonwalked” and “Jheri curl.” “She’s My Gal” displays a wry bawdiness that belies its retro stylings. Eastham felt the freedom to be more experimental with his lyrics as evident in the narrative shifts of “In The Morning,” the first person plural point-of-view of “The Barroom,” and the cinematic transcendancy of album closer “Lift Your Soul”—the latter of which spotlights Eastham’s ability to write larger scale songs that don’t fit the usual pop blueprint while still maintaining a genuine soulfulness.

Dancers In The Mansion pushes the boundaries of what an Americana record can sound like. His hip-hop influences shine through in the rhythm of many of the songs—most notably the country-flavored weeper “Carry On,” which uses a driving rhythm to accent the character’s drive to push through a great loss. At times, Eastham also displays a pop sensibility that echoes Elvis Costello and early Tom Waits.

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Songs like “Lonesome Melody” and “Jackpot” evoke the classic country sound Eastham grew up on. “As much as I dig mixing up different styles, sometimes you just can’t beat the power of a simple country song,” Eastham says. “I love the old records of George Jones, Conway Twitty, and especially Charley Pride, who was my grandma’s all-time favorite.”

If *Dancers In The Mansion* feels like a “band” album, it’s no coincidence: Eastham reunited with his former bandmates from Day Of The Outlaw—Kim Lee (bass, vocals) and Allen Jones (drums)—to create this record. Eastham explains: “It was imperative to me that we record the core of this album in Nashville so I could track live with Kim and Allen. We worked out the arrangements together as a band over the course of many months, so by the time we hit the studio, we had fully fleshed out, organic arrangements for each song.” After playing together now for over five years, the trio has developed a shorthand and a deep rhythmic groove which is readily apparent on the album. Nashville guitar player extraordinaire Jeff Rogers (who has played live with Eastham many times over the years) filled out the band’s core unit.

For the album’s production team, Eastham brought in producer Burke Ericson and engineer Dave Pearson from his previous album. During pre-production, Eastham and Ericson spent weeks emailing back and forth narrowing the album down to 15 songs they felt fit together in a cohesive way. “We really wanted to this album to feel like a journey,” Eastham explains, “so Burke and I had the song order fully sequenced before we even started recording.”

Eastham also reunited with producer Jayce Murphy (who produced his final album with Day Of The Outlaw) to produce some additional Nashville sessions. Rich Mouser (Chris Cornell, Mike Portnoy, Weezer), who has worked with Eastham on two previous albums, mixed the album. Many musicians featured on this album also performed on the last record (David Yuter/keys, Ted Russell Kamp/guitar, Skyko Tavis/strings), but there are some new faces. One is Bruce Springsteen’s longtime pedal steel player Marty Rifkin. Gospel legends The McCrary Sisters are featured on several tracks. Oscar Utterström (Los Lobos, My Morning Jacket), Jim Williamson (The Mavericks), Evan Cobb, and Tutu Sweeney played horns on the album, with Michael Roundtree (Wu-Tang Clan) on percussion.

Eastham was born and raised in the foothills of rural Northern California. (The track “Fruit Cocktail Cannery Blues” recounts a setting from Eastham’s Butte County hometown where he spent several summers working to save up for college.) He grew up on the sounds of classic and outlaw country, with a special place in his heart for California country greats Merle Haggard and Buck Owens. This was supplemented with a love of rock ‘n’ roll—starting with his parents’ beat-up Elvis and Beatles records on up through the glossy pop of hair metal. Eastham is also a long time hip-hop fan.

While attending UC Davis, Eastham played drums in a satirical thrash band and later a power pop group. After graduating with a degree in Computer Engineering, he switched gears and moved to Los Angeles to attend film school. There he developed his skills as a storyteller through writing, directing, and acting in films. He also became an acolyte of country music—starting with Hank Sr. and working his way through the country-flavored singer-songwriters of the ‘70s (like John Prine, Townes Van Zandt, and Mickey Newbury) on up through the neo-traditionalist sounds of Dwight Yoakam. It was at this point he started writing and singing his own songs. He fronted the band Day Of The Outlaw for two albums before embarking on a solo career.

Eastham moved to Nashville from Los Angeles in the fall of 2010. “It took me about five years to really settle in here and get comfortable,” he says. “Now that I’m living in East Nashville, I feel I’m finally home.” This notion is addressed in the track “Sometimes, The Road” where Eastham’s impressionistic lyrics paint a picture of the fading nostalgia one has for “back home.” Each chorus ends with the refrain: “Sometimes the road will bring you home.”

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Parallel to his musical pursuits and echoing back to his film school background, Eastham is an avid filmmaker. He has worked on documentaries as well as co-produced five music videos for his previous album. Eastham is also a rabid collector of film soundtracks on vinyl. In addition to his love of listening to soundtracks, Eastham has scored several short films and plans to do more soundtrack work in the future.

“With this album I feel like I got to dance with my own dancers in the mansion. I made the album I wanted to make and had a blast doing it.” When asked to sum up his experience of recent years, he points to a phrase repeated several times in the album’s final track “Lift Your Soul”: “In the end, it’s gonna be alright.”

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