

Just Like Him

By David McGee, *BluegrassSpecial.com*



PEOPLE LIKE ME
Justin Haigh
Apache Ranch Records

Born and raised in South Dakota, muscular voiced Justin Haigh (pronounced Haig) migrated to Texas in 2006 and began honing his music with producer Lew Curatolo and making a name for himself as a strong live performer. Those who have been fortunate enough to see those shows are going to be impressed that his followup to 2006's *Pale Horse Rider* (and to 2009's cool single, "A Real Good Year For Beer") captures the artist's live energy and serves as a splendid showcase for his sensitivities as a songwriter and interpreter; those new to Haigh's music are going to feel like they've stumbled upon the next big thing. Haigh has a little Garth Brooks in his voice in its lower register, a little Brad Paisley when he moves up into a lighter baritone, but mostly it's a familiar voice, something you can identify as pure country but not necessarily as being imitative of any other artist's. With Curatolo behind the board he has fashioned a powerful sophomore effort with the help of a sterling band that includes Robby Turner on steel guitar, the late Barry Beckett on piano, Tammy Rogers among a trio of fine fiddlers and some seasoned background singers (Harry Stinson and John Wesley Ryles among 'em) who complement his vocal moves by making all the right ones themselves.

The song that's introducing Haigh to the wider mainstream audience is a winner of a honky tonkin' drinkin' song, his own "All My Best Friends (Are Behind Bars)" (which should win some kind of award for its title alone), celebrating the fellows who have been true to him when he's otherwise been "*fighting with best friends and arguing with wives and trying to convince some judge I'm misunderstood.*" Those friends happen to have names such as Jim, Jack, Jose and Johnny Walker, and they're the shelter from the storm Haigh has a good time saluting amidst snarling electric guitars, thumping percussion and singing steel lines. Later in the album, in another original song, he pays homage to a real flesh and blood human, namely the hard country outlaw whose impact on his own music is nigh on to incalculable. In the stirring ballad "Waylon," he builds a clever but serious song on a concatenation of Waylon iconographic references ("*The good old boys still have their fun/Good hearted women still get it done/The eagle soars from up above/The wolf survives the man he runs*") that makes its points via the twanging guitar and Haigh's emotional but measured balladry.

Love, of course, rears its head here, but it's not the comfy cozy kind. In Bobby Pinson's roiling heartbreaker, "Love Me," a storm of searing pain and betrayal with soaring, pleading choruses and angry, snarling guitars, Haigh beseeches a woman "who made a mess of me" to come back and help him reclaim his life "from this crazy place I'm in." Jamey Johnson's "Is It Still Cheating" takes its timeless topic in another direction. In the context of an affecting western ballad rich in fiddle and saloon piano laments, our man wonders if infidelity is rendered moot when both parties in wedlock are playing around. The lyrics' emotional complexity underscore why Johnson is making his bones with

critics and fans alike outside of normal country circles, and Haigh's reading of those lyrics indicate how deeply he can get inside a song and enhance the story with his own point of view.

In the album's most interesting storyline, Haigh advances a class consciousness in songs in which the working man is at odd with moneyed folk who lord their advantages over him. In "People Like Me," with its Waylon-like hard country edge sharpened by cannon-shot drums, wailing steel and a familiar twanging guitar figure, Haigh extols the virtues of folks *"livin' hard lovin' fast/check to check/milk and gas/in the truck head to town"* where the brew and the dirty jokes flow freely, all of which leads him to reflect on his many weekends *"with some future doctor's girlfriend"* when it became apparent to him that his kind is not welcome in certain parts of town. Needless to say, he's staying put. In Kevin Higgins's "In Jail," a mid-tempo country workout with some catchy transitions in mood, Haigh growls a spiteful tale of a gal *"who came from money and it made her mean."* She lures him, willingly, into a stupid liquor store robbery (*"for eighty dollars and a gallon of wine"*), then, with the help of daddy's legal team, rats him out (*"creamy thighs turning State's evidence"*). Guess who's doing time? In Higgins's moving story-song "Monahans," a ruminative country ballad that Haigh sings as if he had first-hand knowledge of its events, a teen couple from the wrong side of the tracks splits up when the distaff side of the duo is spirited away by one of the town's rich kids. Lesson learned--*"Grab ahold of something good/and it will slip right through your hands"*--the narrator hits the road, alone, hurting, with no place to fall. With great stories end to end; references to lemon Dr. Peppers, Merle, ZZ Top, Waylon and all those bottled spirits who comfort him in his times of anguish; plus the weight of experience the artist brings to his music, the world limned on *People Like Me* sounds like the world a lot of other people know well and live in every day. That's country, and Justin Haigh is right on time to stand for what's good and true about this music.

[Justin Haigh's *People Like Me* is available at the artist's website](http://www.thebluegrassspecial.com/archive/2011/june2011/justin-haigh-people-like-me.html)