

Sammy Kershaw

Better Than I Used To Be

The music business is an ever-changing model, and Sammy Kershaw has seen it all. From consolidations with radio and record companies to the digital era that we are now in, he admits that he wondered if there was still a place for his Pure Country sound. “I don’t know if the fire ever left,” he says, “but I had some doubts for a while if people still wanted to hear my music, or if radio would still play my music anymore.”

Then, one day, it all became as clear to Sammy as the first time he had ever heard George Jones or Mel Street sing. “One Saturday morning, I’m sitting on my bus listening to the radio, and this old Johnny Paycheck song comes on called ‘Old Violin.’ That’s how I felt--like an old violin, fixin’ to be put away and never played again.”

Hearing that song was a surreal moment for Sammy. “Then,” he recalls, “the last line in the song came on, and it said ‘We’ll give our all to music, and we’ll give our life.’ That took me back to when I was twelve years old, and in a bar room singing my first Country song, which was ‘Is Anybody Goin’ To San Antone.’ It took me back to that time in my life, and that line changed my mind set in an instant.” It wasn’t about the charts or the record label—it was about the creative spark. “I thought to myself, radio might not ever play me again, and people might not want to hear me, but I need to do some new music---for me.”

So, Sammy returns to the fold with his first album in four years, *Better Than I Used To Be*. Longtime fans will find the music is very comparable to his string of hits that started in 1991 with “Cadillac Style.” One similarity between the classics and the new album is the songs, which are all about real life. “I started when I was twelve years old in the honky-tonks and bar rooms. I grew up early. My dad died when I was eleven, and I was the oldest of four kids. I didn’t really have a childhood.” Those experiences helped to shape his sound, and helped him relate to the lyrics he was singing about.

“There’s not very many songs that I can’t sing. I won’t record a song if I haven’t lived it—no matter how much of a hit I think it might be, if I haven’t lived it, I won’t cut it. I’ll pass it on to somebody else. That’s the way I’ve done all of my albums and all of my music. I’ve stuck to that formula.”

That recipe has included songs about love, life, and loss—not to mention regret. Those are all emotions that Sammy knows firsthand, having experienced them all since bursting upon the scene.

“Back then, I wasn’t so aware of what I was doing all the time,” he says of days past. “I didn’t really think much about doing things, or worry about people watching me so much. Nowadays, going through divorces and this and that, people watch what I do a lot, and they can’t wait to print or talk about some of those things.”

Make no mistake, Kershaw isn’t making excuses. “Of course, I brought most of that stuff on myself. I don’t have anybody to blame but me, but it seems I’m a little more cautious about the things I do, and I think about my choices before I make them. It’s a great thing to have choices, but

you've got to remember that when you make one, you're forcing someone else to do likewise. I just try to make sure that when I make a choice, that something comes back around good for me, and not bad, which before I didn't think much about."

One performance on *Better Than I Used To Be* where those sentiments are front and center is on the stunning title track and first single. If you're affected by the song, you're not alone. Sammy himself admits to having such a reaction.

"I knew I had to find the right song, and two or three months down the road, I opened up an e-mail, and somebody sent the song to me. I listened to it about thirty or forty times that day, and cried like a sissy every time I heard it. I said that's me---that's my story right there--all the things I've been through, and all that stuff." That was all it took. "I knew then it would be title cut of the album," he said, "and I knew it would be the first single."

Better Than I Used To Be features a roller-coaster of emotions. In addition to the title cut, there's the sadness of cuts such as "Like I Wasn't Even There," the romantic feel of "Everybody Wants My Girl," and the weariness of "Takin' The Long Way Home," where he laments about a relationship that seems to be falling apart.

On the other side of the emotional spectrum, there's the rollicking "That Train," which is sure to be a crowd favorite, as well as a cover of Dr. Hook's "On The Cover Of The Rolling Stone," which features a guest cameo from CMA winner Jamey Johnson. "On every album, I always record a song that was a hit twenty-five or thirty years ago" Sammy relates, noting that "Third Rate Romance," a hit from 1994, was one of those such recordings. "One morning I was in the Lowes parking lot, and I had been trying to figure out for about two weeks what song I was going to do, and I had the radio on. 'On The Cover Of The Rolling Stone' came on, and I thought 'Man, that was a big hit,' so I decided to do it. I thought it would be better if I had a duet partner for it, and Jamey came to mind. I called up Buddy Cannon and asked him about it. He called Jamey, and he said yes." The version on the album is a Music City rarity—a first take, and is definitely one of the highlights on the album.

Better Than I Used To Be reunites Kershaw with someone who is definitely a fan of his talents---producer Buddy Cannon. The two have collaborated on many hits over the years, and Kershaw says the relationship works.

"Buddy is a great song man, number one, and Buddy really believes in Sammy Kershaw. I was surprised one time when I saw in a trade where he was asked a question about the top singers, and I remember he said that George Jones, Vern Gosdin, and Sammy Kershaw were the top three voices in Country Music. I was surprised when I read that, you know, and it was nice to know that Buddy believed that much in me." When he decided to venture into the recording studio again, there was nobody that he wanted behind the glass more than Cannon. "I needed somebody who believed in me, and someone who knows there are still some hit records in me," Sammy says strongly.

Kershaw is very pleased with the project, and thinks the fans will be reminded of some of his early sounds. "I think it's close to the second album I ever did, *Haunted Heart*. This album reminds me of that one a lot. It's back to what I started doing in the very beginning of my career. I'm just

hoping there's some room for me in my career for some good Country Music that I love to do. I just love to tell stories."

So...where does the Sammy Kershaw story go from here? When asked about the future, he didn't hesitate. "Number one, you hope for a big album," he says. "I love to play, and do live shows. If you have a big album and a couple of hit records, you get booked a lot more---which is fine with me and my boys because that's what we love to do---to play live, that's what we're all about. I've been a whole lot of places with my music. I don't know where else I could go. I'd love to have an award or two, or nominations," he admits, though saying that touching lives with his music is far more important. "But, that's not something I have to have. I just would like people to know that I haven't gone anywhere, and I'm still making new music, and I'm still singing the truth."

----Chuck Dauphin