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JOHN PAUL WHITE

The Hurting Kind

With *The Hurting Kind*, John Paul White has crafted a stunning album that draws on the lush, orchestrated music made in Nashville in the early 1960s. Yet these songs retain a modern feel, whether he's writing about overwhelming love, unraveling relationships, or the fading memory of a loved one.

White grew up in tiny Loretto, Tennessee, and now lives in Florence, Alabama, not far from Muscle Shoals. He has cultivated his career in Nashville for two decades, first as a songwriter for a major publisher, then as half of *The Civil Wars* – a groundbreaking duo that won four Grammy Awards before disbanding in 2012.

Because *The Civil Wars* were so hard to categorize, White has earned a fan base among indie rock listeners, folk audiences, Americana outlets, and AAA radio. So, what will happen if people hear *The Hurting Kind* and call it country? “Well, that doesn’t scare me in the least,” he says. “As a matter of fact, it kind of thrills me.”



Album cover

What was on your mind leading up to the sessions for *The Hurting Kind*?

I wanted *The Hurting Kind* to be a much more complex record than I’ve made before. I wanted it to be a more thought-about, arranged record. I had been burying my head in ‘countrypolitan’ stuff like Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline and early Roy Orbison, and a lot of Chet Atkins and Bill Porter records. I think I was doing that because I was looking for that style of music in today’s world, and for any artist doing that type of thing. Then I decided to make the kind of record that I wanted to sit down and listen to – one that I’ve been looking for and can’t find.

Where did you record it?

I have a little studio next to my house called Sun Drop Sound, and this is one of the first things we recorded in it. We converted an old, turn-of-the-century home next to mine in the historic district of Florence, Alabama. It has high ceilings and big rooms. We were able to cater the space to what we wanted this record to sound like, and then captured it the way we heard it in our heads. It was a lot of work and a lot of head-scratching at times, too, because of the complexity of the songs.

What makes the songwriting on *The Hurting Kind* different from your past work?

I approached this album differently on the songwriting side before I ever got into the studio. I really wanted there to be a torch song quality to it, the classic, timeless

quality. To not be afraid of the big note, and not be afraid of the drama. A lot of times, without even thinking about it, I pull back the reins, especially when the lyric is pretty sad. When the lyric is pretty heavy, I'm a little more careful about taking it too far. After conversations with people I've met on the road – talking to them about songs that I've written and how they say my songs have helped them – I felt like I could say what I wanted to say on this record. And not worry that it was too maudlin or too heavy-handed. I thought, "I'm just going to go there."

So I had this idea. My publisher, BMG, had been very kind and patient waiting for songs from me. I knew I wanted to write some new songs and I thought, "You know what? I'm going to use their Rolodex and find my heroes and see what they're doing. See if they're still writing songs – and see if they're willing to write songs with me." One of the first phone numbers I got was for Whisperin' Bill Anderson. He's a huge hero of mine. He has this boundless energy, this excitement! It was inspiring to see his eyes light up when a great line would come out or a melody would happen. I just ate it up and fed off it.

Why was it important for you to seek out those classic writers?

It played into the type of record I wanted to make. Bill is definitely from that era – writing and recording songs like "The Tips of My Fingers" and "Still" – and for me it's canon. I thought, "Well, if he'll answer the phone, let's see who else will." So I called Bobby Braddock and he was up for it. He told me a million amazing stories about writing songs like "He Stopped Loving Her Today" and "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" and "Golden Ring," but also his time playing piano with Marty Robbins. It was the best! We wrote a song in maybe an hour.

It was so rewarding in other ways, too, because I got immediate feedback from them on whether I was writing country classic songs or not. I told them right off the bat, I really want to make a record that isn't dated. I don't want it to be retro. I don't want to make it sound sonically like those classic records, but I do want it to have that same aesthetic. I do want it to have that same thought process and to be as deliberate as those records were. Coming out of each and every one of these situations, I got a resounding thumbs-up that I was on that right track. I didn't need anybody else's approval after that.

You built a sizable international audience with *The Civil Wars*. What do you hope those fans will hear in *The Hurting Kind*?

I've always had the same mentality with everything

I've been a part of – just writing something that moves me. If it moves me, then I think it will move others. Then we'll try to get the subject matter down to a specific moment in time and really dissect that moment instead of trying to write an epic. To get at the heart of something that's bothering me, or makes me happy, or confuses me – I feel like I'm still doing that same thing. At the heart of all this, it's me and a guitar. There are other things going on, but at the heart of it, it's really about the song, more than anything else. That's always been the case, with my solo stuff, or with the Civil Wars, or with anything that I've written for the Nashville market. The core is always the most important part.

What made you choose "The Hurting Kind" as the title track for this album?

