

Graham Colton

Lonely Ones

“I’m not the same guy.”

That’s certainly an understatement for Graham Colton. After a major label career, numerous TV appearances and the limiting musical peg of “singer-songwriter,” Colton has gone through a complete reinvention on his new album *Lonely Ones*.

Credit his reinvention to a few things: Colton’s return to the Oklahoma music scene; a budding friendship with the Flaming Lips; and for his new record, an entirely new approach to songwriting.

Colton’s return to Oklahoma may come as a surprise. The singer admits he initially had to leave his home state to find his footing as a musician. “My dad was in a cover band, but besides that and some open mic nights, I wasn’t exposed to any sort of ‘scene,’” he admits. “I’d just sit around writing songs in my bedroom. It wasn’t until I moved to Dallas that my professional career in music started.”

And while that early career led to success — major label albums (*Drive* and *Here Right Now*), performances on *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*, videos on TRL, tours with everyone from John Mayer to Dave Matthews Band to Maroon Five — there were tradeoffs. A little stifled creativity. The musical designation of being a singer-songwriter, a genre not known for taking risks.

Things changed after Colton’s move back home. There, he met his wife, and re-discovered a thriving music scene...which included a creative friendship with Wayne Coyne of the Flaming Lips. “Oklahoma has a tremendously active music community,” says Colton. “Wayne and I met at a few functions and hit it off. I started chatting about my past, what the Lips had done, and having these really long, crazy music conversations. Everything really graduated from there.”

Inspired, Colton decided a complete reinvention was in order. “I didn’t have a starting point for this,” he admits. “But I knew I had to grow and do things differently than I had done before.” Eschewing labels, he turned to Kickstarter to connect directly with fans. “I couldn’t do it like I’d done my last two records [2008’s *Twenty Something* and 2010’s *Pacific Coast Eyes*]. I wanted to work with some good friends [longtime collaborators Chad Copelin and Jarod Evans] and record in good studios. This was going to be a record where I wanted the freedom to do something new, without any parameters.”

Now reconnected with Copelin and Evans and ensconced with his family back in Oklahoma, Colton felt comfortable taking chances. And working closely alongside Coyne and Steven Drozd of the Flaming Lips certainly helped radicalize his recording process. “It was completely unlike anything I’d ever done,” says the singer. “It wasn’t a Flaming Lips record, but I borrowed some gear from them and used those guys as a sounding board.”

Instead of writing an acoustic song and having his band flesh it out, Colton took the opposite tack: he *never* wrote on guitar. “Guitars became an accent, not the cornerstone,” he says. He would try out scenarios where Copelin and Evans would make sounds in one end of the studio, and he’d begin writing from there. And the singer would spend hours just “twisting knobs and pushing buttons,” both Chad & Jarod’s Blackwatch Studios in Norman, OK and the legendary Sonic Ranch studios in Tornillo, TX, home to some of Colton’s favorite bands (Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Beach House, Bright Eyes)

“The point was to make me the most uncomfortable,” he says, laughing. “I had to unlearn everything from 12 years. It was amazing and humbling at the same time.”

Lyrically, Colton found the shift liberating. “I had been an autobiographical storyteller,” he says. “I love that, but this was the polar opposite. The sounds made me think different things. I mean, I’m married with a kid and live back home...I wasn’t writing love songs. It was freeing: I didn’t feel the need to be real direct. This time, I wrote visually.”

The result, *Lonely Ones*, is a lyrically desolate album — dark at times, open to interpretation at others. And there are moments when Colton’s voice works as more of an accent to the song, rather than the focal point. “It needed to be another instrument,” he says. “As a singer-songwriter all you have is your voice and your lyrics. I could let that go here.”

The biggest example of change comes from the first single, “Born to Raise Hell,” an initially upbeat psychedelic rocker full of “la la las” and whistles that disguises a rather gruesome subject matter: a story about a hitchhiker who turned out to be a famous serial killer. “The guy, Richard Speck, was in the car with Chad Copelin’s dad,” says Colton. “He had a big tattoo on his forearm that said ‘Born to Raise Hell.’ Once I heard that story, I was like, I *have* to write about that.”

Musically, *Lonely Ones* runs a wide gamut, veering from synths to guitars to strings, full of psychedelic flourishes and big production. But at its heart: a real sense of melody and plenty of choruses to wrap your head around. Think of it as catchy, thoughtful headphone music.

When Colton takes to the road this winter, he’ll face his next challenge: turning his bold new music into something equally as bold in a live setting. “I’ve been doing a lot of solo acoustic before this, and that won’t happen,” he says. “It’s a full band, and there may even be moments where I don’t play guitar. These aren’t songs you strum along to.”

He adds: “Just like the record, I’m prepared to unlearn my live experience. I’m just really excited to begin everything again.”