



VOICES IN THE HALL: AARON WATSON

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall. Presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today is Lone Star man, Aaron Watson.

AARON WATSON People ask me, "What's the difference between you as an independent artist and a major label artist?" And I say, "Well the biggest difference is that when you buy my record, all the proceeds down to the very last penny goes directly into my wife's purse." And people usually laugh at that, but it's true. My albums belong to my family.

I run my business like it's a small hamburger joint. My fans deserve hospitality, they deserve good service, and they deserve a good burger – good music.

My business is more outlaw than anything that's ever been in country music. There's not the whiskey and the weed and the women, but there's that independent mentality.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Aaron Watson.

"Trying Like the Devil" – Aaron Watson (Red Bandana / BIG Label)

PETER COOPER That was "Trying Like the Devil," from Aaron Watson, an independent recording artist from the great state of Texas. Aaron often comes to Nashville. He comes to record, not to attend board meetings or to glad-hand. He embodies Texas's Lone Star spirit, a spirit that's highlighted in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's featured exhibit, Outlaws and Armadillos: Country's Roaring '70s. I chatted with him just down the hall from the exhibit at the audio lair...

PETER COOPER Aaron Watson, thank you so much for being here with us on Voices in the Hall.

AARON WATSON Peter thanks for having me.

PETER COOPER Man, we're glad to have you here. Always happy to have you in the building. Tell me what is an independent artist?

AARON WATSON Well I guess that's me. My entire career I've been independent. I would say the first decade I was independent out of survival. My story's really no different than so many of these other artists, especially the ones here in your Texas exhibit, where I came to Nashville and time after time after time I kept being told by people that I didn't have a commercial sound or I didn't have what it took. So you know I remember going back home sitting at the kitchen table with my dad in Amarillo, Texas. And he said "Well how did your trip to Nashville go?" and I said "Well dad, everyone says that I just I don't have what it takes." I remember my dad took a sip of coffee and



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he said "Well," he said, "that's the same thing they said to Willie for all those years." He said, "You just need to focus on you and focus on your brand of country music and just do what you do." He said, "Sooner or later they'll come around."

And you know it's true. I've always chased after my heart rather than chasing after some hit or doing what some record executive says. I focus on my fans. I'm not out there chasing after the latest flavor of the month, musically speaking. You know and then I guess here we are this last 10 years. You know we've started charting albums top 10 nationwide. You know y'all had an exhibit for me for my *Underdog* album which became the first independent album in the history of country music to chart number one.

PETER COOPER What does that mean, "independent album"?

AARON WATSON I mean it means my wife owns everything. It means that...

PETER COOPER So you're not going through a major record label.

AARON WATSON No. I write the songs. I own the publishing. I own the masters. When I go record an album, I'm writing people checks out of my bank account. I think that's what it means to be independent. I'm taking a gamble on myself. I'm investing in my music personally. If the record flops, it affects me personally. It affects my family. So I take it very personal that things don't flop. And I work really hard.

We don't have the financial backing of a major label. Being played on country radio is a challenge because it's a political game. It truly is. I mean I've been playing it for a long time. If anybody knows the struggles of getting played on mainstream radio it would be me. You know I've often told people that Jesus could bring me the greatest country song ever, and I could give it to country radio and there's a chance they're not going to play the greatest song ever because there's not that major record label stamp on the back of it. Because that's just how things have always been.

But things are changing. And as my career has grown we've also developed our record label. And my record labels called Big Label Records. It's almost that little deal like "Who's on first?" It's like when people are like, "Have you signed to a big label?" I've always been like, "Yes I did actually." "What's it called?" I'm like, "Big Label." It's really not that big. But it's enabled me to stay focused on my brand of country music.

You know. *Real Good Time* charts number nine. *The Underdog* charts number one. *Vaquero* is the top downloaded album when it came out. It charts number two. It has two Top 40 singles on it. It took me 18 years to get my first hits on country radio. And then we follow it up with this record. Now if I was signed to a major label, I don't believe that they'd probably let me put 20 songs on this new album because they're all about EPs, three/four songs.



