

DALLAS SMITH

Sometime in the distant future, when a wizened Dallas Smith is rocking back and forth on his front porch, stroking his chin and fondly recollecting his astonishing career, he'll pinpoint this precise moment in time – the release of his second full-length country album, *Lifted*, with its scorching first single 'Wastin' Gas' and ecstatically received ensuing tour – as the moment when everything came completely together.

It's not just the music that finds our man entering 2015 in tiptop form, though you can bet dollars to donuts that *Lifted*, with its twangy mix of guitar-goosed corkers, rollicking sing-alongs and tender ballads drawn both from his critically acclaimed 2014 *Tippin' Point* EP and from new sessions, is hands-down his most dynamic record.

Smith's confidence as a performer on the ridiculously vibrant country music live circuit also points to someone at the peak of his powers. That's saying something considering that the platinum-selling singer/songwriter has already ratcheted up accolades including but not limited to five 2013 CCMA Award nominations and a 2013 JUNO Award nomination for Country Album of the Year.

Oh, and did we mention that before emerging as a country star to reckon with, the B.C.-based Smith served as howler-in-chief with gazillion-selling rock brawlers Default (see 2001's smash hit, 'Wasting My Time.') Yup, if Smith hasn't already got the words "boundlessly versatile and amazingly talented" scripted somewhere on his heavily inked bod, he could rightly do so, although he's far too modest to cop to that reality.

"With this record, the main thing was of course to record the best songs possible," Smith says of tracks crafted by hit-makers including Brian Kelley and Tyler Hubbard of Florida Georgia Line and Jaren Johnston of the Cadillac Three. "But I also really wanted to take the EP we had and create a full-length record that had a lot of variety... little bits of all the influences I have.

"Compared to my first record (2012's *Jumped Right In*), *Lifted* is like night and day. We took different approaches with my voice and there are different layers here. We also took the production further." Thanks for the last bit goes to songwriter/producer Joey Moi, who brought similar flair to the *Tippin' Point* EP and Smith's before-mentioned debut.

"Joe has a knack for knowing when a song is right," Smith confirms. "And his work ethic is second to none. He makes me dig in to make the vocal takes better and better. As frustrating as it can be at the time," he chuckles, "I am always amazed when I look back. Joe always makes me proud of what I have done."

Of course, long-time partners Smith and Moi had heaps of outstanding material to work with when approaching *Lifted*, which was variously cut in Nashville and Canada in the fall of 2014. As Smith explains, his association with the celebrated Big Loud Mountain label and Big Loud Shirt music publishing company gave him access to some of the best songwriters scribbling in Music City plus dibs on their newest work.

"Rodney Clawson was heavily involved in this record again," Smith says, "Jaren Johnston and of course Joey Moi. And there are some new guys. Matt Dragstrem is a fresh face in the Big Loud Shirt camp and he co-wrote 'Wastin' Gas.'"

Ask Smith what criteria he looks for when choosing songs and he pauses thoughtfully. “There are a million things. There has to be an interesting melody and I need to be challenged vocally.

“I wanted this record to be really dynamic – more so than anything I have done in the past - so with song selection, I wanted breadth, not a bunch of songs drawn from the same bucket. So there are a couple of ballads and a couple of really straight-ahead fun songs and a few that are lyrically more grown-up sounding.”

There were also challenges to be surmounted. For instance, Smith feared the song ‘Thinkin’ ‘Bout You’ – with its punchy, mouthful chorus – would be a recording nightmare. In fact, “It was the easiest song on the record. I banged that off in a couple of passes.”

By contrast, ‘Just Say When’ seems like a straightforward mid-tempo country/pop love song. “And I thought it was going to be easy for me to sing. Unfortunately, it was not,” Smith laughs. “We had to mess around with the key a little bit, and it was really hard to match the magic in the demo. You just never know how things are going to shape up until you get in there and start recording.”

At the other end of the spectrum is the rowdy slice-of-life vignette ‘Cheap Seats,’ soon to be a much-requested staple of contemporary country radio and possibly the only song to utterly nail the concert experience in a few vivid verses.

“The demo for that song was actually sung by Sarah Buxton who wrote it,” Smith explains. “So it was interesting to take a song demoed with a female voice and translate it to what I do. But as soon as I heard it, I knew I had to cut that song before anyone else could get a chance.”

Smith admits that while he anticipated some backlash for pursuing a country career post-rock – “Mostly because people warned me that might happen,” he says – so far he has felt nothing but encouragement from country radio, the country establishment and, most importantly, from fans. Still, country music has challenged Smith in an area he thought he knew stone-cold: singing on stage before an audience.

“Performance was something I had to figure out with my first record,” he says. “I had never played for a country crowd. For the first batch of shows, I was kind of anchored with an acoustic guitar and I didn’t know if what I did live was going to fly. But it helped watching other country artists – Jason Aldean, Eric Church, Jake Owen, Tim McGraw. I mean, those guys are putting on rock shows.

“With Default, it was four guys in one band and I happened to be singing. Now, it’s my name on the ticket and my name on the backdrop. The focus is on me, so I’ve had to really push myself to evolve and more forward as an entertainer. And now I have a much better grasp of what I am going to present.”