

It's a Cold World Out There

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ROBERT HILBURN IS THE TIMES' POP MUSIC CRITIC

NEW YORK — You can't blame a security guard for casting a suspicious

eye toward singer-songwriter Matthew Ryan in the sparking marble lobby of the ultra-chic Worldwide Plaza complex that houses PolyGram Entertainment in midtown Manhattan.

With his boot-camp haircut and four layers of thrift-shop shirts and jacket, Ryan looks more like a guy who spent the night in the broom closet than someone who actually has business in the skyscraper.

The songs on Ryan's debut album may be compared favorably to those of such acclaimed blue-collar songwriters as Bruce Springsteen and Paul Westerberg, but they haven't become the kind of hits that would put the Pennsylvanian's face on MTV or magazine covers.

Even when Ryan passes through security and makes it to the A&M; Records offices on the 27th floor, he seems out of place. There may be a folk-accented singer-songwriter renaissance going on these days, but you'd better be either female or in a band to participate in it.

Seven female singer-songwriters sold enough records to make SoundScan's list of the 100 best-selling albums of 1997, including Jewel, Sarah McLachlan and Fiona Apple. But there were no male solo writers on it except '70s holdover James Taylor.

Ryan isn't the only one caught in this pop cycle. You couldn't ask for better reviews than Ron Sexsmith and Freedy Johnston have received in recent years, but the royalty checks of these kindred spirits also remain skimpy.

After years of hearing about love and life through the perspective of male troubadours, the pop audience seems to believe it's time for another viewpoint--and a remarkable contingent of women has surfaced in the '90s. The days when record labels and radio stations believed that there was only room for one woman on their rosters and playlists are long gone.

"There's a reason that women are so successful," says Ken Levitan, president of Rising Tide Records in Nashville and former manager of Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, John Hiatt and Los Lobos.

"Both in country music and in pop, it has been the females for the last few years who have been making the most interesting music and taking the most chances, so they have captured

the public's attention. But there are some male artists in that tradition too, and hopefully that attention will translate over to them."

Levitan, who signed Ryan to a publishing deal in 1996, believes the A&M; artist is someone who could benefit from that spillover.

But don't expect the subject matter of Ryan's songs to help his record company get him airplay in the novelty-slanted, upbeat climate of today's Top 40 radio.

The songs are mostly about struggle--tales about growing up on the wrong side of the tracks mixed with stories about complex relationships that have no villains and no winners. Even the titles speak of conflict and regret: "Guilty," "Watch Your Step," "Irrelevant" and "Disappointed."

"Yes, absolutely," Ryan says, when asked if he realizes that he's a hard sell. "As far as what a record company would want from you, it would be better for me to be more dimensional musically. But I don't see the songs as without hope. I see them as about survival.

"There are hard times in life, but you can get through them. That's the message that my favorite writers have always given us--and it's a message that you need sometimes."

There's not a lot of humor in Ryan's debut album, "May Day," but that doesn't mean he can't see humor around him--including the irony of growing up hating many of the singer-songwriters who eventually became models for him, including Springsteen, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

The problem, Ryan says with a smile as he sits in a conference room at A&M;, was that he couldn't get away from those '60s and '70s icons, as his stepfather played them constantly.

"My dad would literally play [Cohen's] 'Songs of Love and Hate' or [Dylan's] 'Blood on the Tracks' on Christmas morning . . . and I hated them," Ryan says, lighting the first of several cigarettes. "I didn't think they could sing a damn. I liked Bryan Adams and John Waite, that kind of smoother singer."

His biological father, Will Webb, left home soon after Matthew was born, searching for dreams that eventually led him to Nashville and his own career as a songwriter. Among Webb's credits: "Angels Don't Fly," which George Jones recorded in the early '90s.

Ryan (whose real name is Ryan Webb) seems to like to smile during an interview--perhaps to show you that he can. He worries that his memories of his childhood too often sound like a soap opera, even warning you not to read too much into the years he spent in Chester, Pa., a blue-collar river town.

Yet one of his songs speaks of a youngster growing up without much self-esteem. In "Lights of the Commodore Berry," Ryan describes a boy being "12 years old and already ashamed."