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Also, generally speaking after you finally have some commercial success on radio, you come out with an album that kind of maybe caters to that even more so. But instead on this record I went the other direction because I wanted to. And I had no one to answer to but myself. And I started the album with a song called "The Ghost Of Guy Clark," and it doesn't even have a chorus. It's an anti-commercial song. And then the next song on the record is a minute and a half instrumental call "El Comienzo Del Viaje," which means "the beginning of the ride." It's not very typical for an artist to who's just finally had commercial success to follow up a record that's a bit more artsy.

People ask me, "What's the difference between you as an independent artist and a major label artist?" And I say, "Well the biggest difference is that when you buy my record all the proceeds down to the very last penny goes directly into my wife's purse." And people usually laugh at that, but it's true. My albums belong to my family. There are artists out there that are winning Album of the Year awards, but the truth of the situation is they don't even own those albums. So I've always really really liked the idea of owning my own albums. I mean I pour my heart into these songs. I want them to belong to my children someday.

PETER COOPER Does that keep you up at night?

AARON WATSON It does. I mean I do have that thought in the back of my head of what if this all, all the success that I've had, what if it all goes away? I don't want to go back to that old white van, playing for nobody. And it keeps me up at night. But it also pushes me to work even harder. And that means getting up before the kids get up and working on my songwriting, staying up after everyone goes to bed working on my songwriting. That means getting on that stage and putting on the best show that I can put on. That means after the show even if I'm tired and hungry, that means going down there to my merch booth and hanging out with the fans, if it means hanging out with them for two hours after they shut the place down. And thanking them, shaking their hands, hugging them and letting them know "Thank you." I run my business like it's a small hamburger joint. My fans deserve hospitality, they deserve good service, and they deserve a good burger. Good music. And I run things like a small business.

PETER COOPER Now, part of the pressure that's there, it seems to me, is there's not necessarily a correlation between making what you would perceive as great music and making music that sells a lot. I mean there are some really big hamburger joints that make burgers that sell in the millions and you wouldn't put them up against the burger that you could get at your small hamburger joint. It would seem that some pressure would be there to make music that sounds a lot like what's in vogue, as opposed to beginning a new album with a song like "The Ghost of Guy Clark," that is a singer songwriter song about a brilliant but not necessarily famous songwriter.



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AARON WATSON Yeah. Guy Clark. He's in my opinion the greatest songwriter. I've been listening to his songs for forever and why don't they ever get old? I mean explain that to me. What is it about an old man sitting on a stool with a guitar singing these songs I've heard a million times over? Why do I never get tired of them? So I guess yes, I could go that route and make one of those burgers that makes more money. But why? You know.

PETER COOPER Because you got kids to put in college.

AARON WATSON The beautiful thing is that I live in west Texas and the price of living is cheap. And I saw a house that looked like it was about a thousand square foot here in Nashville, and that thing costs more than my six thousand square foot house and 420 acres in west Texas. So from a business standpoint it's like, you don't have to be a millionaire in West Texas to live like a millionaire. And at the end of the day, for me my I want my career to be a long distance race. I want to be Guy Clark someday.

“Ghost of Guy Clark” – Aaron Watson (Red Bandana / BIG Label)

PETER COOPER “Ghost of Guy Clark,” from Aaron Watson. Guy Clark was born and raised in Monahans, Texas. He moved to Nashville in 1971, to raise hell and write hellacious songs. One of the most talented song-poets to ever pick a guitar.

Aaron Watson loves Guy Clark’s music, because Aaron Watson has two ears and a good brain. Let’s get back to my interview with Aaron...

PETER COOPER You've been at this for 20 years.

AARON WATSON Yep.

PETER COOPER And your music naturally has changed, morphed, might say evolved over that time to the point where I would imagine you're faced with situations where somebody says, “Yeah, I really liked your earlier work.”

AARON WATSON Oh yeah.

PETER COOPER How do you respond to that?

AARON WATSON I had a kid on this new record. He said, “I'm not buying this record. I'm supporting this other artist because he hasn't sold out. He hasn't changed.” And sometimes I like to address these fans. This kid looked like he's about 20, 21 years old. And I said “Well first of all that artist your supporting who hasn't changed, he has one album out.” I said, “Second of all young buck, when I started your momma was most likely still feeding you from a bottle. Now people change. Or are you still being bottle



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fed? Because as you get older you mature..." Well I haven't matured. I want to use a different word. I don't want people listening thinking that I've matured. I have not matured.

PETER COOPER I can attest after having spent the last hour with you. There's no maturation.

