

If there's a rulebook for country stardom — a how-to guide for performers looking to climb the charts, fill the arenas with fans, and build a legacy — Eric Church certainly hasn't read it. He's never been a big fan of rules, anyway. He'd rather chase down success on his own terms, taking the road less traveled.

"I'm a big believer that everything you do should always be a little different than what you've done before," says the songwriter, whose milestones include 10 chart-topping singles, five Platinum-selling albums, seven ACM Awards, four CMA trophies, and 10 GRAMMY nominations. In a genre built upon tradition, Church has become a new kind of country icon — one who still writes songs anchored by his southern roots, but regularly reaches far outside the genre's safety zone, too.

He hits a new peak with *Heart & Soul*, a collection of three albums created during a single month in the North Carolinian mountains. These 24 tracks capture Church at his very best, matching raw storytelling and climactic hooks with performances that blur the lines between country, soul, Bible Belt funk, and renegade rock & roll. Produced by longtime collaborator Jay Joyce and split into three separate records — *Heart*, *Soul*, and the six-track *&* — *Heart & Soul* is unlike any project in Church's catalog... which is exactly the way he likes it.

"The artists that I love are the ones who do something new with every album they make," he says. "They'll write from a different perspective or record in a different place. They'll do something that you don't see coming. That's what I've tried to do with every record."

Looking to throw themselves another curveball, Church and Joyce headed to the mountain town of Banner Elk, North Carolina, where they set up a makeshift recording studio in a restaurant that had closed its doors for the winter. They moved the tables out of the dining room. They turned the basement into a drum booth. They placed microphones around the premises to capture the unique acoustics of the restaurant's barn wood interior. And then, as the weather outside turned frigid, they got to work on *Heart & Soul*, bringing rotating groups of songwriters and instrumentalists to the compound every few days.

"I've always been intrigued when a song is born in a writer room, because there's a magic that happens there," says Church, who co-wrote *Heart & Soul*'s material with collaborators like Casey Beathard, Jeff Steele, Luke Dick, Jonathan Singleton, Michael Heeney, Luke Laird, Travis Meadows, Jeremy Spillman, Ryan Tyndell, Driver Williams, and Jeff Hyde. "I wanted to take that magic into the studio with us. So, every day, we would write a song in the morning and we would record the song that night. Doing it that way allowed for the songwriters to get involved in the studio process, and for the musicians to be involved in the creative process. You felt a little bit like you were secretly doing something that was special, and you knew it. You started going, 'Hmm, wait 'til the rest of the world finds out about this.'"

At the time, the rest of the world was slowly returning to work after the winter holidays. Up at the Banner Elk compound, though, Church and company were hitting their stride. They finished 24 songs in 28 days, from heartland anthems like "Heart on Fire" — whose greasy, southern stomp nods to Bob Seger and the Rolling Stones — to bare-boned ballads like "Lynyrd Skynyrd Jones." They wrote atmospheric breakup songs ("Kiss Her Goodbye"), laidback country-soul

standouts ("Rock & Roll Found Me"), acoustic love songs ("Jenny"), witty drinking songs ("Crazyland"), and scuzzy southern rockers ("Bad Mother Trucker"). Every evening, Church's small army of songwriters and session musicians would gather together in the restaurant's dining room to record whatever had been written earlier in the day. There was a communal spirit to those nighttime recording sessions. Often, the songwriters themselves would make appearances on the finished tracks, singing harmonies or strumming guitars alongside hotshot instrumentalists like Charlie Worsham, Moose Brown, Rob McNally, Kenny Vaughn, Billy Sutton, and Billy Justineu.

"There was an interchangeable quality that felt so unique," Church says of the recording process. "We were eating together, living together, and acting like a big family up there in the mountains. When we'd record, it didn't matter if you were one of the writers or one of the players. It really came down to everyone wanting the song to be born — for the song to *come alive* — and it was just a matter of who could make it come alive. If you could do that, then you'd be in the studio making it happen. And I've never seen that happen before. I've never even heard of that happening."

Church has never shied away from the unconventional. With 2014's *The Outsiders*, he cranked up his guitar amp to the breaking point, defiantly weaving hard rock, prog, and even heavy metal into his southern sound. One year later, he released *Mr. Misunderstood* with no advance notice, mailing the album's first copies to members of his fan club. When Church hit the road in support of his next release, 2018's *Desperate Man*, he remained onstage for more than three hours every night, delivering marathon performances that had more in common with Bruce Springsteen — a personal hero, as well as the namesake of *Chief's* sextuple-platinum hit single, "Springsteen" — than his country contemporaries.

Bruce Springsteen's influence looms large on songs like "Heart of the Night" and "Russian Roulette," two *Heart & Soul* tracks that find Church spinning stories of dead-end towns, fast cars, and the lure of the wide open American highway. Other songs widen the narrative, with Church playing a heartbroken barfly in "Crazyland," a sunglass-wearing optimist in "Through My Ray-Bans," and a headstrong daredevil in "Break it Kind of Guy." The music itself is just as dynamic, punctuated by acoustic guitars, amplified Telecasters, swirling organ, Muscle Shoals-worthy grooves, the rawest vocal performances of Church's career, and plenty of gospel harmonies from Joanna Cotten. It's the full spread of American roots music, spearheaded by a modern-day legend who's always finding new ways to stretch himself.

At its core, *Heart & Soul* is a project that highlights Eric Church's boundless ability to create. These 24 timeless songs were created during a finite block of time, wrestled into existence by a frontman who has learned to trust his gut, challenge himself, and avoid retreating into his everyday routine. After all, everyday routines result in everyday albums, and Eric Church has no need for those. He wants to make an album with heart and soul. And this time, he made three of them.