

WILL HOGE

NUMBER SEVEN

In May 2010, two weeks after a thousand-year flood devastated parts of Nashville, TN, Will Hoge and his band drove 14 hours back home to perform a single song on stage at the historic Ryman Auditorium. He'd been invited to perform the finale of a nationally televised benefit concert stacked with high-profile artists like Keith Urban, Keb Mo and Brad Paisley. But as a native son of Nashville and a true hometown rock star with an extraordinary ability to connect with a crowd, Hoge's powerhouse vocal on "Washed By The Water" proved the perfect climax and well worth the long haul.

"I really love Nashville," says Will. "It's such an important part of who I am musically and as a person. So it was validating for me and the band to feel like no matter how many records we've sold, among all the others who were on, they saw something in what we do that moves people."

Truth be told, Hoge has sold quite a few albums on his way to regional and national fame, and he's been moving people on stage for well over a decade. It's what he does. He's an artist people see over and over again, because every show is unique and gripping. His songs, while not cheerful on the surface, have the cathartic power of the blues for their recognizable human situations. And then there's the voice - like a human Hammond B3 - clear here, rough there and drenched with dynamics and soul. Hoge's passing resemblance to Bruce Springsteen is fitting for a rocker who is so very *of his place* and who inspires such fervent loyalty and rapturous praise from his fans. He's blazed brightly without going off the rails and he's grown as a songwriter. He's survived and thrived through endless miles in vans and busses, landing and unraveling a mainstream record deal as well as a life-altering scooter accident. If, as we read in Rolling Stone and elsewhere, Nashville has finally landed on the national rock and roll map, Hoge has been there all along.

Now he comes forth with Number Seven, the seventh studio LP of his career, and the lucky number tattooed on his arm. Its eleven songs survey the struggles of the heart that are Hoge's songwriting stock in trade while revealing enticing range and freshness on the sonic front. In places it leans folky-twangy, in others, it's stridently loud and large, with layered, goose-bumpy guitar textures. Acting as his own producer for the first time, Will says this album feels truer to his personal vision than any he's made. Yes, artists say that all the time, but the confluence of events in Hoge's life and career, plus his sheer believability, make this the first and most compelling endorsement of the many that are sure to follow.

Number Seven is Will's second post-accident album, following up on his 2009 release *The Wreckage*. That project was hailed as "triumphant" by the BBC and "self-assured" by American Songwriter, setting a new bar for an artist entering a new chapter.

"The Wreckage influenced Number Seven pretty heavily, and the biggest was just the way that we made it," Hoge says. "With *The Wreckage* we did what we thought was about 75 or 80 percent of the recording. Then the accident happened. So we took a year off and then we came back and re-recorded some stuff and scrapped some stuff. And it became a much better record, not because of the accident but because of that *time*. It afforded us the ability to take a long hard look at ourselves and what we were doing musically. Fast forward to the making of Number Seven, and we did the same thing, sans the motorcycle accident."

That meant laying down living room tracks as a start and then stepping away for about a half a year. The distance made it easy to hear what was worth building on and what didn't work, and the results feel refined even as they ripple with energy. Hoge gets our attention, as one is supposed to do, with the opening line of the CD: "Shakespeare was a traitor, as far as I'm concerned," he sings with resignation and touch of contempt. For lovers of language, it's a provocative line; we want to know How and Why. Turns out that here in "Fool's Gonna Fly" Hoge is calling out The Bard for glossing over the trials of love - for making it look too damned easy. The exhausted, exasperated narrator is bolting from a relationship that even the most romantic pushover wouldn't stick around for. So even as there's something elusively fresh about the soundscapes, Hoge is familiar territory lyrically: smashed up hopes, struggles for dignity and pluperfect pain.

“My wife asks when I’m going to write a song about a happy relationship,” Hoge says with a chuckle. “I always say ‘I just don’t know.’ There’s a lot of years of experience under my belt so it’s easy territory for me to farm, even now.”

