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On Kip Moore's 'Slowheart,' A Country Outcast Finds Home In '80s FM Radio Gold



Four years ago, Kip Moore was stuck in a no-man's land peculiar to country music. He was signed to a Nashville major and had airwave hits in his past, but the radio wasn't playing him. At the same time, his mainstream connection prevented him from cultivating the sort of "alt country" or "Americana" credentials that appeal to coastal listeners dabbling in country's fringes. Moore was simultaneously too country and not country enough.

This has more to do with marketing than music; understandably frustrated, Moore did perhaps the only thing an artist in this situation can: He wrapped his outcast status around him like armor. In interviews, Moore often uses alternate metrics to evaluate his success — instead of sales or airplay or CMA Award nominations, he speaks of concertgoers shouting along to songs, rather than just singing along like more pedestrian fans. And he tours like a man on the run from the law, proving — like Eric Church before him — that the mainstream country audience likes plucky underdogs as much as radio champions, at least when it comes to male singers.

All this led Moore to the best album of his career, 2015's *The Wild Ones*, which distilled his strengths — Bob Seger growl, raise-your-lighter hooks and whomping, 1980s rock production — into a series of tracks about unapologetic characters toughing it out. The record was engineered to make rooms erupt, and they responded accordingly, night after night after night.

Moore's follow-up, *Slowheart*, which is out this Friday, holds this course. You'll recognize the sound, based in FM rock from 1983 to 1988; the topics, from untameability to backseat sex to crumbling romance; and the attitude from songs like "Try Again:" "I'll try, try, try, no I won't quit / I'll fight, fight, fight, you can count on it."

Moore does make two significant changes here, simultaneously ceding control and taking more of it. For the first time on an album, he recorded songs that he didn't write: "Plead The Fifth," by Josh Kear (Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats," Lady Antebellum's "Need You Now") and Luke Dick (Eric Church's "Kill A Word," Miranda Lambert's "Highway Vagabond"), and "The Bull," which Dick wrote with Jon Randall (Brad

Paisley's "Whiskey Lullaby"). But don't let the absence of Moore's name in the credits fool you; these songs are perfect expressions of his persona. Take "The Bull:" "Every knockdown in the dirt / Every 'no' I ever heard / Sure feel good to laugh when I look back and flip the bull the bird."



Even as he sings tracks penned by others, Moore self-produced the majority of an album for the first time, replacing Brett James, who worked on both his 2012 debut *Up All Night* and his breakout *The Wild Ones*. James is a veteran with more than two decades of country music experience and credits on numerous No. 1 hits, but surprisingly, he is not missed on *Slowheart*. Moore knows what he wants and how to get it: Resonant kick drums with the right amount of thud, a rhythm section that scoots cleanly beneath peeling lead guitars and hoarse, exhortative vocals.

He pushes gently in new directions on "Plead The Fifth," a fleet post-punk track that should send plenty of indie bands back to the practice room, and on "Sunburn," which beefs up the undernourished guitar tone of the Replacements' "The Ledge" or Def Leppard's "Love Bites" during the verses, then transfers its allegiance to U2 as the chorus rolls around.

Moore's persistence has paid off: Lead single "More Girls Like You" is at No. 11 on the Country Airplay chart this week, meaning it's the singer's biggest hit since 2013. This may force him to execute a delicate balancing act on his next album — what does an outcast do when he's suddenly embraced by those who once held him at arm's length? But for now, Moore can still play the underdog.