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New Music

Dwight Yoakam

“Second Hand Heart”
(Reprise)

Dwight Yoakam is a high-concept classicist. He inhabits an era and geography all his own, a remembered 1960s California where Buck Owens and the Byrds somehow reigned together in harmony. It’s a place and time where a songwriter’s job — forged from exemplars like Hank Williams and Carl Perkins, polished by the British Invasion and California pop and honed by the impatience of punk — was to capture the deepest emotions in the fewest words, preferably monosyllables. In the title track of his new album, “Second Hand Heart,” Mr. Yoakam sings about new romance after bitter experience: “Pick up all those small hopes back off the ground/’Cause after years of tears it’s hard to say what’s up or down/So if you will I’ll try to start/And take the chance that we might fall apart.”



The album is a reckoning with grown-up love, a battle against disillusionment and a big brash stomp. It was produced by Mr. Yoakam with his road band for backup; they did some recording sessions between arena shows opening for the country hitmaker Eric Church. Even the ballads are pugnacious, buttressed by the band’s three-guitar lineup, while Mr. Yoakam’s voice flaunts its rural drawl and holler, breaking into a near-yodel or a rockabilly whoop every chance he gets.

There are scars and misgivings

behind the musical assurance. Brisk strumming, a galloping drumbeat, peeling lead guitar and, all of a sudden, a swoop of Beach Boys-like falsetto promise hope as Mr. Yoakam sings, “Your tortured heart’s soft anguished pleas/rescued by love shall be set free” — but, as the song’s title points out, that’s “In Another World,” not this one. And the beefed-up rockabilly of “Liar,” with some of Mr. Yoakam’s most exuberant screams, shouts back at duplicity.

Mr. Yoakam has been releasing albums since 1986, and he was a country hitmaker in the 1980s and 1990s, selling millions of albums, before radio tastes changed. Now he jokes in the Elvis Presley-tinged “The Big Time” that “I ain’t never seen the big time,” but he’s happy just to be “a-sittin’ on the front porch” watching his partner do the laundry. But the album says otherwise: He’s still pushing, still sure of what makes a song alive and durable.

JON PARELES