AARON WATSON I'm incredibly immature. As you get older, things change. The things that you're focused on change. I've lost a daughter. That changed me. I've become a father to Jake, Jack and Jolee Kate. I've had different experiences that have molded me into a different person. So I laugh when people say "Well you've changed, you've sold out." That's a bold statement to tell an independent artist that he's sold out. Cause I'm like, "Who did I sell out to? Because they haven't paid me yet." But you have to grow.

And I don't like to be an artist where anybody can put their thumb on me. And with being independent I don't have to do what the music industry says nor do I have to follow the opinion of some 21 year old boy. There are things on my new record that are different. But if you go and you truly do your homework and you listen to my entire back catalogue and my other 15 records, you will find on every record we push the envelope. Because I don't want to be all waltzes and shuffles. I talk about Willie and Waylon but I was also raised on the Beatles and The Stones. I love the Beatles' *White Album*. Why does that album still entertain kids today? That album has folk music on it from "Rocky Raccoon" to hard rock "Helter Skelter" to pop music. I love that kind of freedom.

That's the kind of things that I did on this new album *Red Bandana*. There's diversity there that's going to allow you to enjoy this album a year from now. This is the album of my career. I hope I have other albums of my career. I'm going to keep pushing myself to be the best songwriter. And I encourage a lot of these young writers. I'm like, "Do you want to be a good songwriter or a great songwriter? Yes, I understand you have to play the game, you want to have a hit on country radio. But if you want to be a great songwriter you need to listen to Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Mickey Newbury. The names are out there. Their albums, they're there as almost like textbooks. Study the lyrics. You don't always have to go verse, chorus, verse, chorus." You know I kick off this album, "The Ghost of Guy Clark." I purposely didn't want to have a chorus on that.

PETER COOPER Tom T. Hall wrote a book about how to write songs and explained that you always had to have a chorus that recurred so people could hang onto it, and then almost none of his songs have choruses.

AARON WATSON Yeah. Yeah.

PETER COOPER I think he was trying to throw us off the trail.



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AARON WATSON Well I think to that he may have been his thoughts on how to write that hit song. It's kind of like in church, those praise songs that everybody likes. Well it's because after you've heard it once you've got it memorized and it's there. There is some truth into that. But the great thing about Tom T. is I think that when it came to his music he just did whatever that he wanted.

PETER COOPER Yeah. I would say that for his entire life. And whatever he's doing right now...

AARON WATSON It's whatever he wanted to do?

PETER COOPER Exactly.

AARON WATSON Well I want to be like him when I grow up. Has he matured yet though?

PETER COOPER No.

AARON WATSON OK good. So there's hope for me yet.

PETER COOPER He is reading poetry a lot though.

AARON WATSON I love that.

PETER COOPER He reads poetry journals so maybe there's some maturation there.

One way to write songs that is accepted as say not as a suggestion but as a mandate, one way to write hit songs, is to write them with other songwriters. In 1961 there were 1.12 writers per number one billboard country song. So almost every number one song was written by somebody in a lonely room, by themselves. Today there are more than three writers per number one hit country song. You have chosen to go the other way and sit by yourself and write. Why in the world would you do that in the face of such overwhelming evidence that co-writing and tri-writing and quad-writing is a necessity for success?

AARON WATSON It's shooting for the stars. And it's crazy. But it's a dream. And really I'm living a crazy dream. But it's the idea of what if one guy all by himself wrote one of the best dang records in country music this year? How do you pour your heart into a song if you ask some other writer come in and start giving their thoughts and ideas? I mean then it becomes part of their heart.

I wrote a song on the new record called "Trying Like the Devil." That's not a song that I could write with anyone else. Because in that song, when I wrote that song I was kind of



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depressed and kind of in a dark place personally. And there was a boy in our community who committed suicide. He committed suicide and the next week he was supposed to become an Eagle Scout. And no one knew that that kid was suffering on the inside. He showed no signs. And the dad got on Facebook and said, "I wish people would be more transparent and real on social media." He said, "Everyone portrays perfection. Especially singers and actors and celebrities. And these kids, they don't feel like their lives are measuring up to that." So I wrote this song. And it just talks about how I fall short of the man I wish I could be. And the line in the second verse goes, "So beware of broken glass should you stare into the window of my soul. And judge me not. I only bare it all so you know that you are not alone." How could I write that song with someone else? I couldn't.

