

The Alt-Country Star Next Door

BY ROBERT WHITESCARVER
PHOTOS BY WENDY REDFERN

“Over there, that’s the cow that sits on her haunches like a dog,” Scott Miller says as we ride through one of the pastures on his farm in Swoope, Virginia, a farming community about ten miles west of Staunton.

I’ve never seen a cow sit. As far as I know, cows only have two positions: upright and laying down. But there she is—this Angus cow sitting on her butt with her front legs propped in front of her, not unlike a golden retriever casually surveying birds in a back yard. This canine wannabe chews her cud and gazes out over the luscious green pasture. I take out my phone and snap a picture. She’s the stand out in a herd of sixty.

We are on the highest hill in Swoope. It’s called Swoope Hill. And it’s windy. The farm name is Windy Hill.

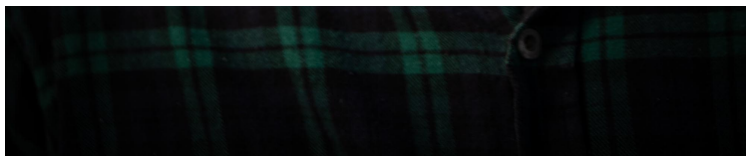
“I love this place,” Scott says looking north as we drive down the big hill on his 200-

acre farm. “Just look what I have.” The view is spectacular with a wide expanse of rolling hills with green pastures framed by the steep, smoky-blue Allegheny Mountains in the distance.

“That’s Buffalo Gap,” he says, pointing to the huge vent through Little North Mountain. Eastern Bison, now extinct, used to come through that gap to graze on the vast grasslands of this valley.

Although Scott Miller, 50, could pass for any muck boot and Carhartt wearing farmer around here, there’s a lot more to him than meets the eye.





Scott is an accomplished and well-known singer songwriter who just happens to have twelve albums under his belt. His old band, an alt country act called The V-Roys based out of Knoxville, Tennessee (voted the town's "Best Band Ever") was signed onto Steve Earle's label, E-Squared Records back in the 90s. The V-Roys once played with Earle on the Conan O'Brien Show. Scott has had a big influence on what alt-country has become today. His style is raucous and smart. Just last year, Miller was inducted into the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame for his song writing chops (just for pedigree comparison, novelist Cormac McCarthy is a fellow inductee).

But the first time I met Scott, I didn't know any of this. I didn't realize an acolyte of Steve Earle operates the farm just down the road from my wife's farm. Scott was sprawled out on a couch in front of the fire at the tail end of a neighbor's party. The host brought out his dobro and asked Scott if he would play a guitar with him.

I don't think Scott really wanted to play. He was tired. It would be like asking your accountant friend to look at your taxes late at night after the party was over.

The host handed him a guitar. Lying on the couch with a guitar across his stomach and a pick between his fingers, Scott deftly performed a bit of magic. Everyone assembled sat up straighter. Surprise! Scott made those strings sing out an upbeat tempo that made us snap our fingers and clap our hands.

Time Bomb

Months later Scott played the Mockingbird in Staunton. I think every person in Swoope was there, including his parents. The place was packed.

Piercing satire and witty humor filled the restaurant with truth-stories of Appalachia, love, suicide, power, and...mothers-in-law. One upbeat ditty described his own mother-in-law opening her pocketbook in the restaurant and stuffing it with the sugar packets from the table.

The anecdote reminds me of the cow that sits like a dog. Scott Miller is an observer. He notices things—absurdities, weird details—that others don't always see right away. An element of surprise is imbued in his music. Each of his songs contain a nugget of the unexpected. He calls these lyrical surprises "time bombs." You're listening to the words and enjoying the beat when suddenly a surprise hits you—bam! Time bomb!

His latest album, *Ladies Auxiliary*, features a seven member all ladies band except for Scott. The title itself is a time bomb. Another joke. It wasn't an all-female band by design, it just turned out that way.

There's a slap-your-knee funny song titled "Get Along, Everybody." It is a fast-paced satire on being politically correct. The opening line is a time bomb for the non-faint of heart: *"Well, I'm proud to be a gay, Shiite Muslim, Nazi, steel-worker, Jew for Jesus. You better be careful what you say around me."*

"Lo Ciento's" time bomb comes at the end when you realize the downtrodden town of Spanishburg, West Virginia lost its soul to money after a wave of wealthy retiree transplants descended from DC.

His songs are steeped in American history and reveal hidden truths. Some are about love, some are about the land. Some are a combination of the two. "My songs go from point A to B to tell a story and evoke an emotion, that's what I try to do," he says.

