

AARON WATSON

"I'd rather be an old fencepost in Texas than the king of Tennessee," Aaron Watson sings on "Fencepost," echoing the words of one of his favorite fellow Texans, Sam Houston. It's a song about a rising Texas country songwriter who gets the door slammed in his face by big-time Nashville record executives who underestimate him. Instead of giving up on his dreams, though, he rolls up his sleeves, proves them all wrong through sheer determination, and soon finds them knocking on his own door. If it sounds familiar, that's because, as Watson sings, it's "a true story," and the reason he's titled his 12th record 'The Underdog.'

"I've always liked the idea of the underdog," says Watson. "I've always liked the idea that the guy who's not supposed to win could still beat all the odds through hard work and perseverance. A lot of people are always telling us that what we're achieving in the music business is just next to impossible. I don't really consider it that way. We're just out there working hard."

Working hard is a serious understatement for Watson, who performs hundreds of shows every year, has collaborated with special guests like Willie Nelson, Dale Watson, Jack Ingram, and Bill Joe Shaver, cracked the Top 10 on the Billboard 200, and sold hundreds of thousands of tickets, all as a totally independent artist with his own label. The lead single from 'The Underdog', "That Look," which Watson wrote for his wife Kimberly, turned heads by debuting in the Top 10 of the Billboard Country Digital Songs Chart and closing out the year as one of the most successful-selling independent singles of 2014.

"If your dreams aren't handed to you on a silver platter, that's ok," says Watson. "You go out there and you chase them. You may have to work hard for them, but don't let anyone discourage you."

'The Underdog,' then, is more than just an album title for Watson. It's a mission statement.

"The idea of the underdog really describes where I'm at right now in my career and what we're trying to achieve with this record," he explains. "I'm not one of these guys that can put on a pair of skinny jeans or turn my hat around backwards and sing those pop country radio songs. Nothing against the guys who do that because it's their thing and true to who they are, but if I played that role, it wouldn't be me. When I'm singing these songs hundreds of times a year, they need to be things I personally believe in."

For Watson, there are three things he believes in above all else: family, faith, and fans.

"There is no Aaron Watson without those three things," he says. "My faith is what guides me. It keeps me focused on my music. God has blessed me with an amazing wife and beautiful kids, and at the end of the day, success to me is working hard and making a living for my family. That's all any dad wants. My fans like the fact that I'm really a normal guy," he continues. "If I can't get on stage and talk to my fans about my faith and my family, I've got nothing."

It's little surprise, then, that the album opens with "The Prayer," a song inspired by a copy of Johnny Cash's book 'The Man In White,' which Watson found in the Faith section of a used bookstore on tour.

"I started reading this book on the bus, and before you get started with the story, Johnny just talks about his struggles with different addictions and how his faith saved his life," says Watson. "He talks about how he tried to kill himself and that was the turning point where he knew Jesus wasn't through with his life. When we think of Johnny Cash, he's The Man in Black, he stands tall, and he's a very intimidating figure. He was 'Folsom Prison Blues,' 'Ring of Fire' Johnny Cash! And he was going into a cave to kill himself! I tried to put myself in that cave with this song."

Rather than dwell on the darkness of that moment though, "The Prayer" is a song about finding the light and letting it shine through. The same goes for "Bluebonnets," a song written in memory of Watson's late daughter Julia Grace, who passed away shortly after birth of Trisomy 18 and was laid to rest on a beautiful hillside overlooking where the Texas state flower

blossoms for a brief, gorgeous window every spring.

"Like bluebonnets in the spring we're only here for a little while," he sings. "It's beautiful and bittersweet so make the most of every mile."

Like the great country songwriters who inspired him—Hank, Waylon, Willie—Watson has a lighter side, too. "Blame It On Those Baby Blues" is a sweet love song, "Freight Train" is a rollicking road anthem, and "One Of Your Nights" is what Watson describes as one of his "lovemaking songs." Meanwhile, "That's Why God Loves Cowboys" and "That's Gonna Leave A Mark" are pure country through and through.

The disparate sounds and feelings on the record are all masterfully tied together through the production work of Keith Stegall (Alan Jackson, George Jones, Zac Brown Band).

"I needed someone who was going to push me to better myself melodically and lyrically," says Watson. "Keith understood all that and he really dove in and found a way to get the best out of me. I was able to get right in there with this legendary producer and work alongside him and soak up every moment, and I'm forever grateful."

Working with such an acclaimed producer as a completely independent artist was a real coup for Watson, and just one more reason he painted his face up like a rodeo clown on the album cover.

"The rodeo clown is a huge underdog," explains Watson, who sings from the perspective of one on "Rodeo Queen." "He's up against a huge bull trying to protect these riders, putting his life on the line. Talk about an unsung hero."

It's an appropriate metaphor for a man who's defied the odds and conventional wisdom, chasing down his dream through hard work and determination even when the door was slammed in his face. "When you fear when you fail when you feel you're gonna fall," he sings on the title track, "follow your heart and always believe in the underdog."