I titled this album *The Hurting Kind* because these are typically the types of emotions and ideas and songs that I deal in. The things that consistently come to the front of my brain every time I sit down to write a song. Every time that I listen to records, the songs that I gravitate toward are the hurting kind. Those are the emotions that I think are the most powerful. They're the ones that are the most lasting. They cut deeper and they stay with us.

THE SONGS

"The Good Old Days"

It's really me wondering, what era of America are people wanting to get back to? I'm having a hard time thinking of one we haven't progressed from, or shouldn't progress from. As a father, I see the world through their eyes and I'm wondering what we're leaving for them, what they're heading into, and how it can be improved upon – and how it can be improved upon for every single person on this earth and not just a select few. This song is my counter-argument to Making America Great Again.

"I Wish I Could Write You a Song"

This is me putting the rose between my teeth and trying to write a romantic song. Trying to measure up to this feeling that I have in my heart and not being able to get it on the page is the most endearing part of the sentiment. I'm a huge fan of Roy Orbison and always felt like he allowed himself to go as big and grandiose as the song wanted him to be. I don't think there are a lot of people in popular music, especially men, who allow that to happen. So I was fully willing.

“Heart Like a Kite”

I’ve written a lot about being a flawed character – and more often than not, that’s the truth. But I wanted to take the perspective of somebody who was in love with someone with a wayward soul, and loved her way too deeply to walk away from. He knows what he’s in for and he doesn’t look at it as a negative. This person isn’t pointing fingers and saying she’s a bad person or a good person. She’s like a puppy that sees a butterfly and can’t help chasing it, and that’s part of why he loves her.

“Yesterday’s Love”

That’s Lillie Mae on fiddles and harmonies. I knew I wanted twin fiddles on this one. It’s funny, when I sing this song live, sometimes I’ll even make a comment during the song, like, “Wow, this is pretty heavy.” (laughs) And I try to sing it in an endearing way, like, “Honey, let’s just don’t talk. It’s over, just come here and hold me.” Kris Kristofferson’s influence shows up a lot on this record and he made a living of writing those kind of songs, like “Help Me Make It Through the Night.” This song was actually written for *Beulah*, but didn’t seem to fit. It does now.

“The Long Way Home”

It’s the one song that has the distinction of making my kids cry. I didn’t see this song as tugging at any heart strings, but when I played it, especially for my 11-year-old, he was tearing up. Especially the line, “Don’t you dare kiss me goodbye” in the bridge. That’s the one that always gets him. I didn’t see that coming, but he knows how much it hurts to leave. My kids know I have to play music, and they love that I do it. They’re very supportive, but thankfully they don’t want me to leave.

“The Hurting Kind”

I wrote this song from a female perspective. I wasn’t trying to do that, but every word of it sounded more real and heavier coming from a female perspective. It’s really a song about abuse. I asked my wife, “Is this still as powerful coming from my voice?” She said 100 percent, and that people are going to use their own voice when they listen to it anyway, so don’t overthink it, and don’t hand it off to somebody else when it’s something you really want to say. I took that advice.

“This Isn’t Gonna End Well” (featuring Lee Ann Womack)

Lee Ann straddles that line between the country world, the Americana world, and the crooner thing. I don’t think she’s super easy to pin down. With her voice she can make anything sound country if she wants to. I did not envision it as a duet at first but once it was done,

and I was playing it down and thinking about it for the record, it made perfect sense. I loved the idea that it wasn’t just a one-sided conversation. Both people knew it was a horrible idea and neither one could pull out of it.

“You Lost Me”

That’s as close to a honky-tonk song as I get. When I play it live, people will giggle because they hear the wordplay and they don’t know where it’s going and how bad things are in that situation. I’m always looking for those twists and turns. I like to take something that seems obvious and look under it and over it and around it. Then I can explain it in a way that others haven’t, because then I can still use words and phrases and thoughts that people are used to, that are conversational.

“James”

This song was inspired by Glen Campbell. I’ve been a huge fan from early childhood. My mom says the first song she remembers me singing is “Rhinstone Cowboy.” When I found out that he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, it was heartbreaking. But I didn’t use Glen’s name or his life story; I used my dad’s. My dad is perfectly healthy and strong as a bull, but I wanted to use the details of his childhood. This song is like multiple short stories, all telling the same story in little flashes.

“My Dreams Have All Come True”

There’s something I love about positive titles that are sad songs, a twist in and of itself. If Elliott Smith and Kris Kristofferson got together and made a country record, that song is what I think would come out of it. It’s got the falsetto parts that I learned through osmosis from my dad. He never yodeled around anyone else, but he’d do it around the house. I look forward to singing that song every night, I won’t lie. I feel like it encompasses everything on the record in a really good way.

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