It's been my songs that have gotten my career to this point. I would just not be able to deal with myself if all of a sudden I made this album of someone else's songs that finally made my career what it is now. I don't think I could betray my songwriting like that. Honestly I would rather not do it at all. If you don't let me sing my songs, I'm out. I'd rather raise chickens. I had to write this album all by myself. And there's very very commercial moments in this record because I'm not going to let the mainstream music industry go, "Well he can do this stuff, but he can't write these so called radio hits." No I wrote radio hits on this record, but I surrounded those light hearted hits with depth, with heart and soul. And it's important to have light hearted. I realized this when I took my kids to see Paul McCartney. Paul played "Blackbird," which we can all agree is a masterpiece and is such a singer-songwriter song from the melody to the lyrics to the guitar riff. It's pure brilliance. And then a few songs later he played "Baby You Can Drive My Car, beep beep, beep beep, yeah." And guess what? I love both those songs. One complements the other. And. They both stir up different emotions.

So I was feeling one way one day when I wrote this song, and I was feeling one way another. One of the songs is called "Am I Amarillo." And my wife pissed me off one day. I was so red hot mad. I was like, "Girl, if it wasn't for Jesus and my babies I'm out of here. But I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm going to sulk. I'm going to throw a fit. And I'm going to sit down with this old 1957 Gibson LG one, and I'm going to write a song about how mad you made me right now." You know it made a great song. And there was raw emotion and you can feel it. Like, I'm ready. Like, if you don't want me here you know I'm out. I'm going home to Amarillo, is what it's about. And I try to capture those moments. Gosh honestly, I'm probably a bit of a diva emotionally because I feel like that stirs up my songwriting. You know it's like that just I think it's what makes a great song.

PETER COOPER You write about it, "I've got a chip on my shoulder."

AARON WATSON Yeah, absolutely. I go, "I've got a chip on my shoulder, but it doesn't weigh me down. It whispers 'Get back up' when I'm knocked on the ground." Now that's



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some like Shel Silverstein kind of stuff. Those are the greatest writers. And that's what I would encourage today's writers is you need to go back and listen to the legends.

When I come to Nashville, I'm ready to learn from the best. These songwriters? I had Bob DiPiero come out onto the road with me. And I'm usually a big talker. I shut my mouth and I listened and I learned. These guys are the best.

PETER COOPER Yeah. And you draw inspiration from your admiration. You were just walking around in this museum's Outlaws and Armadillos: Country's Roaring '70s exhibit and taking a picture of the headstock of Shel Silverstein's songwriting guitar...

AARON WATSON Oh yeah. I loved it.

PETER COOPER ...where he with a little label maker put "Shel" on it.

AARON WATSON I loved it. Yeah. That's just. That inspires me so much. And to see the pick marks that have been raked across that guitar and to go, "Oh my word. I wonder what song was written on that." I mean I look at things differently. I see all this stuff and it takes me to other places and gets my mind wandering and. I love to dream. I love to dream. And these guys were all dreamers. You have to be a dreamer to be a songwriter.

We were talking about the song I wrote for my hero Red Steagall, cowboy poet. And in the song Red dies in the song. Red is dead in the song. And I texted Red. And I said, "Red, I wrote you a song, but I just wanted to apologize because in the song you're dead." And Red responded back. He said, "Hey, it's okay. That makes for a better song when I'm dead." So it does. It's about emotion and it's about capturing that human emotion. And when you can write a song that helps people cope with life in any form or fashion, that's what it's all about.

PETER COOPER Well one commonality with a lot of these people that are your heroes and mine is that they have coped with life and come out dealing with it through creativity. You mentioned earlier you had a daughter who died.

AARON WATSON Yes.

PETER COOPER Very young. For most people that would be a cause to retreat, to become insular, to do anything but communicate and create. How do you come back from a life-altering, life-damaging event like that, and then go out in front of thousands of people and bring a party?



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AARON WATSON Oh man. I struggled. After we lost Julia I struggled. Every show was torture. I was heart broke on the inside, I didn't want to play. These people are having fun. I had my you know my in-ears in, listening,.

