

Justin Haigh - *People Like Me* (Apache Ranch, 2011)

Newcomer Justin Haigh opens his new album with a terrific single, “All My Best Friends.” His original tune pulls together classic country word play (“all my best friends are behind bars”), a clever roll of call brands and throwback twang that’s heavy on the fiddle and steel. His spirit friends visit a second time for the mid-tempo two-step blues, “Jack Daniels on Ice,” a song that finds Haigh sitting out a chilly situation at home in the welcoming confines of his local bar. Raise on a South Dakota ranch, Haigh was steeped in Merle, Waylon, Lefty and Hank from a young age, and after a restless adolescence he resettled in Texas. Haigh’s working class roots are proudly declared and staunchly defended in the album’s title track, and nods to Waylon Jennings with some terrific guitar figures.

Producer Lew Curatolo balances the throwback numbers with a few ballads and up-tempo tunes lined by contemporary rock guitars. The latter may draw radio play, but it’s drowning one’s sorrows (“A Real Good Year for Beer”), breaking one’s vows (“Is It Still Cheating,” co-written by Jamey Johnson) and doing one’s time (“In Jail”) that give this debut its real kick. Haigh’s voice often resembles Tracy Lawrence, but on Marty Gauthier’s “I Ain’t Leaving” he musters the sort of strength plied by George Strait. His second nod to Jennings adds an Allman Brothers flavor to a cover of “Rose in Paradise,” and the album closes with Kevin Higgins’ “Gathering Dust,” declaring long-term dedication to the musical road upon which Haigh is embarking.

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