

Dean Brody / Gypsy Road

He's far too humble to admit it, but this is a pretty sweet time to be walking in Dean Brody's boots. You might say our man is having his moment.

Take *Gypsy Road*, the country singer/songwriter's just-released album. It's easily his most winning and original collection of songs, a fact confirmed by the rollicking, sun-drenched first single, 'Upside Down.' Fitting for a guy already possessed of a boatload of CCMA and JUNO Awards including twin 2014 Country Album of the Year prizes for his fourth disc, *Crop Circles*.

With *Gypsy Road*, Brody has corralled his various – and highly varied - songwriting inspirations while fearlessly stretching himself as both a storyteller and a musician. And he did it... while playing the ukulele. Well, part of the time anyway.

"'Upside Down' as well as the song 'Monterey' were written on a ukulele," Brody offers, adding that the tender-hearted but scorching 'Love Would Be Enough' was sketched out on a banjo instead of his usual guitar. Banjo brings the twang elsewhere on the album, notably on the propulsive corker 'Bringing Down the House.'

Brody continues: "I have instruments all over the place and I like noodling on things. I learned three chords on the ukulele and wanted to try and write something.

"I think it really helped take 'Upside Down' into a more playful, summery place. You can't write a ballad on a ukulele," he laughs, adding that the song's hippie protagonists were inspired by a real-life (and thigh-slapping) Florida road trip encounter.

Typically for Brody, *Gypsy Road* covers huge emotional terrain. Witness the plaintive 'Footprints of a Giant,' galvanized by the 2014 shooting of 24-year-old Corporal Nathan Cirillo as he stood guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Ottawa's National War Memorial, leaving behind a five-year-old son.

"I was in Nashville at the time and I was kind of emotional. I have two kids and you just can't help but think how hard that would be for his son to be without his father, his hero."

By contrast, there is the do-si-do swagger and unabashed hayseed cheek of 'Hillbilly' and the palpable, possibly obsessive longing of 'Sweet Lola,' which situates its knock-kneed protagonist (of all places) behind bars in a Mexican jail. (Brody bills the song as a sequel of sorts to *Crop Circles*' chart-topping 'Bounty.')

The cohesive link throughout is Brody's innate ability to tell stories that resonate emotionally as well as musically, creating vivid characters that scan as real people. "It's funny but I can't really write for more than an hour at a time," he says. "After that I start to lose perspective.

"A lot of my songwriting comes out of editing. I'll write something, then walk away from it and do something else and then keep coming back to it.

"Mountains and the ocean come up a lot," Brody continues. "I grew up by the mountains in B.C. and live by the ocean in Nova Scotia. And I find both places equally inspiring."

Nashville, too, is a key part of *Gypsy Road's* – and Brody's – back story. It was in Music City with long-time producer Matt Rovey (see also 2010's *Trail in Life*, 2012's *Dirt* and 2013's above-mentioned *Crop Circles*) and an ace team of session hands that the new album coalesced.

“Matt has always been a great sounding board for what I write. And one of his gifts is his demeanour in the studio – very calm. He has a great rapport with musicians which makes them feel comfortable experimenting with different things. There’s a trust there between him and the players.”

Nashville is also where some of Brody’s best and most challenging experiences building a career over the past decade have transpired: best because... Nashville! And toughest because of vexing immigration and record label woes, luckily both distant memories today.

If there’s one thing Brody knows for sure, it’s that chasing a dream can pay huge dividends if you flatly refuse to compromise. Plucking a ukulele now and then doesn’t hurt, either.

“There was a point in my career where it seemed like I had invested what might have been wasted time chasing a dream,” Brody offers with trademark candour. “While all my friends were in their nice suburban homes and driving their two vehicles, my family and I were still eating macaroni and living off credit cards.

“Now, we have an amazing place on the ocean right around the corner from the house we rented when we first came back to Canada after I opted out of a record deal because of the way I was being treated. Sometimes I look at that house, which is so full of memories, and think ‘Wow. This dream actually happened. All those dark, hard times were worth it.’”

Heady stuff. Yet ask Brody if the stakes for success feel higher now with album number five – or maybe lower since there’s nothing left to prove – and he doesn’t skip a beat.

“I always think I have something to prove. I really want to give my fans and radio the best music I can. And because the landscape is changing so much and so rapidly in the country genre, I’m never comfortable just relaxing.

“I am constantly trying to say what I want to say while trying to tell other people’s stories. For me, music is about sharing. And part of sharing is remaining relevant and writing things that connect with people. Otherwise, I might as well just stay home and play in my kitchen.”