



With *Contract Man*, Geoff Marshall and The Mail Order Cowboys showcase a tight set of old-school country tunes that are simultaneously timeless and current and translate immediately to modern life.

Whether you're a fan of traditional country or not, you'll listen to this record and say, 'Yes, that literally happened to me the other day.' That's not surprising given Marshall's approach to songwriting. "Usually a week after something happens to me I write a song about it," he says. That results in an immediacy and authenticity that's a hallmark of traditional country and the band's sound.

Country is about stories and songs from the heart – sometimes playful, sometimes melancholy, sometimes downright vengeful – about love, life and laughing your ass off in the face of pain – and that's The Mail Order Cowboys stock in trade.

Recorded in 2016, and co-produced by Marshall and James Paul (Paramore, Dashboard Confessional), *Contract Man* draws on Marshall's wry sense of humour and the band's abundant musical chops in equal measure. From smoky hard time tunes like 'Disaster,' to whimsical offerings like 'Hank Williams Hanky,' through classic sounding tracks such as 'It's Wrong For Me To Love You (Like I do),' any listener with a pulse will find their own struggles reflected in these songs immediately. And nowhere more so than on Marshall's personal favourite, a duet with Jasmine Bleile (Ladies of the Canyon) entitled 'Pretty Easy To Love,' which he wrote as a gift to his sister for her wedding.

Growing up in Greenwood, Nova Scotia, Marshall was surrounded by music early on. "My parents had a band called the Keynotes, so my older brothers and sisters were already singing together when I started." It was just what his family did, he adds: "We'd sing five part harmonies driving around in my parents van just to keep ourselves entertained."

"My mum was a Bluenose farm girl who played organ and Dad was a Newfie weapons handler who played bass. My uncle Russ was in several bands in Newfoundland, including one that opened for the The Mamas & the Papas and another that had a local CBC TV show. My grandmother, Bernice, played piano and my grampy Eddie played mandolin and fiddle." When it came to getting into music, he adds: "I had no choice, really."

Prior to stepping on stage for his first gig at age five in 1968, however, Marshall was reluctant. "We were going to sing The Mighty Quinn, but I hadn't learned the lyrics. I remember my brother

saying, 'Look, just come out and look cute and people will love you.' I was there to sell the show, as a prop, basically, but it was great."

In the mid-1970s Marshall's family moved to Northern Ontario. "We lived in Holtyre, a gold mining town five miles off the highway north of Kirkland Lake. I basically joined the first band that would have me and got the hell out of Dodge and onto the road."

Marshall played in everything from punk to reggae bands, lived in Toronto and later Montreal, and worked as an illustrator, cartoonist and artist. It was actually a weekly open mic night at The Wheel Club in Montreal that led him back to his country roots as a performer. "The Wheel has been open since the 1940s and they had something called Hillbilly Night, where you could get up and do two or three songs, but no electric instruments (except pedal steel), and nothing from after 1965."

When a drummer friend floated the idea of starting a "traditional, no nonsense country band," Marshall, thinking back on his childhood, figured it would be easy to put together. It wasn't, he says, in part because it took time for him to find his voice.

At the time, he explains, in writing his own songs there were no rules or limitations. "It was undisciplined and so I didn't develop as an artist." But learning and performing tunes by classic country artists like Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Hank Williams and Johnny Cash "lit the lights," Marshall says. "I knew the songs, but hadn't played them. I took vocal lessons from Jasmine, but at first I got frustrated because I didn't think I could do what she wanted. It took about two years to get in shape vocally to interpret the music properly."

"I like to think of those songs as standards, not covers," he continues. "Country music, like jazz, is about sharing material, but also about finding your own voice. If you go out there and you're just imitating other people you're not doing your job."

After returning to Toronto in 2014, Marshall founded The Mail Order Cowboys with Gary Robertson (electric guitar), Sean Dignan (drums) and Tim Bradford (bass) and performed in classic local venues including the Dakota, Cameron House, Castro's Lounge and really anywhere that would have them; from festivals to farmhouses, to movie halls and barber shops.

When it comes to his work as both a visual artist and as a musician it's all about the story. "It basically comes from the same place. I don't see a big line between art, photography and music. They have to be sincere and cover topics people relate to like heartache and disappointment; the things people need help with."

Although there's a connection between all Marshall's creative efforts, the band is a far more social thing, he says. It's the immediate reaction from the crowd and the dialogue with audiences that Marshall and the band crave and, at the core, what fuels both the Mail Order Cowboys' efforts on *Contract Man* and their signature brand of homemade honky-tonk.