

RYAN BINGHAM

The roots rocker plugs in and discovers a new talent

THREE YEARS AGO RYAN BINGHAM ROCKETED INTO THE limelight with "The Weary Kind," the Grammy-winning theme song he co-wrote and performed for the acclaimed film, *Crazy Heart*. The L.A.-based singer-songwriter cherished the success, but the experience didn't change him much. "Everything happened so fast," he says. "I just tried to hang on for the ride while it lasted. It introduced me to a lot of great musicians and actors and opened a lot of doors. But I don't think it changed my life significantly."

Bingham is accustomed to hanging on for the ride. Raised in rural Texas, he spent his teen years traveling the rodeo circuit



Anna Axster

before throwing himself into music full time. His 2007 debut album, *Mescalito*, established him as one of roots music's most promising troubadours. "I went at music with the same energy I did rodeos," he says. "The lifestyle is pretty much the same. You're on the road all the time, sleeping in the back of your truck. I was used to that."

Two follow-up albums adhered to that rustic vibe, but for his latest, *Tomorrowland*, Bingham decided to plug in and rock out. Setting up a makeshift studio in a friend's vacant house in Malibu, he began fiddling with effects gear and toying with ideas on electric guitar. A stormy rocker titled "Heart of Rhythm" set the tone. "I had been listening to Jimi Hendrix, the Clash and other punk stuff," he says. "I was sort of letting the 16-year-old kid in me come out, having fun with the guitar and really learning how to play. I had played some electric on the road, but this was the first time I had tried playing solos and leads."

After making demos, Bingham brought in a small core of backing players, as well as co-producer Justin Stanley—and a trove of vintage instruments. "We had a '55 Telecaster, an old baritone acoustic and a vintage Les Paul," Bingham says. "There were also vintage AC-30 and AC-15 amps and a bunch of old pedals, including an original Uni-Vibe and a Colorsound. We would spend hours trying various pedals, seeing what sounds we could come up with. It was great fun."

Bingham also enjoyed handling nearly all the guitar parts. "I went in thinking I would play basic rhythm tracks," he says. "I didn't think I was capable of playing some of the things I did."

The new music has offered Bingham a change of pace. "Most of the songs on the last record were sad and beat," he says. "Some were tough to get through. It's always more fun when you can break out the electric guitars and crank it up."

—Russell Hall

