

# Dwight Yoakam

## *Brighter Days*

“As a songwriter, I try to articulate that *Brighter Days* are up ahead,” says Dwight Yoakam, whose 21st studio album joyfully reflects where he’s been since the 2015 release of *Second Hand Heart*, his last album of originals. The aptly titled *Brighter Days* brims with songs of hope and possibility, written during a time of major change in his personal life: As he puts it, “Life happens when you’re busy making other plans,” to quote John Lennon. My world changed so dramatically during the pandemic. I had hope and the future delivered to me in the midst of one of the darker moments in our country’s history”: marriage to his partner Emily Joyce and the birth of their son, Dalton, in 2020.

Recorded with his longtime band in six studios between 2021 and 2024, the exhilarating *Brighter Days* shows that



album artwork

Yoakam’s distinctive, supple vocals are just as powerful today as on his 1986 debut LP. *Brighter Days*’ diverse tracks span the spectrum of California country that have influenced him over the decades. As

Yoakam says, “That California sound from the Dust Bowl to the Hollywood Bowl. I moved here at 20. I was born in Kentucky, raised in Ohio, and grew up in California, where I had to plant the flag and hold

the hill.” Indeed: After more than 26 million albums sold worldwide and 21 Grammy noms (with several wins), Yoakam’s potent mix of what he describes as “country, rock, hillbilly, and bluegrass” sound more vital than ever. And as *Brighter Days*’ mixing engineer, the award-winning Chris Lord-Alge, has said of him: “Nobody really sings like this guy, and no one sings as in tune as he sings. His work ethic is from an era before technology made everyone lazy.”

The album’s first single, “I Don’t Know How to Say Goodbye (Bang Bang Boom Boom),” a rollicking duet with Post Malone, actually emerged when *Brighter Days* was near the finishing line. The pair had first bonded in 2018 when the rapper guested on Dwight’s Sirius/XM channel Bakersfield Beat; fast-forward to earlier this year when Post, who’d asked Yoakam to join him for his April Stagecoach set, said he wanted the two to prep a song from Dwight’s early career. “We decided to do ‘Little Ways’ from my second album,” says Yoakam, “and then I’m told that Post wanted to sing on my new record. I said, ‘Oh, man, I wish somebody’d told me that before I finished the album!’” Though thirteen tracks were in the can, *Brighter Days* was not yet mastered. “I didn’t want to duct-tape Post’s vocals to a track we’d already cut,” says Dwight, who, when he got the call in February, happened to be driving along with his wife and young son: “Between two stoplights, I said, ‘I could just

write something for Post and me to sing together.’ By the next stoplight, I was thinking about a hillbilly shuffle from that period ’86 to ’87. And I said, ‘I’m gonna write a song called, ‘I Don’t Know How to Say Goodbye.’” I started singing it to my wife as we pulled away. By the next light I had that first hook, and the stanza of the first verse, then the next couple of lines I sang out loud and grabbed my phone to make a voice memo of the melody. When we reached the next stoplight, I wrote the second part of the song – ‘Bang Bang Boom Boom.’ The song has a joyous intent, which is ironic, given the lyrics. It’s happy/sad – I’m so sad I gotta get happy.”

In March, Post joined Yoakam and his band to cut the album’s fourteenth track. “He didn’t hear the song until he got to the studio that night,” Dwight recalls. “He came in and did it with us cold. We had a great time, and he sang his ass off.” After their subsequent Stagecoach duet, the pair reconnected in July when Post joined Yoakam and his band onstage at the Greek Theater for four songs. Most recently, the compadres donned their flashiest rhinestone-studded jackets to ride horses down Sunset Boulevard for the song’s eye-catching video, for which Yoakam collaborated with director Gregory Alosio, another longtime co-conspirator.

