



WILLIAM MICHAEL MORGAN

If our love was a song, Girl
I'd play it all night long, Girl
I tell you what I'd put it on, Girl
I'd put it on vinyl

Country music is at its best when youthful energy carries tradition forward. It's what the likes of Dwight Yoakam, Ricky Skaggs and Garth Brooks brought to the format, and it's what fans and critics alike are looking for in modern-day country.

Look no further than William Michael Morgan. That fresh-take-on-a-classic-sound approach was apparent when he was a 14-year-old playing four sets a night of Haggard, Strait and Waylon in Mississippi honky-tonks that had "everything but the chicken wire," and it's apparent now in his debut album, *Vinyl*. Throughout its 11 songs, he brings a voice and manner older than his 23 years to bear on music written by him and many of today's best tunesmiths.

It's a combination summed up in the album's title track, a song about new love as vintage, as fresh and timeless as the vinyl that embodies a lifetime's worth of classic records—and a substance enjoying a resurgence as young people everywhere savor its audio magic.

"I am such a fan of the traditional approach," he says, "but I want to make it as fresh as you can possibly make it. The song 'Vinyl' caught my attention the minute I heard it. I think that combination of old and new suits me to a 'T'."

It certainly does. William Michael has written with and drawn from many of the city's best present-day songwriters even as he takes inspiration from heroes like Keith Whitley, George Jones and his friend and mentor, '90s honky-tonk king Mark Chesnutt. He is a veteran of the Louisiana Hayride, whose stage hosted Hank Sr., Elvis and so many others, and he is a mainstay at the Grand Ole Opry, a timeless institution showcasing the best of modern country and gladly showcasing William Michael's talents nearly two dozen times.

The album captures the magic the Hayride, the Opry and present-day country radio have all embraced. It opens with the crisp Fender guitar of "People Like Me," the perfect introduction to someone with a lifelong affinity for working people, and closes with "Back Seat Driver," a touching piece of intergenerational storytelling. In between,

there is love and loss, work, relaxation and escape, all anchored in William Michael's expressive baritone and in classic instrumentation.

"We always had a steel guitar in my early bands, and I've had one ever since," he says. "If it came down to it, I would pick a steel guitar over a lead guitar any day, just because I love that lonesome sound. Even in my ear piece on stage, where some people just want voice and maybe an acoustic, I like a little bit of steel in it because it puts me in my element."

Nowhere is William Michael's ability to bridge musical gaps more apparent than in the breakthrough hit that made his name, quickly earning five million YouTube views and six million streams. The sweetly romantic "I Met a Girl" was written by three men who couldn't be more cutting-edge—Trevor Rosen, Sam Hunt and Shane McAnally—and yet William Michael's heartfelt vocals bring shades of the '80s and channel the romance of Conway and the honesty of Randy Travis.

"I Know Who He Is," written by William Michael's frequent collaborator Casey Beathard, is a touching look at the relationship of a son to a father facing dementia. "It took everything I had not to cry while singing it," he says. "It's our chance to use a great song to shine light on this subject."

On the other end of the spectrum is "Missing," a bit of pure escapism that proclaims, "Sometimes missing is my favorite place to be."

"Everybody needs to be missing from time to time," he says, "to get off the grid, myself included. It helps to clear your mind and get away from the real world a little bit."

In summing up the album's approach, he says, "It's all about how you produce it and feel it and write it and sing it. You can keep it country, meaning you tell stories and bring honesty to it, and still make it sound fresh and different. We're all on the same highway. Some of us are in the right lane, some of us are in the left, but we're all headed for the same place."

William Michael earned his place on the highway during a childhood in Vicksburg, with Marty Robbins the first artist whose music really moved him. He remembers even as a youngster the way he was affected by great country lyrics. Then, he and his family attended Riverfest in Vicksburg and saw Dierks Bentley perform.

"That's what really opened my eyes up to what I wanted to do," he says. "Seeing him play and feed off the energy of that crowd changed everything."

He was 11 when he got his first guitar and 13 when he started playing out with guys three or four times his age, learning the old songs and savoring that classic honky-tonk feel. He got his start with a dancing crowd at Bo's Hideaway in Fayette and eventually played all over Mississippi and Louisiana. His parents were right there, driving him to and from late-night gigs, sometimes hours away, often getting little sleep before they headed to their own jobs.

"They always encouraged me," he says, "and a lot of people say it, but I wouldn't be anywhere without them." His dad handled an early MySpace account, networking and looking for opportunities. One came in the form of the Hayride, which William Michael played at least once a month for years starting at 14. Another came when he contacted songwriter Roger Springer, whom they visited in Nashville. That set in motion a chain of events that led to songwriting appointments with Springer, Mike Geiger and Tim Menzies,

among many other great Music Row writers, and a meeting with Joe Carter and Mike Taliaferro, who became supporters and then his official management team.

William Michael spent his late teen years learning his craft, writing and performing, and by the time he earned both a publishing deal and a label contract with Warner Bros. Nashville, he was the complete package.

His producer Scott Hendricks, who has throughout his years in the industry amassed an incredible 65 No. 1 singles, called the first time he heard William Michael's voice coming through studio speakers "a jaw-dropping experience," deeming the breakout artist "one of the very best singers [he has] ever recorded." Pandora said, "His voice resonates with the flawless timbre of someone who has been singing country music for decades beyond his years."

William Michael says that Hendricks and co-producer Jimmy Ritchey "saw the vision right away and have been working to capture it," adding, "I'm 23 and always growing and learning, but I'll always keep my traditional roots and this is a team that makes sure this record is really me."

An old soul in a young man's body, William Michael is the tradition-tinged future in a tall, lean package. His aim is simple--"Happy or sad, I try to put the most heart into it that I can"--and with *Vinyl*, he has brought a lifetime of music-making to bear on a project destined to serve his fans and country music alike well.