



# Thank God I'm A Country Boy

Love him or hate him (and he's often provoked those kind of extremes), it would be a brave person indeed who dismisses Ryan Adams as talentless. *TotalMusic* digs into the past of the awkward alt-country bad boy and gets some insights into his latest – and arguably greatest – album, *Love Is Hell*...

An untidy mix of singer/songwriter, garage punk and alt-country rocker, Ryan Adams is nothing if not stylistically diverse. Citing influences as wide-ranging as Loretta Lynn, Hüsker Dü, Merle Haggard and, erm, Dokken, the man refuses to be pigeonholed and has, on more than one occasion, found his scattergun approach to recording and interviews leaving fans confused and peers aggravated (he once famously referred to White Stripe Jack White as a "little girl" and a "fucking ponce"). He may well be his own worst enemy but, on the evidence of his latest album, *Love Is Hell*, he is also a quite remarkably talented songwriter and performer.

Born in Jacksonville, NC, in 1974 he grew up with country music as a major part of his family's musical diet. However, in his early teens he developed a taste for punk-rock and began playing electric guitar and writing songs, and by the time he was 16 he had formed a band called the Patty Duke Syndrome. Then, in 1994, he formed Whiskeytown with guitarist Phil Wandscher and violinist Caitlin Cary (bass player Steve Grothman and drummer Eric Gilmore completed the line-up), releasing their first album, *Faithless Street*, on the local Mood Food label. Attracting the attention of the Geffen-linked Outpost Records the band then released *Stranger's Almanac*, but were becoming increasingly shambolic live (an audience patience-trying affliction that still occasionally affect Adams today). After recording final album *Pneumonia* – which was shelved when Geffen was swallowed by Universal – Whiskeytown quietly called it quits and Adams set about launching his solo career with the very well received *Heartbreaker* on Bloodshot Records. Follow-up hit *Gold* was then released by Universal (ironically enough as they were the label that shelved his old band's final album, only to release it after the solo Adams started shifting CDs in a major way) and the rest is history.

## CHELSEA HOTEL

All of which brings us bang up to date with Adams, contrary as ever, receiving far more positive press for *Love Is Hell*, an album his label Lost Highway initially refused to release as they thought it unformed and unrepresentative, and sent Adams back to knock out the far less

impressive, if more upbeat, *Rock N Roll* instead. A very, very distant cousin to his massive 'pop' hit, *Gold*, *Love Is Hell* apparently grew out of Adams's transient lifestyle.

"I was living out in Los Angeles and had finished *Gold*, and I just kinda never checked out of my hotel," he recalls. "I just stayed. I just got lost maintaining this decadent lifestyle. [Then] I went to New York and met a nice gal and she thought it was bad that I was truly being a transient, so she convinced me to at least stay at the Chelsea Hotel, because you can rent the rooms month to month if you like, and it's an easy place to have a residence, you know. Then we split up – I think it was because I played 'old people music' as she put it, which I thought was really funny as she liked heavy metal. And I'm like, 'Well, that's just the blues turned up very loud', but whatever, that's a totally different discussion."

*"I didn't move there for the decadence or for anything but I probably had the most decadent Dionysian nights in my entire life in [the Chelsea] hotel. There were weeks where I didn't see the sun"*

There are several references to the Chelsea on the album, especially on 'Hotel Chelsea Nights'.

"I just remember that song was like being in the Chelsea. There's another reference to the Hotel in 'City Rain, City Streets.' (Sings) "In my city bed out of my fucking head. Is it snowing in space?" You just can't live at the Chelsea Hotel and not do some blow or drugs or pills. And I had many strange evenings living there, but a good time, too. I didn't move there for the decadence or for anything but I probably had the most decadent Dionysian nights in my entire life in that hotel. There were weeks where I didn't see the sun. Also, Chelsea Guitars is where I get pretty much all my guitars – Stanley's Chelsea Guitars is next door."

## ENGLISH GIRLS ARE MEAN

Obviously a very personal record, *Love Is Hell* features some of Adams's most beautiful songs, including the doleful 'Thank You Louise'.

"I like that one because it has the set-up of the old woman. You almost get the sense of her being

a martyr and being completely sympathetic to her character, but by the last line you realise that she had fucked up her entire family and one of her three children kills himself. [In fact] it was loosely based on...at the time I was very suicidal and it was based on my mother. Because I am the youngest boy with a sister and a brother, and I was the one that kills myself in the song. I am in every song on that record. All the characters who are not presented as me are me in a weird kind of way. Even in 'House For Sale', I imagine myself as the woman character who doesn't know she's already dead, because that is how I felt. Sometimes it's like storytelling with abstract reasoning involved. I get to torture myself through these different characters, you know."

So is 'English Girls Approximately' about anyone in particular, or is it simply one of your offbeat in-character songs?

"No, no, no. It's about somebody. Take a guess whom. The answer is readily available to you. You just have to think about it for a couple of minutes. I don't think it would be fair to tell you... Oh, I guess it doesn't really matter... Does it matter? Do I say or don't I say?" Needless to say, he doesn't, but continues to drop hints. "In this song, my relationship fused out in this really dramatic way with this person whom I admire and who's a songwriter. We don't speak anymore and it's like a letter to this person. It's like you're reading someone else's diary and maybe some of the lines correlate to other people where they can also feel something for the song, like a lost lover or something, you know. And I like the idea of having a song saying that English girls are mean. Not to generalise, but truly they are!"

What a charmer! Ryan Adams is still cheerfully plunging his foot into his mouth on a regular basis, but regardless of these wayward instincts, he remains a prodigiously talented songwriter and, in *Love Is Hell*, has released one of the albums of the year.

## Love Is Hell

is out now on Lost Highway.