"Dolly Wilson's poison love, here I come again," is a line in the song, "Ten Miles Down the Nine Mile Road." It's a song rooted in the Shenandoah Valley and tells about Dolly's brothers who farmed the land *"to the ground, 'til nothing there would grow..."*



Early Music Career

Scott's music career began when he wrote songs during classes at The College of William & Mary. He graduated in 1990 with degrees in American History and Soviet Studies.

"I flushed all that down the toilet and went to Knoxville to play music," he says, adding, "I've played in every state except Alaska and Hawaii. I've played in every venue from caves to the Ryman Auditorium."

"Ryman Auditorium, isn't that where the Grand Ole Opry played?" I ask.

"Yes, that's one of the places where the Grand Ole Opry took place, but I didn't play in it and don't put that in your article. They will sue me," he jests.

I visit Scott at his temporary writing studio. He rents a place every winter somewhere in Swoope to focus on writing—a hideout if you will, to escape from family, friends, the farm, and nosy question askers like me.

I look at his guitar and wonder if he has a name for it like B.B. King's Lucille.

"You got a name for your guitar?" I ask.

"Yeah, I call her the Messenger," he says. "But it doesn't have a pedigree. I look at guitars like I do my calves. They have to work."

I look around his workspace and notice two antique typewriters. "Oh, you collect typewriters?" I ask.

"That's what I use to write my songs," he says. "This one's a 1905 Underwriter Standard No. 5. It was my great-grandfather's. The other one was my grandmother's."

Why old typewriters?

"I found them in the basement of my parents' house and I fell in love them. I like to be able touch my past."

On the table, next to the antique typewriter are his works in progress—typed papers with annotations in different colored

inks. His songs might be full of witty time bombs but his writing process is clearly serious.

Coming Back Home

In 2010, Scott left his full-time Knoxville music scene to come back to the rolling hills of Swoope to take care of his aging parents and take over the farm. His wife Thea Miller, an interior designer and horse enthusiast, was onboard.

“It’s just what you do when the time comes and there is peace in that,” he says.

He’s now farming...and doing his music. “Two good ways to lose money,” he chuckles.

“Business wise, they are both the same. You are never going to get rich but both support a way of life.”

Scott operates his family’s cow-calf operation. That’s the bulk of the beef cattle business here in the Shenandoah Valley. There are more beef calves born here than anywhere in Virginia. Here’s the simplistic plan: cow has sex with a bull. Cow has calf. Cow raises calf on her milk and farmer’s grass. Calf grows up. Farmer sells calf. Repeat, each year for each cow. It’s a lot more complicated than that but that’s basically the cow-calf business.

Scott and his family are into soil and

water conservation, which is another reason why I like Scott—so am I. I worked with his father decades ago to fence their cattle out of Back Creek. When Scott took over the farm he enrolled in the U.S.D.A.'s Environmental Quality Incentives Program to put in two cattle watering stations for rotational grazing.

“I had grass in February!” he exclaims. It is a thing of beauty for a farmer to have lush green grass in February.

He also fenced the cows out of most of their woods. “I got tired of chasing cows and calves out of there and they eat the acorns and get sick. And besides, trees grow faster when their roots aren’t trampled by the bovines,” he says.

Where To Next

Locally, Scott has played the Red Wing Roots Festival, Oak Grove Music Festival, the Wayne Theatre in Waynesboro, and the Jefferson Theatre in Charlottesville. His April show at the Jefferson sold out.

This summer, Scott is taking it easy on the music front so he can focus on farming (summer is farming’s busy season). But come fall, he plans to hit the road again with the ladies of the *Ladies Auxiliary*: Bryn Davies (bass), Rayna Geller (fiddle/banjo), Jen Gunderman (keys), Deanie Richardson

(fiddle), Megan Carchman (drums) and guitarist Anne McCue who also produced the album.

“I’ve toured with guys in vans and buses and I can tell you that the ladies have been the most vulgar, by far,” he says.

They’ll be playing in Lebanon, Virginia on August 24 and the Wayne Theatre in Waynesboro on November 9.

I might take in a show or two, but no matter how big and famous he gets, Scott will always be a neighbor to me—a neighbor with impressive guitar skills and an unending arsenal of time bombs. People like him help make my little corner of the Valley what it is.

Just the other day, I passed him on the road after feeding cattle and asked him how his folks were.

“Upright and regular,” he said.

Upright and regular. Sounds to me like another time bomb, but I can’t really say for sure.



NEXT

One to Watch

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