

Who is Robert Ellis? At first glance, he's simply a smiling, longhaired, twenty-two-year old in a hand-stitched western shirt and Dwight Yoakam-tight blue jeans. But there's more to this youthful Houston, Texas native than meets the eye. The New York Times recently proclaimed that Ellis sounds "equally inspired by Jackson Browne and George Jones." Not a bad reference point for an artist his age. Ellis cut his teeth performing the songs of similar luminaries around town, most notably at the neighborhood beacon, Fitzgerald's. His "Whiskey Wednesdays" at that club are regularly packed with punkish newcomers and graying locals sharing a mutual interest in artists ranging from Ray Price to Buck Owens to George Jones. Ellis has songwriting ability equal to his encyclopedic knowledge of these greats and it shines on his upcoming New West Records debut, *Photographs*, due this July. The young songwriter's second release is an impressive and diverse concept album split between five breathtaking folk songs and five soon-to-be country standards. Listening to *Photographs*, one finds it difficult to pigeonhole Robert Ellis. It's even harder to remember that he's barely just begun. So, rather than have us try to crack the code of this talented young troubadour, we figured we'd let Ellis tell you about himself.

On Growing Up with Country Music

I've listened to country music since I was a little kid. I grew up south of Houston and it's a pretty common thing here. I was raised going to bluegrass festivals and I think that had a lot to do with it. It was just country and bluegrass music. It's always been what my role models listened to.

On His "Whiskey Wednesdays"

Well we just started playing this Wednesday thing, doing all 70s and earlier classic country. Just having a good time every week and a lot of people started coming out and dancing. It was kind of just this drunken, fun time that snowballed into this big event.

It's a weird cross section of people. It's not like a country crowd by any means. It's everybody. It's older country listeners and young, punk kids- every race and denomination of people. It's really great.

On His Band

We kind of just magnetized towards each other. I first met Will, the pedal steel player. He was the first one I started playing with and I happened to go to one of his shows at this little candy store where he was playing banjo with this other guy, Lucas. I was like, 'Man, you guys should come over to the house after and we'll play a little bluegrass.' He's like, 'Yea, I love bluegrass.' That night we hung out and pretty much have hung out every day since then. And then the other guys...it kind of just all magically happened at one time. Geoffrey [bass], Ryan Chavez [drums], and Kelly Doyle, the guitar player. Everyone in the band is such a good musician. I don't know how it happened the way it did.

On Photographs

I came up with the concept before I came up with any of the songs, actually. I'd written a couple of the songs, but I hadn't written any of the 'B Side' stuff. I'd only written a couple of the 'A Side' songs. That was right around the same time that we started doing our Wednesday country music thing. I had that other record out and I was kind of thinking about what to do with this record. The band had just formed, but with the last record I was really, really happy with the way I made it. Which was just me, mad scientist, with an engineer, doing everything myself. I tracked the guitar and voice parts live and then added really minimal instrumentation. Most of the music that I listen to outside of the classic country genre is really minimal stuff—minimal and to the point without many bells and whistles.

So I wanted to still do that, but I also wanted to make a record with this band. So rather than make two records, I figured this might be the best of both worlds. The 'A side' stuff is definitely country, but in a different way. The 'B side' stuff is totally throwback country stuff, but the focus is still the songs. And that's the common thread between both sides. They're all songs. They're all uniquely ours. They just have a little bit of a different treatment on them, you know?

On meeting George Fontaine, Sr., President of New West Records

He bought my record at Cactus Records—my first record. And then, he was going to see the Wild Moccasins at one of their shows and walked inside and I was playing a little acoustic set as part of a New Year's festival. He stopped and watched me. I don't think I met him that night, but maybe a week later I was shopping for records at Cactus and he approached me and introduced himself. We started talking and developed a little bit of a relationship. It was totally random chance. Around the same time that I met him, I had been furiously e-mailing labels. All of them, New West included. I told him I hadn't heard back from New West, and he replied, "Well, now you have!"

On How He Views His Music Relative to the World of Pop Country

A long time ago I stopped really caring what was on that side of the music world. What people consider country music now is so far removed from what we're doing. I don't really pay attention to it. What we're doing is trying to write good songs--make them sound pretty. Obviously we listen to classic, "real" country music and that comes through in our sound. Today's popular country sounds to me like whitewashed, regurgitated, mediocre 70's rock and roll with a southern tinge to the vocals.