



## JIM LAUDERDALE

Even in Nashville, a city teeming with talent, Jim Lauderdale is unique.

He came to Music City, for example, not as a kid off the Greyhound with stars in his eyes, but as a singer and songwriter who had already begun a promising career.

Once arrived, he became a high-profile performer while at the same time building his reputation as a "writer's writer," a reliable source of hit material for George Strait, George Jones, Vince Gill, Patty Loveless, the Dixie Chicks, and other headliners. By 2002, Lauderdale's collaboration with Ralph Stanley, *Lost in the Lonesome Pines*, garnered him a Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album of the Year, and he was presented with both the Americana Music Association's Artist of the Year Award and Song of the Year.

Pundits in the know took note early on of Lauderdale's appeal. Jim Macnie suggests - correctly - on all-music.com that "if every Nashville singing star had to cut at least one Lauderdale song, country wouldn't be the Chumpville that it is these days." The Nashville Scene classifies him as "a hip country chameleon." And Entertainment Weekly lauds his ability to make his songs "ache, bend, snort, and moan in a way no one else does."

All of this suggests that Lauderdale isn't an artist you can file easily into any one category.

And now, with his simultaneous release of two new albums, different in style yet equal in their excellence, this point is made clearer than ever.

On *Bluegrass*, a collection of tunes written alone or with co-writers like Buddy Miller, John Leventhal, Joe Henry, and Leslie Satcher, Lauderdale assembles an all-star lineup of musicians who know their way around the banjo and fiddle, and invests this traditional music with the creative chops that have made him a fixture along Music Row.

And on *Country Super Hits Volume 1*, he pairs with another respected writer, Odie Blackmon (also his co-producer on this project), to create a selection of tunes that capture the essence of classic honky-tonk and mainstream country, right down to the jukebox glow and the last-call bouquet of whiskey and beer.

As with all of Lauderdale's work, from *Planet of Love*, his critic-dazzling debut in 1991, through *Headed for the Hills*, his epic collaboration in 2004 with Grateful Dead lyrical wizard Robert Hunter, *Bluegrass* and *Country Super Hits Volume 1* make a strong initial impression and grow richer with repetition. The point is that, as compelling as this music is when heard for the first time, there's plenty going on below the surface too.

Ask Lauderdale about this, and his answer is unexpected yet right on the button: "I think there are more similarities than differences between these two albums," he says. "These songs could go either way. The bluegrass stuff could be cut by a country artist, and vice versa. To me, a good song is a good song, no matter how you do it."

We respect Lauderdale's opinion - after all, who knows more about the magic behind the bleary epiphany of "I Met Jesus in a Bar" on the country CD, or the topsy-turvy confusion, offset by some burnin' fiddle, dobro, and banjo, on the bluegrass track, "Who's Leavin' Who"? Yet suspicion persists that there is some difference in the work; after all, it's hard to imagine a song with a deeper bluegrass feel than "Mighty Lonesome" or a more perfect saloon lament than "Honky Tonk Mood Again."

The truth is that Lauderdale has always had that ability of writing music that reflects his originality as well as a sense of total authenticity. Because his mission is to write songs that excel on their own, rather than shape them to the standards of any one genre, he has been able to come up with material that can be adapted to almost any kind of interpretation.

Arguably, though, the best interpretations are Lauderdale's. That pain in his phrasing in "Love in the Ruins" and "Forever Ends Today," from Bluegrass, came partly through the influence of Buck Owens but mostly through his own gift for channeling life's lessons through a melody and lacing it with a sharp, unforgettable hook. That transformation of the nimble fiddle/guitar line on "Don't Blame the Wrong Guy" into a counter-melody on the chorus shows his interest in going beyond the conventions of the idiom. And on Country Super Hits Volume 1 the rumba groove that adds dimension to the barroom beat of "Two More Wishes," and the decision to build the emotional peak of a ballad on the word "Cautious" - and make it work - testifies as well to his accessible unorthodoxy.

But for all the variety within these tracks, Bluegrass and Country Super Hits Volume 1 pay tribute, in the end, to two great strains of American music, whose spirits are enhanced rather than distracted by Lauderdale's innovations.

"I recognize that my diversity can create a challenge for those that need to categorize me," he admits, "where even though I might have Ralph Stanley singing with me, there's also some singer/songwriter stuff and some country stuff - so which bin does it belong in at the record store? I think Bluegrass and Country Super Hits Volume 1 are a little more straightforward."

Maybe so, but coming from an artist who has opened for both George Clinton and Johnny Cash, cut his teeth onstage while sandwiched between rock and blues bands in L.A., and won a Grammy Award for an album whose title song he composed while driving home from a Ralph Stanley session and recorded after rushing back to the studio to cut "Lost in the Lonesome Pines," his straightforward path usually hides unexpected turns.

That's Jim Lauderdale: predictably unpredictable, surprising and satisfying, transforming American music once again.