

Paul Cauthen remembers sitting alone in an Austin house after a weekend-long bender. A life making music seemed to be slipping away. Wide awake with nothing to lose, he fell on his hands and knees right there, bowed his head, and threw down a divine gauntlet.

“I dared Him,” Cauthen says, recalling his desperate challenge to God. “I said, ‘Use me. I’ll be a rag doll. Just put me out there, let’s go. I dare you.’”

Most people don’t plead in the form of a dare. That blend of vulnerability and brash confidence is part of what makes Cauthen and his music—which often hinges on the same paradox—so compelling. Whether it was by heavenly intervention or sheer force of will, Cauthen emerged with *My Gospel* (Lightning Rod Records), his mesmerizing full-length solo debut. Produced by Beau Bedford, the record is both an artistic and personal triumph. *My Gospel* captures a young artist in full possession of a raw virtuosity that must sometimes feel like a burden: If your singing takes listeners on white-knuckle rides and you write like a hard-luck Transcendentalist poet who abandoned the East Coast for the desert, you’d better do both. Anything else just wouldn’t feel like living. “I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do in life,” Cauthen says. “So I just kept on working. Even when I didn’t hardly have money to eat, my songs allowed me to get into the studios. I wrote my way into this thing.”

The album is called *My Gospel*, but make no mistake: These are songs about Earthly struggles to love, connect, and just get by. “I’m not super religious,” Cauthen says. “I don’t believe God is this guy wearing a white cloak who comes down with wings and beautiful sandals. I do believe that people are put into other people’s lives for reasons, and those reasons are unexplained. I believe *that* is God.”

Americana music fans will remember Cauthen’s name from Sons of Fathers, the raucous Texicana group he co-founded in 2011 with bassist David Beck. The band earned glowing praise from *Rolling Stone*, *NPR*, and others, thanks to two albums that climbed into the Top 10 of the Americana Music Chart. “We had just got off the road with Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes, playing for 7,000 and 12,000 people a night,” Cauthen says. “And I quit. I just knew it wasn’t where I was supposed to be anymore.”

That was three years ago—and the impetus for ending up in that apartment in Austin. Cauthen has since learned to channel his racing mind and rumbling baritone into the blues, gospel, and rock-and-roll that fuel *My Gospel* with gale-force power. Over the course of three years, Cauthen recorded the album in several different studios across the country: Willie Nelson’s Arlyn Studios in Austin; FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals; Sargent Recorders in Los Angeles; Modern Electric Sound Recorders in Dallas. The result is a quintessentially American album unlike anything in recent memory. “We were going for timeless. We were going for righteous. Those were the two words that we focused on while we were recording,” Cauthen says. “That’s it.”

Cauthen has been the strongest, loudest singer in the room for as long as he can remember. He grew up in Tyler, Texas, where his grandfather—a songwriter and gospel song leader originally from Lubbock who worked with artists including Buddy Holly, Sonny Curtis, and other Crickets—taught Cauthen and his two sisters to sing harmony. “He threw us all in the bathtub because it sounded really good in there,” Cauthen says with a laugh. Sundays and Wednesday evenings were spent at the Church of Christ, singing a cappella in the choir. “My granddad was all about music. He’d always ask people, ‘Can you sing? What songs do you know?’” Cauthen lovingly imitates his grandfather as he shares the memory, changing his inflection to sound both excited and earnest.

When his grandfather died, Cauthen was 10 years old and heartbroken. He abandoned the guitar he’d taught him to play. “It made me too sad,” he says simply. But his grandmother pushed him to pick it up again, and she handed over his grandfather’s ’58 Gibson acoustic along with Willie Nelson’s *Red Headed Stranger* as she told him, “Learn every bit of Willie’s licks. Then you’ll be a guitar player.” She also put plenty of Elvis, Roy Orbison, Waylon Jennings, the Everly Brothers, and more in his hands.

