Slow Down in Oklahoma

Shawna Russell

By Jan Sikes

Shawna Russell and her family have been making music in the great State of Oklahoma since she can remember. Born in Holdenville, Okla., and raised for most of her life in Woody Guthrie’s hometown of Okemah, Okla., her roots run deep.

Born in 1978, growing up she never really made the connection between Okemah and Woody Guthrie until she was old enough to realize there was a huge folk festival that drew people from all around the world each year in his honor.

Then, the importance of the town grew. That monumental festival will take place July 12-16 this year. So, if you’re anywhere near Okemah, this four-day event is well worth attending. You can see the entire music lineup and schedule at http://www.woodyfest.com.

Russell first sang in public at the age of seven. At the age of thirteen, she and her dad formed a band and then at the age of seventeen, she joined her uncle’s band and has been going strong ever since, eventually forming her own group.

Her first new music release in six years, Russell has recently recorded “BackAround.” It is a collection of seven songs she wrote or co-wrote with her dad and guitarist, Keith Russell, and her uncle, Tim Russell, who also plays bass in her band, “The Ranch Hands.”

In a recent interview, she openly shared her thoughts on this new album, family involvement and a television music show broadcast that she and her family produce.

“This [extended play] is very special,” Russell explained. “It’s been a long time in the making. You never want to have that long of a time in between projects, but sometimes life just gets in the way and throws you curve balls, and you simply find your way around them. So, we thought that the title was not just a great title for one of the songs on the album, but appropriate because we were bringing my music back around to the people as well.”

The eye-catching cover of this extended play (EP) looks like a fine piece of tooled leather that begs to be touched and was designed by Keith Whitfield at Aartvark Graphic Design, LLC.

“The tooled leather look was what we were going for on the cover,” she added. “To me, it represents an art form much like creating music. I write a lot of songs with my dad and uncle, but I also have songs on this album that I wrote by myself. I’m a fairly new songwriter, so it’s always special to me to be able to get my ideas out there on my own and not just have a collaboration, which is also great.”

When you listen to this EP, you’ll notice that none of the songs sound alike, with the exception of Russell’s rich powerhouse voice.

“There is a little bit of everything on this EP,” she said. “I’m one of those artists who is hard
Russell
to pin down to a specific style because I tend to vacillate from California Country to Southern Rock.”

The family theme runs deep through Russell’s music and her life.

“My dad, my uncle and I have been traveling and playing music together since I was seventeen,” Russell explained. “Actually, my dad and uncle are celebrating their 50th year of playing music together. It’s very special to have that kind of connection with your family and create this musical tradition with them.

“It’s something that will stand the test of time. People will be able to listen to this for years to come and hopefully feel the connection we have with one another and with the music. That was what I wanted when I tackled this project.”

The seven tracks on this CD are as unique as their creators. The title track, “BackAround” tells of a teen girl in the ’70s searching for worldly freedom, but following love back home. It is the quintessential tale of wanderlust and the undeniable urge to return home to the love of family.

When Russell recorded her first project, “Goddess,” in 2008, drummer Russ Kunkel played on the session. Kunkel is well known for his work with legends James Taylor and Jackson Browne. It was during this session Russ made the statement that he might someday “retire and slow down in a place like Oklahoma.”

A far cry from the busy streets of Los Angeles, it appealed to him. It was from this line that Russell and her uncle, Tim, wrote the song, “Slow Down in Oklahoma.” There is much to be said for a slower lifestyle.

“Learn to Live Again” is a song that will speak to anyone trying to make a new start. Russell rocks out on this, but her vocals shine and the message of falling into darkness and trying to find the light and strength to get up and live again come through loud and clear.

The dust bowl has been written about and sung about for many years, but not in the way Russell tells it in “No More Water.” It speaks about a betrayal of the worst kind during a critical time.

This EP is music that stays true to her Oklahoma roots and takes you on a journey through a myriad of emotions found in the words and music arrangements of these songs.

But, the family’s involvement in producing and promoting music on a grand scale doesn’t stop there. The Russell family created a music show on The Country Network (TCN) spotlighting Americana, Texas and Red Dirt music artists. The show is available in nearly 50 million households via DTV, cable networks, ROKU and online streaming.

“The show is called ‘Our Land–The Music Highway’ and is a monthly special that features different artists,” she explained. “I usually interview the artists and then have them perform and then I also perform with my family band. It’s a great spotlight for genres of music that get overlooked on some of the other national television shows. It was our desire to help promote these talented artists. That prompted us to create this show.”

New episodes air every second Saturday of the month and repeat throughout the month. Check your local guide for show times.

So, folks in Oklahoma, if you aren’t already, get acquainted with this musical family and tune into the show.

If you’d like to see Russell in a live performance, her entire touring schedule can be found at www.RussellRussell.com.