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## Hayes Carll Casts God as a Woman, Says We're All Gonna Die on His Surprisingly Reassuring New Album

Americana's sardonic observer writes some of his best songs yet on *You Get It All*, a record about meeting your neighbor, communing with your creator, and if all else fails, hiding out in a cheap motel

By **JOSEPH HUDAK** 



"I always think if you can get rock & roll and humor in the same song and tell a story, that's a pretty great combination," says Hayes Carll.  
David McClister\*

**Hayes Carll** is in Galveston, Texas, watching the shrimp boats return from the Gulf of Mexico to empty their nets. Later that night, the singer-songwriter will play the first of two shows at the Old Quarter Acoustic Café, a folk club that originally operated in nearby Houston until it closed in 1979. Townes Van Zandt recorded a seminal live album there that Carll is more than a little familiar with — his songs have often been compared to those of Van Zandt's, a comparison that rings true in the stark yet clever lyricism of his new album *You Get It All*.

Right now though, Carll is focused on those shrimpers. To him, they represent a more honest life, one vastly different than the funhouse-mirror existence that plays out on social media and cable news.

"I just sat on the deck of a restaurant overlooking the shrimp boats and fishing boats coming in and dropping off their catches. I'm watching everybody go about their lives trying to make livings...and take care of their families, and I'm overwhelmed by the strength and pride and kindness that I see," Carll tells *Rolling Stone*.

But another America, perpetually restless, angry and online, depresses Carll and makes him fear for the future. “I don’t like that America. That America seems focused on the division and on the differences and on the blame and the rage. I have a friend who calls it ‘rage porn.’ I look at that and a lot of times I don’t recognize those people, even if they are people I know... We’re pulling further apart. If we can get it together and start having conversations and treat each other with respect, we got a shot. And if not, I’m pretty pessimistic about where things are headed.”

As Carll sees it, even the creator is shaking an omniscient head at what’s happening here on Earth. In the album opener “Nice Things” — a contender for satirical song of the year — he recounts a visit from God, whom he subtly casts as a woman. “God came down to Earth to enjoy what she created,” he sings in the first line of the song, before dropping the divine Her into various demoralizing situations: She fishes in polluted waters, gets accosted by a mob of hypocrites, and is busted for smoking pot. “This must be a joke,” God sighs in the verse, as she’s handcuffed for possession.

“We can come in and lecture and everybody will get turned off by that,” Carll says, “so the only person that has the right to say this and cannot be argued with is the Creator. I thought it’d be fun to make her a woman.”

Carll wrote “Nice Things” with John and TJ Osborne of the country duo Brothers Osborne. “I had this idea of ‘This is why we can’t have nice things,’ but in my mind, it was a wife saying it to her husband. I think it was John that said, ‘Why don’t we broaden it out?’ and we had fun thinking of all the ways that that can apply.”



In making *You Get It All*, Carll handed over the reins to his wife, the singer-songwriter Allison Moorer, who produced the LP with guitarist Kenny Greenberg. Moorer co-produced Carll’s last album of original material, 2019’s *What It Is*, and is a counterbalance in the studio to what Carll calls his “ADD and shitty recall.”

“I know what I want to say, but I don’t really know how to get it out there sometimes,” he says. “She has this great ability to remember records and sounds and her brain can hold all these references. She brings a vision and a purpose and intentionality to things and tries to make it great — and is not really interested in showing up if we’re not going to push to create something special.”

In *You Get It All*, Carll and Moorner, with the expert playing of Greenberg, hit that mark. Over 11 songs, he veers from classic country (“In the Meantime”), to greasy soul (“Different Boats”), to the Texas boogie of “To Keep From Being Found.” A co-write with John Prine collaborator Pat McLaughlin, the track follows in the grand tradition of Carll songs like **“KMAG YOYO”** with its rapid-fire verses, rich details, and wry delivery. He sings about hiding out in a motel room, one that still uses an actual key and rents by the week. “I ain’t ever going back to Texas,” he sings. “I’ll pay the cost of being lost just to keep from being found.”

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“Pat said, ‘If you get Texas into a song, people love that,’” Carll, a Houston native, laughs. “I wanted it to sound like Delbert McClinton. And I always think if you can get rock & roll and humor in the same song and tell a story, that’s a pretty great combination.”

“Help Me Remember” tackles the more serious matter of Alzheimer’s dementia, a song that challenged Carll to rethink his writing process. Working with songwriter Josh Morningstar, he came up with a moving plea for help from the point-of-view of someone suffering memory loss. “Early in my life, I thought songwriting was Bob Dylan taking some amphetamines and staying up all night writing ‘Masters of War’ or something. I didn’t understand that there was a craft to it,” Carll says. “With this song, I kept working on it and chipping away and shaving it and redoing it and moving it around. It was really important to me to get it right.”

Carll has been playing much of *You Get It All* at his concerts. After riding out the pandemic with a livestream series and an album on which he **reimagined selections** from his catalog, he’s back on tour, playing markets like Philadelphia; Raleigh, North Carolina; Birmingham, Alabama; and Galveston, where he first got his start at the Old Quarter Acoustic Café. He admits to a certain level of trepidation about performing live again.

“I’ve been playing and going for 20-plus years and [the pandemic] was the first time in my adult life that I’d taken a minute and not been on the road,” he says. “I feel like I was supposed to learn something from that. I just haven’t quite figured out yet what that is.”

Perhaps it’s some lesson about our collective grief, a reminder that after a nearly two-year global tragedy, we’re all tethered in some way. He writes about that in the standout track “Different Boats,” featuring a transcendent solo by Kenny Greenberg.

“Let’s take a breath and respect that we’re all on this trip together and we’ve all got a different trip, every single one of us. And we’re all going to die,” he says. “I don’t know if that’s an optimistic take on things, but there is a commonality in that.”

And for God’s sake — be she a woman or a man — he says, take a break from social media. “It’s so exhausting. Even if you don’t engage in it, it still takes years off your life,” Carll laughs. “I get a lot more meaning out of knowing my neighbors than I do out of getting pissed off about every single news story.”