

Dwight Yoakam - A biography

Few entertainers have attained the iconic status of Dwight Yoakam. Perhaps that is because so few have consistently and repeatedly met the high standard of excellence delivered by the Kentucky native no matter what his endeavor. His name immediately conjures up compelling, provocative images: A pale cowboy hat with the brim pulled low; poured-on blue jeans; intricate, catchy melodies paired with poignant, brilliant lyrics that mesmerize with their indelible imprint. Then there's Yoakam the actor, who seemingly melts into his roles, impressively standing toe-to-toe with some of the world's top thespians: Jodie Foster, Tommy Lee Jones, Forest Whitaker, Nicolas Cage. Add to that Yoakam the entrepreneur and you have a singular talent without peer.

Yoakam's latest Warner Bros. album, *3 Pears*, exemplifies his ability to incorporate multiple, competing influences into a piece of cohesive art. It balances his country core with a fiercely independent embrace of rock, Americana, pop and soul. It blends Yoakam's respect for his musical predecessors with the collaborative assistance of modern singer/songwriter Beck, who co-produced two tracks, and current rocker Kid Rock, who co-wrote the hooky opener, "Take Hold Of My Hand." But most importantly, *3 Pears* builds on his trademark edginess with a notable, growing positivity.

"The music just kind of dropped in, in that way," Yoakam reflects. "Music is a bit of a mystery. Like all emotions are. And I think maybe it was something I needed to express and to share with the world at large, something positive when all of us are kind of carrying around this collective, emotional weight."

Much has been written about the Kentucky-born, Ohio-raised Yoakam being too country for Nashville when he first sought out his musical fortune in the mid-80s, but the truth is his music has always been too unique, too ruggedly individualistic to fit neatly into any one box. Like the icons he so admires – Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Buck Owens – Yoakam is one of a kind. He has taken his influences and filtered them into his own potent blend of country and rock that honors his musical predecessors and yet creates something beautifully new.

Produced by Yoakam, *3 Pears* demonstrates that spirit, coalescing around buzzing guitars and vulnerable ballads as he explores the emotional extremes of his musical persona, all delivered with a revealing honesty. "Heart Like Mine" puts a country garage-band spin on a classic pop/rock melody, while "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke (And Loud, Loud Music)" – written by Joe and Rose Lee Maphis and closely associated with the Flying Burrito Brothers – is thrashing, 21st-century cowpunk. "Waterfall" takes an unusual, dreamy stab at embracing intimacy, and "Long Way To Go" – presented first as a gently chugging lope and later reprised as a stark piano/vocal performance – elegantly refines the concept of personal commitment. "Trying" surrounds an ultra-sensitive vocal performance with a ragged, soulful production.

The witty title track, which opened the flood gates to Yoakam's creativity, was inspired by George Harrison: *Living in the Material World*, the Martin Scorsese-directed film bio. One scene found John Lennon horsing around in three pairs of glasses, and Yoakam was immediately struck by the late Beatle's mix of zaniness and serious intent.

“I got to thinking about innocence and happiness,” Yoakam says. “There’s a certain nonsensical element to the song, but it was through that that I turned a corner. It allowed me to express some true, deeper feeling.”

Yoakam’s relentless search for truth has firmly connected him with a large, loyal following. A long-time Los Angeleno, Yoakam has sold more than 25 million albums worldwide, placing him in an elite cadre of global superstars. Yet the sales have never come at the expense of his musical integrity. Whether singing about the twisted wreckage of romance, the broken dreams of this hard life, or the burgeoning optimism that marks *3 Pears*, Yoakam brings a knowing, glorious edge to his delivery and stands, in a world of artifice and flash, as a beacon of authenticity.

His debut album, *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc.*, set the tone as critics and fans alike responded to a new voice that arrived fully formed with no contemporary rival. With those 10 songs, full of twang and truth, Yoakam led the New Traditionalist movement, though he was never confined by that role. The *New York Times*’ Peter Watrous, in fact, confirmed Yoakam’s status beyond his obvious importance to country: “He fits into a general cultural reinvestigation of things American, including jazz and grassroots rock-and-roll.” From the start, it was clear this jaded, often inscrutable troubadour could put a voice to our thoughts, expressing them better than we ever could.

He has 12 gold albums and nine platinum or multi-platinum albums, including the triple-platinum *This Time*. Five of those albums have topped *Billboard*’s Country Albums chart with another 14 landing in the Top 10. More than 30 singles have charted, with 22 going Top 20, including the incomparable hits “Honky Tonk Man,” “Please Please Baby,” “Little Ways,” “I Sang Dixie,” “It Only Hurts When I Cry,” “Fast as You” and “Thousand Miles from Nowhere.” He’s won two Grammys and earned a staggering 21 nominations.

As stellar as his recordings are, Yoakam’s live performances are transcendent. Upon his appearance at the Kentucky State Fair in 2006, the *Louisville Courier Journal*’s Marty Rosen declared that “in his best moments, Dwight Yoakam ranks with the scant handful of country singers (or, more accurately, singers in any genre, from opera to blues) who can legitimately be called geniuses.”

The potency of his performances makes him a much in-demand guest on the television circuit. So much so that he holds the record for the most appearances by any musical artist on the top-ranked *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

But the music only tells part of the story. Over the last 15 years, Yoakam has carved out a niche as one of the top character actors on film.

Starting with a role as a truck driver in John Dahl’s spicy film noir *Red Rock West* in 1992, Yoakam was an instantly mesmerizing presence on the big screen. However, nothing prepared viewers for his riveting appearance as the malevolent Doyle Hargraves in the Academy Award-winning film *Sling Blade*, for which he and his co-stars were also nominated for the Screen Actors Guild’s award for outstanding performance by a cast. In David Fincher’s box office hit

Panic Room, as the brilliantly underplayed antagonist Raoul, Yoakam once again seamlessly shapeshifted in front of our eyes. As David Smith wrote for the BBC, "...the film is stolen by Yoakam." His performance in Tommy Lee Jones' Cannes Film Festival award-winning *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* was effusively praised for its penetrating honesty. Entertainment Weekly's Sean Smith told USA Today, "As a character actor, he disappears into his roles. There's something amazingly natural about what he does. All his characters have this tense undertone to them."

As he does in his music, Yoakam nimbly transcends categorization as an actor. He displayed his vast range while portraying the hilarious Pastor Phil alongside Reese Witherspoon and Vince Vaughn in the broad comedy romp, *Four Christmases*. He delved into darkness with his role as the infectiously eccentric Doc Miles in the Jason Stratham pictures *Crank* and *Crank 2: High Voltage*. And he proved comedically stubborn in a divorce-negotiation scene in the Vince Vaughn/Owen Wilson picture *Wedding Crashers*.

Yoakam's ability to fuse multiple genres in music and to work in a variety of formats in movies led Time magazine to call him "a Renaissance man" and inspired author Don McLeese, in *Dwight Yoakam: A Thousand Miles From Nowhere*, to dub him "a visionary beyond time."

Yoakam's journey is, by admission, not a straight path. But it is one that feeds the essential premise of his art. His unique musical and theatrical efforts are different facets of Yoakam's singular devotion to discovery of himself and the world in which he lives. "You search for a sandbox," he says, "and just have fun in it." Few have the ability to make so many sandboxes uniquely their own.