

Ryan Culwell
Flatlands
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"I reached some plains so vast, that I did not find their limit anywhere I went . . . with no more land marks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea . . . there was not a stone, nor bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by."—Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, 1541

Ryan Culwell grew up in a forgotten place. His songs were forged in the great void that is the panhandle of Texas—The Great In-Between, a land so desolate that few even thought to settle there until oil was discovered beneath the emptiness. And the solitude of the plains comes pouring out of him when he opens his mouth to sing. Like an approaching dust storm, Culwell's songs whisper and howl and embed the dirt of the flatlands deep into your skin.

Growing up in the middle of all that flatness seems to have amplified Culwell's soul; his songs shine forth like the stars in West Texas on a clear night. Culwell spent most his life among the company of roughneck oilfield men in a small town near the epicenter of the Dust Bowl. "My dad and brother have always worked the kind of jobs that required them to wake up at three in the morning to fix whatever went wrong, even if the wind was blowing sixty miles per hour and it was five degrees. People think I exaggerate this kind of work ethic, and they damn sure think I exaggerate the weather in the panhandle."

Like an oil rigger drilling for crude, Culwell's songs penetrate deep into the essence of the Great Plains. In "Darkness" he sings: "Wind ain't blown here in days, it's strange and lonely/

the only sound is some old men in the diner talkin bout rain/ but that's only hearsay/ don't believe we'll see no rain/ then again I seen stranger things/ like a whole world that's flat."

Despite hailing from a place that ignores the presence of the outside world, Culwell has become something of a searcher, an intellectual nomad. Amid his tales of oilfields and honky-tonks, he's likely to quote the poet Geoffrey Hill ("Can Absence be a god, or have we made an idol of our emptiness?") or the French mystic Simone Weil: "We must be rooted in the absence of a place. We must take the feeling of being home into exile."

It was only when Culwell went into exile in Nashville that he truly got in touch with the "absence of place" that is his home. Ryan Culwell is no rhinestoned Texas troubadour—he counts Bob Dylan, John Lee Hooker, and Woody Guthrie as influences. In fact, Culwell hails from the same stretch of prairie where Guthrie spent his most formative years, and like Guthrie, he has emerged as a poet of the plains. Of the legendary songwriter from Pampa Culwell says: "Guthrie was defined by the whole experience [of the Dust Bowl in the Texas Panhandle] but

expressed that identity in leaving. We hear a lot about the trail of people leaving. We know the sound of exodus, but what does it sound like to stay?"

At the age of thirty-one, after moving from Amarillo Texas to Music City, Culwell began playing what he calls "bigger" songs. But he heard the flatlands calling to him, and he found himself writing secret songs about his roots on the open plains —songs about "what it sounds like to stay," thought he hadn't. Soon enough, these were the only tunes anyone wanted to hear. These songs became *Flatlands*, Culwell's debut album from Lightning Rod Records (Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires, Billy Joe Shaver, James McMurry).

On the opening track of the record, "Amarillo," Ryan comes out swinging: "What am I gonna do with this? Just walk around waving two white fists?/ Am I throwing punches or singing

songs?/ Have I been here for way too long?" The song is a paeon to those who choose to live their whole lives in a place where "most people won't even stay the night." Songs like this have garnered Culwell almost prophet-like status among the disaffected youth of the Llano Estacado. But his songs are not regional. The high plains are Solitude Amplified; we have all, at one time or another, felt the kind of epic absence that Culwell spins so effortlessly into song.

Listening to these songs about the empty plains, we also encounter something unexpected: hope. In many ways, *Flatlands* is an optimistic record, like a lighted window seen from many miles away. On the eponymous track Culwell sings: "The earth can break a man/ But I will take my stand/ I'll climb my mountains/ Out in the Flatlands." And on "I Will Come For You" when he cajoles, "Let's head on out to the front porch/ And wait for the cold to come," an almost giddy joy can be heard behind his lonesome Texas drawl.

The tenderness on this record will surprise listeners who first encounter Culwell's weather-beaten resolve. But this, too, comes from Culwell's dualistic relationship with his home. Like many from West Texas, he loves this land and he hates it. He's not unlike Tom Joad: tough, but gentle. But *tough*. A Culwell song brings to mind an old sharecropper who limps into the town diner on a Sunday morning. The man's weary face commands respect, but his limp puts you at ease somehow.

While Culwell is poised to take American music halls by storm with these "secret" songs, he remains humble: a man devoted to his wife and daughters and enthralled by the art of songcraft. "I don't want to tell the world that I've worked harder than other artists. I probably haven't. But I have kept my head in the game long enough to write a couple of decent songs. It's not really different than the farmers who stuck it out in years of drought or just pushed their necks out when the wind blew all their topsoil away."