Yoakam’s Sirius/XM channel, which he’s helmed since 2018, led to the genesis of much of *Brighter Days*’ formidable songcraft. “Honestly, the

Bakersfield Beat channel has been one of the catalysts for everything because of the conversations with my guests,” he asserts. One of those was North Hollywood native Jeffrey Steele, founding member of Boy Howdy and a hit songwriter for numerous country artists. Yoakam was fascinated by Steele’s tales of growing up in the shadow of the famed Palomino club. Not long after their meeting of the minds, the two decided to co-write their own Cali-style honky-tonk, with Yoakam offering up the bittersweet “California Sky” and the hard-country “I’ll Pay the Price.” “He was really gracious about collaborating on both of my song ideas,” says Yoakam. By the time the pandemic raged,

Steele introduced Dwight to his songwriting partners Bob DePiero and Shane Minor via a video call. “For the first time in my career, I did some team writing, and I’d never written before on Zoom,” says Yoakam. “It was so much fun with guys as talented as they are. It became this wonderful experience of pure, artistic collaboration with Jeffrey, Bob and Shane.” *Brighter Days*’ opening track, the cowpunkish guitarfest “Wide Open Heart,” and the Hammond B3-fueled weeper “Hand Me Down Heart” show how well the approach worked. One of Yoakam’s most personal songs, the heartfelt ballad “I Spell Love” – with sonics inspired by both Paul Simon’s “Cecelia” and Everly Brothers’ harmonies – also benefitted from his collaborators’ input. But “that

song would not exist if not for Emily and Dalton,” says Yoakam, whose lyrics include such tender lines as “A life lived alone/Left for a joy I’d never known/And that’s why I spell love/L-O-V-U.”

Of course, Yoakam’s other major collaborators are his ace band mates, some of whom have been with him for over twenty years: Eugene Edwards on lead guitar; Jonathan Clark on bass and vocals; Mitch Marine on drums; and Jamison Hollister on steel guitar and fiddle. Other contributors in the studio, according to Dwight, include Drew Taubenfeld on pedal steel, mandolin, and dobro; Brian Whelan on keyboards, guitars and vocals; along with Skip Edwards on piano and Hammond B3 organ. “The album exists in no small part due to their willingness and efforts in the past couple years to be in the studio recording with me as I created this record,” Yoakam says.

With a garage-rock fervor, Dwight and his band kill on the barnburner “Can’t Be Wrong”: “Did we pass the audition?” he asks at the end, again quoting John Lennon (who uttered those words after the Beatles played that London rooftop in 1970). The rock & roll shuffle “Every Night,” with its shimmering keyboards

and blazing guitar break, owes a debt to Sam Cooke’s “Twistin’ the Night Away,” says Yoakam. Dwight cowrote the ‘60s-style mod-pop number “A Dream That Never Ends” with protégé King Leg, aka Bryan Joyce, whose 2018 debut he produced. The hopeful “If Only,” like most of the tracks, boast simpatico background vocals as well as Yoakam seamlessly harmonizing with himself. “I haven’t done this much harmony singing since my first couple of albums,” Yoakam reveals. The group’s invigorating a capella opening lines of the Carter Family’s “Keep on the Sunny Side” were inspired by Appalachian hymns from Dwight’s childhood; when the instrumentation kicks in, the track takes off like a bottlerocket, a la vintage Stones. Another cover, his buddy Chris Hillman’s classic Byrds song “Time Between,” from 1967’s *Younger than Yesterday*, features Taubenfeld’s stunning mandolin solo and more than does justice to the original, as does Yoakam’s twangy version of Cake’s “Bound Away.”

As for the title track, Dwight’s little son shares songwriting credit and gets a vocal spotlight on the song’s coda. “When he was three months old, that was the first time he ‘spoke’ to me,” Dwight reveals. “Not real

speaking but sounds of love. That moment I’ll never forget. While still in the midst of the dreariness of the Covid saga when he was about 20 months old, one day, I was sitting reading in a chair with a guitar near by, and Dalton came in with his little Telecaster ukulele strapped on, and said, ‘Play, Daddy!’ – wanting me to pick up my guitar. So I stopped what I was reading, picked up my guitar looked at him, and started playing a melody. I watched his gleefulness as he tried to play along with me, I could see how much fun he was having. I started singing the words ‘Brighter Days,’ and he sang them right back to me and that led to the first stanza of the first verse, which is why I gave him his first writing credit.

The song – and album – exudes a love of life and all its possibilities. Yoakam already has new songs in the works and more touring ahead. Plus a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2024 Americana Music Association’s Honors and Awards ceremony. “There’s a certain effervescence to the whole Americana thing,” Dwight offers. “It’s the exuberance of youth, when all is possible and music expresses the possibilities in life.” The same can be said of the luminous *Brighter Days*.

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