Between Hoge’s hometown sound and his penchant for lonesome blues, country influences has always been present in his music, and there are some explicit examples on *Number Seven*. “Gone” would sound great on even contemporary country radio (programmers take heed) and “No Man’s Land” is a twanging investigation of the gulf between the singer and a woman, or maybe all women. At the same time, Hoge’s folk-poet side is robustly represented on two thought-provoking songs. “American Dream,” a profile a homeless guy living amid the wreckage a devastated economy, is lifted above the potentially cliché subject matter with lines like “I’d give it all right back to just be looked at like a man.” A similar mission to lay claim to dignity suffuses the epic “Illegal Line,” which humanizes the oft-demagogued issue of immigration. The protagonist is simultaneously a hero and a pariah, and the song builds seductively to biting climaxes that underscore the drama of the story. “People often complain that there’s nothing from current musicians that has any sort of weight or political commentary,” says Hoge. “And I think rock and roll is a little lesser for that at this point. So I hope that that song gets out and that people hear it and frankly that it pisses some people off.”

The album’s grand finale (and first single) “When I Get My Wings” looks to that other musical city in Tennessee for influence and lets Hoge uncork on a full-throated Otis Redding-style vocal with a heavenly host of Memphis-inspired horns. It’s an album-ending surprise for the listener and a bit of a surprise in its execution, for Hoge says it almost didn’t make it out of the production process. “It started life as a bluegrass song, more in line with (folky *Number Seven* track) ‘Silver Chain,’” he says. The lyric, inspired by an obituary about a 50-plus-year marriage, was great, but the acoustic, down-home arrangements were falling short.

“So the last day of recording, I just wasn’t willing to give up on the song. We took a lunch break, and I just sat in the studio and rethought the whole song. That led me to the Stax sound, which is such an influential thing for me. We brought the band back in after lunch and when we found the right tempo, the song took on a whole new life.”

Hoge’s own life got going in Franklin, a few miles from Nashville, in a house full of records and a musically-minded family. He set off to college at West Kentucky University with plans to teach, but writing and playing guitar blew up into an unquenchable thirst to write and perform. So he left to tour with his first band Spoonful, a name that tells you something about his early musical roots in the blues. The group got noticed but never signed, and as players shifted in and out between other work, Hoge felt compelled to pursue his future as a solo artist.

His new band was built around a distinguished and fortuitous partner (his “rock and roll uncle” he says), former Georgia Satellites frontman Dan Baird. Baird’s greasy deep-South guitar proved a potent match for Hoge’s thrilling vocals, and the opportunities for Hoge multiplied. A board tape from an on-fire night at Nashville’s Exit/In became Will Hoge’s first solo recording, and soon he was touring heavily, opening for major acts and playing clubs and colleges around the Southeast. Atlantic Records picked up his first studio album *Carousel* and released the follow-up *Blackbird On A Lonely Wire* in 2003. It wasn’t Hoge’s favorite chapter of his career, and he had plenty to say at the time about the shallow commitment by the label to what should have been that breakout album. But he did thrive through it and got free to make several EPs and live projects that showed Hoge was as prolific as he was talented on stage.

Around 2006, Hoge was invited to add his name to the wall of fame at the Exit/In, a rare honor for a “local” rock act. He placed his plaque up there alongside, well, nearly every legend in recent American music, during a sold-out show. “I still have people who come up to me and say I was there the night you put your name on the wall,” Hoge says. If you’re from here and know how hard it’s been for Nashville rockers to break the inexplicable ceiling imposed on them by god knows what, that night back at his home base club was better in some ways than winning a Grammy.

By the time Hoge entered the studio to make the album that would become *The Wreckage*, he was a regional benchmark artist with a considerable national following. He was cruising through his mid 30s with that precious and rare scenario coming to pass – the long, fruitful career as a frontman. Then came the truck that smashed into him head-on, crushing his lungs and breaking multiple bones. He was in the hospital for weeks and was forced into a physical therapy regimen where he painstakingly re-built his approach to singing, hitherto the most intuitive and natural of things. It was life changing, he says, and thus art-changing as well.

“If I had to sum it up in one word, it gave me a patience,” says Hoge. “Not that I was an *impatient* person before, but there’s a certain restlessness that comes from being an artist. You tend to want to keep moving, because there are so many ideas. Every show I put pressure

on myself to do *all these things*. But I think my wife and band members would attest to a kind of patience that wasn't there before – even in the studio. The ability to dig into a song that I believe in and work until it gets right instead of saying well it's not working let's move on."

That's how "When I Get My Wings" flew, where two albums ago it might have crashed, he says. And it's how he will continue to hew to the advice he gives in one of the best songs on *The Wreckage* about his youthful and blind devotion to the music: "Keep on dreaming even if it breaks your heart." The same spirit underlies *Number Seven*, just as it will inform numbers eight, nine, ten and beyond.