



Rob Baird is a thinker, a seeker, a man who surveys the scene, decides what he aims to accomplish and sets it in motion. Sure, over the past five years the Memphis-born musician, who broke out with 2012's critically-acclaimed *I Swear It's The Truth* and built a dedicated fanbase as a result, steadily earned a reputation as a no-frills, earnest singer, songwriter and performer — one able to tear through the Texas live-music circuit with ease. But Baird envisioned for himself a fuller artistic landscape. "I love Texas but I knew there was more out there," the 28-year-old says. It's why he temporarily stepped off the stage, decamped to Nashville and began to assemble *Wrong Side of The River*, the musician's most eclectic and elegant, crisp and stunning collection of songs yet. "It was time for me to go out there and figure it out on my own; hit the reset button," he says.

Hearing him speak so passionately — that is before letting his fiery new music cut through you — one gets the sense that with *Wrong Side* Baird has at last pried open an emotional well that's long been kept tightly lidded. Longtime musical influences — some as deep-welled as the Stax-era soul seeping from the Memphis streets of his youth; or those blues melodies he remembers hearing when world-weathered bluesmen came to perform at his elementary school — are imbedded within the core framework of *Wrong Side of the River*. "I let my guard down and let what was naturally there shine," he says, referencing a spellbinding string of songs on the LP that slash from the blues-drenched, Jack White-influenced title track, which he likens to "this whole Nashville vs. Austin thing," to the sweeping, organ-aided Jackson Browne rocker "Mercy Me" and the "sentimental back-porch ballad, "Run of Good Luck," which Baird wrote in an hour's time with up-and-coming Nashville virtuoso Ruston Kelly.

Long pegged as a country or Americana artist, Baird was also eager to dig deeper this go-round, shed any preconceived notions of genre or form surrounding him. "I'm just excited to not be lumped into one genre," he admits not so subtly referring country. "I had to figure out what I wanted to say and where I wanted to go." It's why Baird led off his new album with the cannon-shot stomp of a blues-rocker, "Ain't Nobody Got A Hold On Me." "I wanted to set the tone that maybe this album is a little different," he explains. "It's got that driving force."

A major hurdle in Baird's self-discovery over the past few years was in understanding that while, yes, he does and will always have an affection for classic country music, especially the wide-lens storytelling it so wonderfully facilitates, his own musical craft is hardly a one-size-fits-all proposition. "I've ended up in places that maybe I shouldn't have been necessarily," he says looking back at a career littered with roadblocks.

To that end, he began penning songs that reflect both his hard-earned maturity ("I feel like I've grown up a lot in the past couple years") and an ever-expanding musical palate. Crucial to this process of self-discovery was working with producer Brian Douglas Phillips who Baird says played a crucial role in helping him get his mind around the album's sonic shape and, once at his Rattle Trap Audio studio in Austin, played everything from pedal steel to piano, organ and both acoustic and electric guitar on the album. He and the producer, a multi-instrumentalist and creative craftsman who has received accolades for his work with everyone from David Ramirez to Josh Halverson and The Reliques, had never previously met, but "we went and got lunch and I was like "Yup. I'm in" immediately," Baird recalls of instantly bonding with Douglas Phillips. Adds Baird: "We definitely got to take our time when recording more than I've ever been able to before."

It's also in his choosing to work with those with whom he feels a kindred spirit – and who like him have also been put through the music-industry ringer – that Baird finds comfort. It's almost a familial approach to crafting art, really, he explains.

"It's nice to have guys that have been through it," he says of his seasoned band, with whom he's not only set to tour with but who also played on the entirety of *Wrong Side*. "They know what it takes to do touring right and know how to do it in a way where everybody is still friends at the end of the day," Baird says.

"I just want to have music that connects with people," Baird adds, his voice rising in excitement as he looks ahead to what promises to be a monumental tour behind his new LP. "I mean, what's the point of doing it unless you somehow have emotion?"

Most importantly, for Baird, he feels supremely accomplished.

"At the end it's all about the music to me," he concludes. "You have to go through all the pain and suffering and figure out who you wanna be and what you wanna do. A lot people just want to make money first. I can't live that way. You've got to be happy with what you're doing. You've got to sing those songs every night. I'm hungry again!"