There wasn't a lot of hope for young people in Chester, recalls Ryan, who grew up on the edge of the city's massive housing projects.

“You know that Springsteen song ‘My Hometown?’” he asks at one point in the interview. “It was the same in Chester. There were some racial tensions but mostly just class issues. There was a street called Highland Avenue, and it’s amazing what a difference it made to live on one side or another of that street.”

Because of the tensions, there were gangs in Chester and lots of violence, but Ryan stayed pretty much free of trouble. At the same time, he didn’t have many expectations.”

But Ryan started finding direction during his late teens after his family moved to Delaware, where he fell in love.

“I met this beautiful young girl who I couldn’t believe thought I was beautiful,” Ryan says hesitantly, as if uncertain how much of his personal life he wants to reveal. “The world opened up for me. She wanted to go on to school and be a teacher and I wanted to be those things with her.”

Following her lead, Ryan enrolled in the University of Delaware, but teaching wasn’t meant to be.

“It was this completely dysfunctional relationship and suddenly . . .,” he says, the words coming even slower. “I started understanding how things happen in life, and understanding a lot of those songs I used to not understand. I started listening again to songs like [Cohen’s] ‘Famous Blue Raincoat’ and [Springsteen’s] ‘Brilliant Disguise’ and they started making sense to me.”

Ryan had already been toying with music, but he now became serious about it. It was around then that he wrote “Watch Your Step,” a song on the album about a failed relationship.

He began to see songwriting, not education, as his future, and that added to the tensions of the relationship.

“She thought I’d be one of those people whose dreams don’t happen,” he says. “You see those people all the time. They are at the corner bar right now. Her fear for me is that I’d end up like that, and I still could. It’s a very thin line between getting what you want and throwing everything away in pursuit of it.”

Bitten by songwriting, Ryan was in his late teens when he headed to Nashville in the early ‘90s, where he lived briefly with his father. He worked at various odd jobs while trying to put bands together. It was a new start, and somewhere along the line he adopted the name of Matthew Ryan, partly to underscore the changes in his life.

The career breakthrough came when Levitan signed him to the publishing deal and set up a showcase that led to the A&M; contract. David Ricketts, formerly of the duo of David + David, produced the album, which was released last fall. It includes one song, “Disappointed,” that Ryan wrote with his father.

Reviews were good. People magazine said Ryan’s songs are full of “passion and injured pride” and “sound like they come not from the music industry but from the heart.” The Village Voice

described the album as “chockful of intriguing song craft.” Yet the album still hasn’t cracked the weekly Top 200 sales chart in Billboard magazine.

Al Cafaro, chairman and chief executive officer of A&M; Records, believes Ryan will eventually find an audience.

“There’s an emotional honesty to his songs, lyrically, that jumped out at me--the poetic aspect of it,” Cafaro said in a separate interview. “What makes it so powerful is that he also has melodies. Very often there are people who have words but who don’t have any sense of the musical accompaniment. That’s not the case with Matthew. He has both.”

Ryan’s musical influences aren’t limited to singer-songwriters. He has loved lots of bands through the years, including U2, Westerberg’s Replacements and the Waterboys--and there is tension and bite in his music. Ryan even put together some bands in Nashville, including one-- the Caustics--that got some record company nibbles. He now tours with a drummer, guitarist and bassist.

But Ryan feels more comfortable putting the emphasis on himself and his songs rather than on a wider band focus.

He is committing most of 1998 to touring, hoping to connect with a wider audience. A&M; has already released one video from the album and plans another this spring.

At the end of the interview, Ryan, who lives in Nashville with his new girlfriend and their year-old son, stands in the A&M; office and glances down at some trade publications with their photos of the latest hit acts.

“There is part of me that still thinks [his old girlfriend] might be right,” he says in a near-whisper. “I could end up in that bar someday with just a lot of broken daydreams.

“But the way I look at it is I’m just 26. I’ve got a lot of time left. Besides, songwriting is my life. Once I picked up the guitar, everything else started to blur for me. It’s not like there was a choice.”