

A black and white photograph of a man, John Miller, playing an acoustic guitar. He is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows. The background is blurred, showing other people in a dimly lit setting, possibly a stage or a club. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

# JOHN MILLER

THE NOT SO  
CASUAL COUNTRY  
CONTENDER

interview by steve rapid

photography by marc marnie

***John Miller has been a lifelong country music fan, his heroes include icon Hank Williams. John was also the vocalist/frontman, guitarist and principal songwriter with Glasgow's Radio Sweethearts. He now performs solo or with his band The Country Casuals.***

***He has released three solos albums One Excuse Too Many, Popping Pills and his current album Still Carrying A Flame, as well as two album with the Radio Sweethearts New Memories and Lonesome Blue.***

*What was the spark that made you decide to write and play country music as against any other genre you listened to growing up?*

I've always had an inclination to sing. When I was a toddler, according to my mother, I would put on a regular show in the front room just for her.

This involved standing on the dining table (my first stage) with a dolly-peg for a microphone belting out Beatles hits.

I had very varied tastes in music as I was growing up. When I was at school my friends and I had a reputation of always being in on the very early days of the next big thing. I was very into punk rock in my early teens closely followed by a brief period as a ska loving skinhead. I remember being very excited at hearing U2's *Boy* and *Crocodiles* by Echo and The Bunnymen who quickly became my favourite band. I was content with that until 1984 when, at the age of 20, my infatuation with The Smiths began. Their debut album was released one week before my 20th birthday. What a gift that was.

When I was 16 I sang in an indie band who were kind of Echo and the Bunnymen meets The Walker Brothers. At least we thought so (*ha ha*). We played a load of shows, mainly in Glasgow, but sadly never got to make a record.

The main influence in my life was always Country Music and has been pretty much the one musical constant for as long as I can remember. When other people scribbled pop band names on their school exercise books I would be writing Hank Williams in the fanciest font I could manage.

Hank was, I guess, the main influence for me but I was also exposed to Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline and

Jim Reeves who were almost household names in the UK. I listened to loads of other great country singers too, people like Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings, and later I would go out and discover the earlier Country Greats who had influenced them. Artists like Wynn Stewart, Bob Wills and Lefty Frizzell.

So, even as an 18 year old playing Glasgow indie clubs like Maestros (the King Tut's of it's day) I would be happily playing Hank songs at the soundcheck. This led to me fronting The Hank Williams Memorial Band formed in late 1983 to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Hank's death. Interestingly enough the drummer in that band was one Craig Ferguson (of Late Late Show fame).

I suppose eventually a country band was inevitable.

*Once you had made that decision how did you set about bringing it to reality?*

I actually stopped making music soon after the Hank thing. That lasted for almost a decade but I knew if I ever went back it would be to make Country Music.

My chance came about when Douglas Stewart of the BMX Bandits introduced me to their drummer Francis Macdonald.

Frank and I hit it off and he quickly became one of my best friends. We'd talk endlessly about music. He liked Gram Parsons and I introduced him to some older Country Music. One day I pitched the idea of forming a Country band and very soon after Radio Sweethearts were born.

*The first Radio Sweethearts album was produced by Kim Fowley; not a particularly established country music fan and someone who is finding celluloid fame now in the new Runaways biopic, how did that happen?*

Kim was actually in town to work with BMX Bandits and Frank persuaded him to stay on and spend a day recording a single with Radio Sweethearts.

The night before we went into the studio Kim made me sit down in Frank's bedroom with an acoustic guitar and sing every song I had written while he sat with a sheet of paper giving them marks out of 10. I still have that sheet of paper. The next day we were waiting on Kim and Frank

arriving at the studio when we got a fax from Kim listing the songs he wanted us to record. Unfortunately the band hadn't even HEARD some of them which led to a frantic effort to teach them the songs before Kim arrived. One fraught 18 hour session later we had 15 songs recorded and mixed.

These songs formed the basis of the *New Memories* album which was released in the US under a deal brokered by Kim and later, with extra tracks, in the UK on Francis Macdonald's Shoeshine label.

