

# The Boston Globe

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## Full circle

Back on a major label,  
Dwight Yoakam still calls his own tune

**D**wight Yoakam arrived in Los Angeles in 1977 with an “instinct,” as he once put it, about what he “could maybe do with hillbilly music.” He’s been doing all sorts of things with it ever since, from the debut LP that announced his intentions to the world, “Guitars, Cadillac, Etc., Etc.” to his latest release, “Second Hand Heart.” We spoke to Yoakam by phone this week about a bit of that history, his new record, and the distinctive character of Indian Ranch, where he’s due to perform on Sunday.

**Q.** You have often been characterized as a traditionalist, particularly early on, and yet in a fundamental way your music has been anything but traditional.

**A.** There was a group of artists that came onto the scene in 1986 — myself, Steve Earle, Randy Travis, Lyle Lovett, a variety of artists of a certain generation that happened in that moment. I guess for lack of a better way to categorize a moment, folks applied “tradition.” And there were certainly traditions in what we were each doing. But my music has evolved; it was evolving even then, I think. The “Guitars, Cadillacs” LP was very much of a moment. It was not a retro record as such, which is why I think it was able to realize commercial success. It had immediacy and pertinence in the moment that it was in.

**Q.** You spent the first 15 years of your recording career on a major label, and now you’re back on a major with your last two records, but things have changed a lot in that intervening time.

**A.** It’s been an interesting experience, through leaving Warner in 2001, making four independent records, and then coming back to a major label. Things have changed on all fronts. Major labels think in a more independent way now if they’re smart, but it’s still a confluence of energy and access; there

can be a greater reach with majors.

**Q.** For your part, during that first tenure on a major, you seemed to have a complicated relationship with mainstream country: You seemed to be in it, but not of it.

**A.** That would be an accurate way to describe it. I never thought of it that way: in it but not of it, and in it to varying degrees over the next decade after my initial record.

**Q.** And now that you're back, in a similar label situation, how would you describe your relation to the mainstream — or is there a relation at all?

**A.** I don't think there is. I don't know. "Mainstream country," I guess you're referring to commercial country radio's playlists — I'm probably absent from that format, but now there's such a plurality of points of access, from iTunes to YouTube to Spotify. If at some point contemporary country radio decides to play me, I'd be thrilled. "3 Pears" was played at Americana and AAA. Formats have really evolved in the last 10 years to be substantial and meaningful. The Americana format is interesting; it's a disparate collection of sounds and musicians that are being embraced by that broader format.



**Q.** Your latest record shows that you're still finding new ways to mine and bring together the honky-tonk and more pop sides of your musical DNA.

**A.** I'm really lucky, really fortunate in that I don't have any regrets about any record I've ever made — the work I did with Pete Anderson over the years, all the way through to now. And I'm free to make the music that I made on this record, and on the previous record. I'm not doing it with any conscious design. This album was created in a very spontaneous way.

**Q.** So there weren't any particular sounds or themes that you had in mind or brought to the record?

**A.** No, other than what I am doing with the electric guitar in my own hands onstage over the last 10 years. My rhythm-guitar playing went from principally the acoustic guitar to the electric. More so on "3 Pears": I did almost all of the electric guitars except for the solo-guitar stuff. On this album I did probably half as much, but still a large portion of the riff electric-guitar stuff. So for me, these last two albums, if there's anything about them, it's that, and the sonic of, the wonderful, excited aggression of a not-too-big amp breaking up. There's also a bit of a full-circle feel for me in terms of the immediacy of this record with "Guitars, Cadillacs" — not sonically so much, or in terms of the literalness of the material, but in terms of the kind of sense of im-

**DWIGHT YOAKAM**

At: Indian Ranch, Webster,  
Sunday at 2 p.m.  
Tickets: \$47-\$59.50 508-943-3871.  
www.indianranch.com

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mediacy, for lack of a better way to put it.

**Q.** You're playing Sunday at a place that is not your typical venue.

**A.** It's kind of fun, because it's this summer escapade, where people are weekend camping, some folks come and go during the work week. It's like sneak-

ing off to some weird adult summer camp. It's a very immediate performance environment, very close quarters, the crowd isn't spread out. And it's always a daytime, daylight gig, so you lose the theater of darkness. You see everybody doing whatever, so I'm observing the audience in a very thorough fashion. It's always a fantastic crowd to play for, because they bring their enthusiasm with them in extra suitcases. I mean, they're there for purpose.

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*Interview was condensed and edited.  
Stuart Munro can be reached at  
sj.munro@verizon.net.*



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