

## Album Review: Justin Haigh – *People Like Me*

July 6, 2011 by [C.M. Wilcox](#)

If you missed Justin Haigh's first album — and possibly even if you didn't — *People Like Me* is liable to set your head spinning. Sophomore albums by little-known artists on small-time Texas indie labels (Apache Ranch Records' only other act is Nashville Star Season 1 runner-up John Arthur Martinez) aren't supposed to be this consistently wonderful.

From the first few lines of self-penned album opener "All My Best Friends (Are Behind Bars)," it's clear that Haigh is working in the same Texas honky tonk vein that produced '90s stars Tracy Lawrence, Mark Chesnutt, and Tracy Byrd. Yet the breadth and quality of material on *People Like Me* suggest a seriousness and intent of purpose at odds with the pejorative connotations of the term "hat act."

In fact, Justin Haigh is anything but just another hat act. Not just any schmuck in a Stetson is entrusted with top-shelf songs from Bobby Pinson, Kelley Lovelace, Erv Woolsey (George Strait's longtime manager), Mary Gauthier, and Jamey Johnson on his sophomore album. Especially not without name recognition or major label backing. And not just any schmuck in a Stetson can do as much with such songs as Haigh does here. While "All My Best Friends," "Jack Daniels on Ice," and "People Like Me" prove Haigh's mettle with good-timing dance songs, "I Ain't Leaving" (Mary Gauthier/Travis Meadows) and "Is It Still Cheating" (Jamey Johnson/Randy Houser/Jerrold Niemann) show him equally capable with uber-intelligent contemporary ballads and visceral Vern Gosdin-style heartbreak songs.

Waylon Jennings gets his due with a cover (a "Rose in Paradise" to equal the original) and title-centric tribute song, but the album is marked even more strongly by a different Texas singer-songwriter. Kevin Higgins, with whom I was not familiar before finding his name in the credits, contributes two of the album's strongest tracks in "Monahans" and "In Jail," both evocative story songs rich with dusty detail and sly humor. He wrote them, along with album closer "Gathering Dust," solo. As a performer, Higgins fronts a Texas band called The Dust Devils. Here, he's sort of the Billy Joe Shaver to Haigh's neotrad *Honky Tonk Heroes*. If the album gets the attention it deserves, both men stand to benefit.

If smart traditional country with mainstream appeal is what you're after, *People Like Me* does it better than any of the high-profile releases from Chris Young, Blake Shelton, or Ashton Shepherd due next week. I wouldn't be surprised to see it show up on some Best of 2011 lists.