PETER COOPER In-ears meaning these are monitors, whereas some, a long long time ago people used to have big stage monitors. Now if you see a performer fiddling with their ears it's because of these little in-ear monitors where they can hear what's going on.

AARON WATSON It's like headphones, little headphones that we listen to music through.

PETER COOPER Like earbuds Yeah.

AARON WATSON I put those headphones on and I would just turn the music up and I could see people yelling and screaming and having fun, but I wasn't hearing them. I just wanted to get on stage, and I wanted to get off the stage. But you know I wrote a song for Julia called "Bluebonnets." "Bluebonnets in the spring. Life is like blue bonnets in the spring."

And a few months after we lost her around Easter, my wife wanted to take pictures of our other three kids, Jake Jack and Jolee Kate, but she wanted to take pictures at the little country cemetery where we buried Julia. And I said, "Babe, let's not go there. Let's take pictures at the ranch." And she said, "No, I want to take pictures of my babies at the cemetery." And when we showed up to the cemetery, there were bluebonnets everywhere. And it didn't look like a cemetery anymore. It just looked like this beautiful field full of bluebonnets. And we took the pictures of the kids, and in the far distant background there's a tree. And under that tree is where Julia is buried. And oh, it's the sweetest picture.

And it's so tough to talk about. But I came back to the cemetery a few months later and the blue bonnets were gone. And I thought man, that's like life. Life is like bluebonnets in the spring. It's short. And I wrote this song for Julia. And I was hesitant to put it on the record. But I did it. And that song, I have people every night tell me, "I need you to play that song for me tonight. That song got me through losing someone special to me. That song has helped me cope." Because that song's just not about losing loved ones. It's about making the most out of this time we have on this earth. And it's also a song filled with hope. It's a song that has a gospel foundation. That music helped me get those emotions out. And rather than keep it trapped inside of me when I'm on that stage, now I have that song where I'm on that stage and I can talk about her. And I can tell people who are going through a hard time that I know how they feel. And I can use my experience as a way of helping others. But I can talk about her.



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Music is everything. It's the greatest form of expression to me personally. It's like when I'm feeling love I just want to write a love song. When I'm upset I want to write a song about that. I wear my heart on my sleeve. And sometimes that's good and sometimes that's bad. I think for me as a songwriter, I've never really wanted any big awards, but every time somebody comes up to me and tells me that my song helped them, that's the greatest award ever.

"Bluebonnets (Julia's Song)" – Aaron Watson (The Underdog / BIG Label)

PETER COOPER "Bluebonnets (Julia's Song)," by Aaron Watson. That's a song about loss and faith, and the way that these things can interconnect.

PETER COOPER Aaron Watson, it's been so great to have you here talking with us in the audio lair at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum for this edition of Voices in the Hall. Thank you so much for spending your time and telling your stories.

AARON WATSON Well thank you for having me. You've been amazing. And I just have to mention that people can't, they don't know this, but in the background behind the scenes we've got a legendary mastering engineer Alan Stoker here. And I'm literally sitting next to his...what is that? Is that a?

PETER COOPER That would be, you may not recognize it because you don't have one, but it's called a Grammy award.

AARON WATSON Oh is that a Grammy?

PETER COOPER It's given to people who've made significant musical accomplishments.

AARON WATSON So my question is really why are we interviewing me when we've got a Grammy winning engineer there, Alan Stoker? So if are you listening here the wonderful quality of our voices, it's because Alan is a Grammy award winning engineer.

PETER COOPER That's right.

AARON WATSON So thank you.

PETER COOPER That's right. And sometimes he makes us sound like this.

AARON WATSON Yeah. So thank you Alan for all you've done. Good day sir.

PETER COOPER Thanks to Aaron Watson for visiting today on Voices in the Hall. Aaron is an inspiration for people who want to be independent, who want to go it alone,



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to write what they feel, to trust it will connect. Is it possible to do that? Well yes it is, at least if you're Aaron Watson. I'm Peter Cooper. Thank you for listening to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, recorded by audio czar Alan Stoker, and produced by Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio. Come see us at the Museum in beautiful downtown Nashville, Tennessee.

PETER COOPER Coming up next time on Voices in the Hall: Molly Tuttle.

MOLLY TUTTLE When you love something that really shines through in your playing. Music has always just been a constant source of comfort and something to feel good about, something that inspires you.

PETER COOPER Next time on Voices in the Hall.