

WHEELER WALKER JR.

In a now-classic scene from the 1976 Academy Award Winning film *Network*, newscaster Howard Beale screams into the television camera, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take it anymore!” Beale -- struggling with declining ratings and just learning that he was about to lose his job - decides to let loose on national television after declaring that “life is bullshit.”

But instead of getting him fired (Beale’s goal), the outburst causes a ratings spike, and Howard Beale becomes a national hero for angry and frustrated Americans.

Many have compared this scene to the career trajectory of the new king of country music, Wheeler Walker, Jr. Wheeler moved to Nashville in 2000, with dreams of Garth Brooks in his head, confident that his golden voice and poetic songs would make him an instant star. Unfortunately, as Howard Beale noted, life is bullshit.

Wheeler’s first album - the unfortunately titled “No Love For the City” (his ode to preferring country life over city living) - featured a picture of Wheeler giving a thumbs down in front of the World Trade Center. Although the album was full of hard-driving, hook-laden honky-tonk, the record was released on 9/11/01 and had to immediately be pulled from store shelves. Of course, this mishap was not Wheeler’s fault... but the next decade of missteps certainly were: sleeping with record company presidents’ wives, burning down the women’s restroom at the Grand Ole Opry, and getting dropped by label after label for refusing to censor his music.

And then, in 2015, Wheeler had his Howard Beale moment: “Who says you can’t curse on a country album?” Well, a lot of people, but fuck ‘em... so Wheeler reached out to his old Kentucky pal Sturgill Simpson for the name of a producer who would let him record his music the way he wanted to: Sturgill suggested Grammy award winner Dave Cobb, who produced Simpson’s first two albums. A friendship was born, and Wheeler emptied out his bank account, wrote a check to Cobb, and the rest is history.

To say Wheeler Walker, Jr. was mad as hell and wasn’t gonna take it anymore is an understatement. A decade of failure in country music (and life) made its way into every track of *Redneck Shit*. Assuming correctly that no label in Nashville would release it, Walker created his own label and distributed the album through Nashville’s Thirty Tigers.

What came next was the stuff of Nashville legend. With no songs that the FCC would even allow on US airwaves, the album debuted at #9 on the *Billboard* Country album charts. (Because of its filthy content, *Billboard* also categorized the record as a “comedy” album, which still upsets Wheeler to this day. Nevertheless, the album debuted at #1 on the *Billboard* Comedy Charts and ended up being the 2nd best-selling comedy album of 2016, even though Wheeler says, “This ain’t no fuckin’ comedy record... this is real life”).

Fans from across the country music spectrum flocked to Wheeler’s “don’t give a fuck” attitude. One of them - Nashville hitmaker Shane McAnally - even wrote a song with Wheeler for his follow-up.

Cut to 2017: With an army of Howard Beale-like fans, Wheeler is readying the release of his new record, *Ol’ Wheeler*, out into the world. In an age where the President of the United States is bragging about grabbing women by the pussy, can anyone really get mad about Wheeler bragging that he’s the “Pussy King?” (Apparently, yes).

The biggest story of *Ol’ Wheeler* is that everyone thought *Redneck Shit* was a one-note joke. But *Ol’ Wheeler* somehow manages to be even better than its predecessor. With more complex instrumentation - Cobb and the same backing band of session men from *Redneck Shit* are behind the new album - and more serious themes about life on the road and the expectations from being Nashville’s enemy number one, Wheeler has turned his life into filthy art. As he recently acknowledged to *Rolling Stone*, Wheeler is confident that his new record will “grab Nashville by the pussy.”

And yes, in case you were asking, the new album is just as dirty. But so is the world around him. And as stores and websites across the globe boycott the record, it only makes Wheeler bigger. He’s bringing a hip-hop attitude to country music. One of his friends even referred to him as “Kanye Twitty.”

So sure, go ahead and ignore him. But it will only make Wheeler - and his growing army of fans - even stronger. As he sings on “Poon,” the album’s closing track, “Fuck you Music City, want that sweet and pink and pretty, gimme that poon.” Or to put it more simply, Wheeler is ready to set fire to Music Row and fuck your wife while it burns.