*Talking of Francis MacDonald (of Teenage Fanclub), he has been there from the start writing songs on both Radio Sweethearts albums as well as playing drums. He was also your label boss for a couple of albums, how important was he to you?*  
Frank is a real go-getter and is now a very successful band manager as well as being a label boss. Being naturally lazy and entirely ignorant of the music 'business' I wouldn't have got anywhere without him. He was the one who found all the Radio Sweethearts guys within what felt like 5 minutes and was certainly within days of the band idea being mooted.

He also organised shows and recording sessions where I wouldn't have known where to begin.

He continued to support me even after the band split, playing drums on and releasing my first two solo albums. He plays drums on the new album too and continues to be not only my very dear friend but also a great person to go to when I have any questions about the business side of things.

*Your influences come from classic 50's to early 70's country as well as inspiration from contemporaries like Dale Watson and Tom Armstrong who draw from similar sources but has that style of country music lost its path in the dash for cross-over mainstream success?*

You're absolutely spot on about my influences. I love lots of Country Music from those decades. Nashville was producing some great Country Music then but I think I'm much more influenced by the California sound of singers like Wynn Stewart and Merle Haggard.

Meeting people like Dale Watson and Tom Armstrong, and also Robbie Fulks, was definitely inspirational for me. It was amazing for me to find

and become friends with people who shared my idea of what real Country Music was.

The so-called mainstream Country Music of today bears little resemblance to the Country Music I know and love. Dale Watson has been very vocal about it and even states that he doesn't want his music to be known as Country because that term has been hijacked by some other kind of music. I wouldn't go that far (*ha ha*).

To me what I've always regarded as Country Music is still and always will be 'Country Music'. I just don't think of that other music as 'Country' at all though I can see a funny look in some people's eyes when I mention that I play Country Music.

I don't think the confusion is such a problem in the UK though as a lot of people still have a great affection for the real thing.

*Another factor for the music seems to be, on this side of the Atlantic at least, the need for some audiences to listen to nothing but old cover songs. Has that been a drawback in getting your songs across?*

I don't know how it is in Ireland but we have a very strange beast here which is known as 'The UK Country Scene'. I've never been very closely involved with it, though I have occasionally dipped my toe in the water, but it seems to resemble no other 'Country Scene' on the planet.

There are a whole load of 'covers bands' around, some of whom are excellent at what they do, but all of whom seem to be doing much the same thing.

You can often see 3 different bands over a weekend at one club but you can safely bet they'll be playing the same songs. The sad thing is that that's what the audiences seem to want. I guess there's a comforting familiarity about it.

There are some bands on the scene who play some original songs but there's very little scope on the UK scene for a band doing predominately original material. Saying that, I have found some clubs who are happy to listen to what I'm doing so there is some hope that things may change.

Another substantial part of the Country Music scene now is the Linedancing fraternity. They often have no real interest in the music unless they know

which particular dance accompanies that tune.

Sadly, the linedancers are not confined to the UK. I recently saw a linedance exhibition in the street in Grindelwald, Switzerland and have had them turn up at my bigger shows in Germany.

I don't mind them too much if they're dancing at my show but it does irk me a little bit that I can tell they're not really listening to the music. They generally spend half the song discussing among themselves which dance they think will fit and barely get into their stride before the song is over. It amuses me to see that and I generally follow up with a song in a different tempo just to confuse them. The old fashioned waltzers and two-steppers need no such debate of course. They simply hit the floor running and have much more fun.

I guess it does make it difficult to get my music across in those circumstances but I feel it would be wrong for me to compromise too much. I can only do what I do and hope for the best.

*At this stage in your career what are your expectations for your music and where it may bring you?*

I never ever expected to be a 'star' but at one time I expected I would make a living with my music. I realised a long time ago that neither of those things was going to happen. It disheartened me for a while and for almost two years I turned my back on music completely. I then spent another couple of years slowly working my way back in, still unconvinced if I really wanted to or not.

