

Colton Bowlin

Grandpa's Mill



photo credit: Sommer Daniel

For Colton Bowlin, the best songs come between long shifts at the local feed mill.

A 21-year-old native of small-town Albany, Kentucky, Bowlin spent countless hours at his grandfather's mill, where he loaded bales of hay for longtime customers, listened to tall tales shared by old-timers and occasionally strummed his guitar. He'd often hang around long after business hours to workshop a new melody or pen a few words.

Some days, the mill served as a makeshift classroom

for Bowlin's burgeoning admiration for country music. He loved his grandpa – “he was my best friend,” Bowlin said – which meant loving his music, too. Bowlin grew up on classic country, never too far removed from a Conway Twitty or Johnny Paycheck tune, thanks to his “paw.” He merged his respect for artists like Merle Haggard and Elvis Presley with a love for today's troubadours, such as Colter Wall and Tyler Childers. To many in Bowlin's native Clinton County and nearby small towns on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, he became the kid from the feed mill who knew how to strum a damn good song.

And on his new album *Grandpa's Mill*, he's written a soundtrack for the place that's never far from his heart. To cut the 12-song album, Bowlin enlisted producer Dave Ferguson, who worked on essential albums from Childers and Sturgill Simpson, among others. To track *Grandpa's Mill*, Bowlin, Ferguson and company trekked to Chase Park Transduction Studios in Athens, Georgia.

"The feed mill was the only job I had, I never had another job besides working there," Bowlin said, adding: "I think it definitely shaped me to who I am today. It's a lot of heavy lifting and talking to old-timers that was friends with my paw. That's where stories come from. We talk about huntin' and fishin' and all that stuff."

You named the album *Grandpa's Mill*, a nod to a real place where you spent a lot of time growing up. Why dedicate the album to this place?

My grandpa's mill that I worked in, that was all my life until this last year when he passed away and the family sold the business. All my life I've been down there at the feed mill, around him and all the customers. I mainly wanted to make it a dedication to him, how close me and him was. I always wanted to be just like him. There's a couple songs on the record that have an old-school sound. "On My Way" is one of the tracks that is leaning toward that classic, traditional sound, something that he used to show me all the time. I wanted to have a project dedicated to him.

So, some of the characters in the songs come from you putting a creative twist on that time in your life.

Absolutely. A lot of the stories the old-timers told us. I think one of the lines in one of my songs sums the record up entirely. In "Time For Sale," I say, 'There's glory in all the stories, but the stories ain't mine.' I think that sums up the whole record. All these stories ain't mine but I put my own spin on it. If I was telling it, how would I want to tell it?

Growing up, you worked a lot of hours at the feed mill, sometimes six days a week. Then, you'd work on music?

We opened at 7 a.m. and closed in the evening at five. When I got off work, I was tired most of the time, but I'd have fun writing. I'd sit down there in the mill. The cool thing about these songs on

the record, a majority of them did start in the mill. I spent about every evening down there, playing music. Even when I got done working for the week – we'd get off on Saturday at 12 o'clock – I'd play a gig that night, usually every Saturday. Even sometimes on Fridays, we'd get off at five and I'd drive straight from there to go play a three-hour show at a bar. Play some covers and some original songs, if people wanted to hear 'em. Playing around these local bars and restaurants. Every place where anybody would let me scream at 'em, ya know? That's kinda where it all started.

You'd lift around heavy bags of animal feed all day before playing a three-hour show that night.

I was so hungry for it. I couldn't wait to go play. I'd have a new song and I'd want to go show it to my family, who's always supporting me. They would always come out. All day long at the mill, I'm itching. Sitting there, pickin' on the guitar in my free time. Paw probably didn't know that at the time, that I was on company hours playing the guitar while I should be working. I'd sit down there and practice on these songs, make sure I got them right, then I'd go to these shows.

You connected with David Ferguson to produce *Grandpa's Mill*. I imagine that was a fun experience, to say the least?

It was a real blessing to have somebody like him. I'm a big fan of all the stuff that he's worked on. So to have him be part of my art is really a big deal for me. It was an awesome experience.

You cover the sonic spectrum on this album. There's honky-tonk influence, roots-rock, some touches of bluegrass. Are you most comfortable exploring these different sounds under the Americana umbrella?

I like being able to make the music that I love, which is all of it. I like to be very versatile with the range of my voice. I don't think there's any set genre for me. It's definitely country-rooted, for sure. I like to be able to hop around on everything, on every genre that I can.

The song "Time For Sale" may stop some people in their tracks on first listen. What's the story behind this one?

I was sittin' around the house one day, and had just got to thinking about time as a whole and how fast

it goes. I thought, what if there was a man that had time for sale? Wishin' you could buy back time, so you could buy more of it – that was just sittin' with me. It went from there, talkin' about one thing and another, like losing my grandpa, wishing I could talk to him in 2022, when he was in better health. It talks about how time is and losing things as time goes along. Wishing you had time to sell, that's pretty much it.

The album opens with a country tune called "Clinton County." Where is Clinton County and why did you decide to take your listeners there?

Clinton County's on the state line of Tennessee. It's dead center, Tennessee and Kentucky. When I was workin' at the feed mill, I wrote this. I thought of this melody and started writing about getting older and being on the road, playing music. At the time, I wasn't playing full-time but that's what I was thinking of doing. I think "Clinton County" and "Time For Sale" and the whole record as itself speaks a lot about time, how it gets away from you and what it takes from you.

Another one named after a location is "Greenbrier Road." That song feels a little like an ode to escaping time, going to a place where things don't move quite as fast.

Yeah, it's talking about slowin' down again. It's another one of those time songs, ya know. It's going back to my childhood, when everything seemed

like it was better at that time. I feel like everyone goes back to their past sometimes. Greenbrier Road is where I grew up with my mom and dad. It's in Byrdstown, Tennessee. That's where I went to middle school and high school, but I always spent more time in Albany, Kentucky, with my grandpa. "Greenbrier Road" is talking about growing up there and wishing you could go back to that time.

And "Dirty River" is a murder ballad. What do you think makes a good murder ballad? It's something that feels like a rite of passage for country songwriters.

I've said this before, but the lyrics are the most important part. Telling the story in detail. Also, the way you wrap up a song for me, in a murder ballad, that goes a long way. I think you shouldn't hide as much in a murder ballad, you should make it as dark as you think you need to. I think "Dirty River" captures that. I definitely wanted to put my own spin on it because I grew up listening to a lot of those, a lot of Johnny Cash, Colter Wall.

You mentioned earlier that when you started playing shows, you were hungry for it. You still feel that today?

I'm still hungry. It's just a different kind of hunger, you know. I'm still trying to make the most of this thing and take it as far as I can. I always told my paw that I'd make something of myself. That keeps me driven to take this thing as far as I can.

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