

To Nashville and Back Again: After two decades of writing in the backrooms, Ron McNeill steps into the spotlight

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In the early '90s, when Bruce Springsteen was testing the waters without his famous backup band, he had a quiet hit called 57 Channels (And Nothin' On). Driven by a lone probing bassline, Springsteen's social consciousness cut to the quick as he trashed television and its endless rotation of digital junk. Fast-forward 30 years – TV, radio, satellite, Spotify – the signals beam and stream a 1000 times stronger. It's not all junk, silver and gold does shine through, but sometimes it takes time to refine.

LONG DISTANCE LOVE AFFAIR

"Most of the houses on 16th and 17th Avenue are just that," says Ron McNeill. "Regular homes, converted into a bunch of writing rooms. They have a reception desk when you walk in, and little rooms filled with pianos, guitars, couches, some food. You spend two and half, three hours in there bullshitting, coming up with ideas, and hopefully leave with a tune under your belt."

Born in Minto, NB, based in Calgary, McNeill carries a colourful resume. He's been a Golden Glove boxing champ, played upper tier pro hockey, and for the past 20 years a bona-fide songwriter – no stranger to Music Row. In 2006 he moved to the country music capital to shop around his material, breathe in the history and team up with some of the industry's finest.

He didn't go down empty-handed either. McNeill's dad played in a '70s three-piece country-rock band who hit their stride and recorded in Los Angeles, paving the way for his son's foray into the art of making music.

"I started writing in my teens, but the first real song came around 2000. Then my fourth song, Halfway to Nashville, was picked up and recorded by Justin Ament, a Canadian Idol contestant. It went to 78 on the country charts."

McNeill absorbed what Nashville had to offer covering as many bases as possible. On Music Row he made close connections in the biz, then crossed the river to the east side mingling with musicians more grounded in reflection and raw emotion than commercial pop. Comfortable moving around town, he completed his first run through Music City in 2007.

Returning to Calgary, McNeill slipped into a different routine working as an HVAC specialist by day, songwriter at night, playing bars on weekends along with coaching kid's hockey. Despite the domestic streak, he has never leaned towards cranking out clichéd country that wallows in feel-good fantasies full of pickup trucks and corny pickup lines. McNeill isn't living a rainbow dream.

"I don't do music to say, 'Hey, look what I do!'; I do it to connect with people and write about experiences I've been through, and those experiences are usually what other people have been through too. That's where you connect."

Nashville taught McNeill a thing or two about storytelling. One of them was building songs based on a hook using a title or riff. He found both the riff and the title for one particular adventure and stuck to doing what he does best – write what you know.

"I had this Spanish melody for a song I called Cocaine for Breakfast, about someone close to me that had a problem. I knew a well-known publisher, his wife heard it and said, 'Could you change that to whiskey? That's a great song.' I replied no I can't, absolutely cannot and would not. I'd rather stick it in a drawer and nobody ever hears it, than change it."

A BIG BOLD DEBUT

With 60 songs recorded by other artists, McNeill felt it was high time to test drive his own music and take control of the wheel. *Waiting On The Day*, McNeill's big, bold debut has him roaming back to Nashville signing up a cast of studio vets who turned out a righteous piece of country with a rock-steady, infectious undertow.

It's not exactly the kind of record you'd expect from someone who's been banging away trying to cash in on the three-minute radio hit. No question, most tracks clock in at that magic three-minute mark and flow with melody. But it's not over-manipulated to make nice for radio – and that's a good thing. The bottom end is pulsing, groove heavy as the drums pull through tough, sexy and mean. The guitars are up in the mix, running hot, ringing out sometimes raging, while McNeill's gritty vocals are tempered by a chorus of bluesy, late-night gospel singers. *Waiting On The Day* is a beauty and a beast, bursting with sonic energy.

Lyrically, McNeill delivers a cast of freewheelin' characters that we all know well or, at the very least, have brushed up against from time to time. Right out of the gate, leading off the record and looking for redemption, is *Praying The Hell Out Of Me*, plumbfull of swagger and witty wordplay. McNeill then dovetails into the sweeping *Hey Bob Dylan*, asking the poetic high priest if he made a secret pact, and would do it all over again.

"I don't know if you ever saw the Ed Bradley segment on 60 Minutes when Dylan's trying to act like he sold his soul to the devil. He's giving this really strange interview and he's, you know how Dylan is, all aloof like he's trying to make people think that he went to the crossroads. Whether he did or he didn't, whatever, I thought that's something to write about. I grabbed the guitar and in 10 minutes had the song, one of my favorites."

Of course, Dylan's not the only one that song is about. What rock 'n' roller, from Nashville to Fort Mac, hasn't tried to cut the same deal. There's an underlying tension in McNeill's songs and stories – he wrestles with difficult deals, trying to break free or set them right. Even his low-key tunes, like the brotherly love in *Same Dream* where running horses and driving Harleys, although very different rides, embrace the same flight to freedom.

A lot of fertile ground is covered throughout *Waiting On The Day*. Perhaps most striking is McNeill's fiery but friendly vocal delivery. In addition to his smooth whisky-coated rasp that reels back to the country outlaws he admires, McNeill's bold personality pours out marking territory that is one part true grit, one part stage pro.

McNeill notes there's a "spiritual" touch record with the reliance on a fine formation of female backup singers that add a remarkable fresh, soulful swing to the songs, truly a pleasure. Charlie McCoy, the harmonica whiz who's played with Elvis and Dylan to Waylon and Willie while serving as Hee Haw's musical director, stepped in at 80 years of age and "ripped it up," lending his one-of-kind genius. And when McNeill, in Springsteen mode, counts out 1-2-3-4 at the end of *Something's Gotta Give* then tears off into a feisty guitar tango soaring with dual leads, he delivers a helluva barn-burner fueling his brand of rugged, roots rocking country.

Every once in a while, a voice cuts through the infinite stream of channels flowing across the airways. *Waiting on that day* has arrived.

