

Steve Moakler has been making a name for himself in Nashville for 10 years now—and on his new album, he's returning to his roots in Western Pennsylvania.

*Steel Town* is a country record, but the stories it tells and the characters it elevates are very much rooted in Pittsburgh—the Steel City—and its surrounding areas. For Moakler, this homecoming is paired with a liberation, one where his songwriting and his performing are a full reconciliation of who he is. "I've had the title *Steel Town* in my head for a long time. But I've been very intimidated; where I'm from means so much to me, and there's a lot of pride in Pittsburgh and in the Rust Belt. I wanted to honor that.

"This is my fourth album, but it feels like in a lot of ways, it's the first time I'm ever going back and talking about the earlier chapters of my life and where I'm from."

With songs like the easygoing country-radio hit "Suitcase," which revels in love's ability to open up one's appreciation of life's simpler pleasures, and the crackling barroom singalong "Love Drunk," *Steel Town* represents a performer and songwriter who's coming into his own.

Moakler moved to Nashville in the mid-2000s and has released three albums on his own. But it was penning songs for other artists—Dierks Bentley's "Riser," as well as tracks for Ashley Monroe and Kellie Pickler—that got him energized to create the songs that would make up *Steel Town*.

"There was a period of time when I was making my own independent records where I wasn't sure if I wanted to really pursue what we call in Nashville 'the artist route,'" he recalled. "So I said, 'I think I just want to write songs. I need to just take that pressure off and just fall back in love with writing music, because that's what's got me into this whole thing in the first place.' When I did that, I feel like all of a sudden, I started to love the songs I was writing more than ever before. I started to recognize my voice and realize what was unique about my style and my story."

Callbacks to Moakler's Western Pennsylvania roots are all over the album. The boisterous rocker "Siddle's Saloon" takes the listener right back to Moakler's grandfather's house, where his family would gather.

"'Siddle's Saloon' is inspired by my grandfather's bar in his basement. His nickname was Siddle (to this day we have no idea why), and he and his brothers had a concrete trucking company. He was just a good-timin', blue collar guy, and he loved bringing people together. So he bought an old actual bar, repainted it, and they got two kegerators in there, and he installed a booth and stools and all kinds of cool Pittsburgh memorabilia.

"It was the hang," Moakler says. "It was where he hung out with all the neighbors. My mom and her siblings hung out there when they were teenagers—that was where they partied. I have memories of sitting down there, watching Steelers games. My uncle bought the house, actually, and it's still there. It's kind of a family tradition—I just got a house, and I put a bar in my basement and remade the Siddle's Saloon sign, but put 'South' underneath it. It's a very special place. When someone says the word 'family,' that's where I see my family."

The expansive, slide-guitar-assisted "Wheels" offers a broader perspective on Moakler's journey, drawing parallels between the way life "don't slow down, the speed picks up" and the simple machine. Written with Caitlyn Smith and Gordie Sampson, "Wheels" seizes on specific imagery to create a universally relatable song—the country music ideal. "It was the

kind of song I always wanted to write," says Moakler. "We write heartbreak songs and love songs and hometown songs, and those are all great—they're really hard to write really well. But I think it's really cool that we could tell a story as big as life with one simple word."

*Steel Town* was produced by Luke Laird, a fellow native of western Pennsylvania. "I can't imagine making the record with somebody else," Moakler says of Laird, who co-wrote "Suitcase" (with Barry Dean and Thomas Rhett) and the ruminative "Just Long Enough." "Being from western Pennsylvania, Laird knew exactly what 'Steel Town' means. He was the perfect partner for the record."

That recognition of how much Moakler was influenced by his home is the product of being in Nashville for a decade, as well as the result of a keenly honed instinct about people and their relationships. Moakler's insight into not just himself, but the world at large, animates the songs on *Steel Town*, making it a fiercely personal project that will resonate far and wide.

"When I first came to Nashville, I wasn't thinking about where I was from—that didn't cross my mind," Moakler recalls. "All I was thinking about was where I was going. I think that's perfectly normal for an 18-year-old; you're running as fast as you can and ready to conquer the world."

"It's taken being this far into my life to really understand where I'm from, and how much I'm a product of it," says Moakler. "I don't think I could've written a record called *Steel Town* and understood what that meant right after I left. It's taken 10 years to appreciate where I'm from and to have been hundreds of other places and to realize what's so unique about my hometown. I left a long time ago, but they imparted all this stuff into me. And that's what I have to bring to the world."