As a teenager, Cauthen got into more trouble than most. He got caught with weed and did a little time in jail, then got kicked out of college. “You have to get kicked out of something in order to be a true songwriter, whether it’s kicked out of school, or kicked out of your house, or kicked out of a marriage, or kicked into jail,” Cauthen says, only half-joking. “I got all those on my résumé.” He started working in oil and natural gas to make ends meet, surveying land and enjoying being outside. But all the while, he never stopped singing.

Cauthen delivers the songs on *My Gospel* with the tortured showmanship of Jerry Lee Lewis and seductive ease of Elvis. The idea of a life-affirming power found in the connectedness of people courses throughout the record. The album kicks off with “Still Drivin’,” which calls up the swampy finger-picking of Jerry Reed as it proclaims survival. “It’s my don’t-give-up anthem,” Cauthen says. “Keep on truckin’.” As he thunders, “Still drivin’ / when’s this break gonna come?” the word “break” points to both a career breakthrough and the universal need for rest. “I love to leave the plots of songs open-ended,” he says, enjoying the different possibilities for interpretation the track allows.

Cauthen co-wrote all of the songs on the album with his motley crew of “favorite songwriting buddies” save two, “I’ll Be the One” and “Grand Central,” which he wrote alone. As Cauthen begs for a chance in “I’ll Be the One,” he swivels between cocky self-assurance and humble beseeching, crooning, “Oh, I could be your kind of guy / whatever that is, cold, sweet, shy.” It’s a signature Cauthen vocal performance: playful but also masterful. “Grand Central” uses crying steel to capture the loneliness of rock bottom. Written in about seven minutes not long after he left Sons of Fathers, the song offers a moving portrait of a man who’s running out of options but remains proud as he mulls over self-inflicted wounds, confessing, “The only one that’s hurting is me.”

“You’re as Young as You’ll Ever Be” has assumed deep personal significance for Cauthen. He wrote the song with his dear friend Victor Holk just four months before Holk died after suffering third-degree burns in a house fire. Holk, who was a sound engineer for Sons of Fathers and Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, came to Cauthen with the line that became the song’s title and heart. The two had never written together before. “It’s a haunting song for me. I don’t...” Cauthen trails off, then adds, “It’s hard to play. It’s a song I’m blessed with because Victor was a selfless human being that was all for music and the arts.” The track is one of several on the album that urges listeners to seize the day. Smoldering, piano-laced “Let It Burn” lingers in regrets and memories as it elevates the seemingly mundane. “I’m just really trying to put somebody into a place where they can take it all in and totally comprehend what happens around them,” he says. “These little moments that we have with somebody that were super beautiful that we take for granted.”

The sauntering “My Saddle” utilizes guitar, horns, percussive shakers, lush background harmonies, wolf howls, and Cauthen’s vocal prowess to conjure up imagery fit for a John Ford film—and sweep his target off her feet. The American West is one of the ever-present undercurrents on *My Gospel*: “Marfa Lights” compares a romance to the famous, sporadic heavenly light show in West Texas. “It’s a mysterious, cosmic love song,” Cauthen says.

Cauthen soars when he explores that conflicted space of crying out for help and demanding it. “Hanging Out On the Line” is one of the most stunning examples, enriched by gospel harmonies courtesy of Muscle Shoals veterans who contributed to landmark Aretha Franklin and Etta James albums. The same gorgeous harmonies flood the title track, which also serves as the album’s show-stopping closer. Cauthen launches into “My Gospel” starkly alone before being joined by the otherworldly chorus. Started with Owen Temple and finished in Muscle Shoals with Bedford and guitar player, Nik Lee, the song is a tender acknowledgement of weariness and an invitation to rest in truth, sung with empathy and love. “You have to give up everything, forfeit yourself to the situation, and hope to God that your talents are good enough,” Cauthen says of the recording process. “That’s how great records are made.”

Ultimately, Cauthen is on a mission: to make music he can be proud of that also serves a higher purpose. “On this album, I wanted to push a message that tells people that life’s short. Love the ones you’re with. Just take any opportunity to run with it—don’t think twice.”

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