Once I got used to the idea that it was simply a passion and not a career I became much happier again. I made my new album with no expectations except to share my music with friends around the world and, hopefully, recoup my costs. If I do that's great, if I don't that's also great. The main thing is I'm getting out there and sharing my music. It would still be nice to make a living though (*ha ha*).

*That you're still writing and recording is a testament to your need to get the music out there. You also play live with your band the Country Casuals which aspect of the process do you enjoy most?*

Yes, I realise now there is still a need inside me for my music to be heard, or as I prefer it, shared. This, I imagine, is the case for all music makers. The writing and recording process can be fairly



stressful as I am on my own mostly and there is a nagging insecurity that asks if you're doing the right thing. I always think my music is never any good until someone comes up and tells me it's good.

Playing live is completely different. Your audience will soon let you know if they're enjoying the music or not. Although the lead up to a show, the arranging and travelling and such, can be tiring or stressful the time spent on stage is such a thrill. You can build up a relationship with an audience that can never exist in a writing or recording environment so I guess it's safe to say that playing live is my favourite part.

Plus the big bonus is that you get to meet some great people at the live shows. I've met a lot of people that I now regard as personal friends and that I regularly correspond with.

*The inspiration for the material, for telling the stories, is part of a tradition in Scotland; one of the root sources for the strands of music that wove into what became Country Music. Do you feel a part of that tradition?*

Yes, very much so. I feel a great sense of pride in the historically recognised fact that Country Music evolved from the music of Scottish and Irish settlers. I've lived my whole life in Scotland but my grandfather was from deep in the south of Ireland and all the songs my Mother learned at his knee I learned at her knee. To me those songs are very much from that same tradition. Maybe that's why my songs are often very melancholy?

*Do you think Country Music will ever come to the fore in the UK where it has little support on mainstream radio and TV?*

I think Country Music in the UK had its heyday in the 70s when they used to have the massive Wembley Country festivals and Country Stars appeared regularly on the *Val Doonican Show* and even *Top Of The Pops*. Sadly, I don't see that ever happening again. Even the most mainstream Country show in the UK, Radio 2's *Bob Harris Country*, is restricted to one hour on a Thursday night.

*On your myspace page you have also listed acts like The Beatles, The Clash, The Smiths and Roxy Music in your influences. Does that add a layer of inspiration to your writing or are you just a fan?*  
Mainly I'm just a fan albeit a slightly obsessive one at times.

*Your music is up there with the best of contemporary country. Does it frustrate you that it doesn't achieve broader recognition?*

It's very nice of you to say so. Thanks for that.

'Broader recognition' is a strange thing. I've no idea how it comes about although I suspect a lot of money and a lot of lunches help smooth the way. Unfortunately I don't have the resources to go along that route. Being a truly independent artist nowadays I don't really have much clout or knowledge for that matter and rely solely on the good auspices of people like Mark Lamarr who play my music solely on its merit. I suspect there are some people I've sent a CD to who haven't even listened to it. That's the price I pay for being a 'UK Country Artist'. Some folks can't see past that.

It's odd that the people who consistently have the least problems with me being a non-American act are the Americans themselves. They seem to like my music just fine.

The fact that the majority of the UK media choose to tar everyone on the UK Country scene with the same brush is extremely frustrating sometimes.

I have to point out that I do get a fair amount of support from some sections of the UK media but there is still a certain level of unnecessary resistance out there.

*Do you have some favourite songs that you have recorded that you feel hit the nail on the head for you in terms of writing and recording?*

Wow, that's a tough question to answer. Off the top of my head I'd say I still have a very soft spot for *Heart On The Line* from the second Radio Sweethearts album. Also *This Pain Inside* and, from the latest album, *My Dreaming Party*. I also love *Two Into Three Won't Go* from my second CD. Whether they are benchmark recordings or not I couldn't say but I like them as songs.

*What's next for John Miller?*

Who knows? More of the same I would guess. I'd like to play and see more places including a return to the Emerald Isle someday. I'm open to offers (smiles).