

ERIC CHURCH

Album: *Chief* | Release Date: Tuesday, July 26, 2011 | Label: EMI Records

Eric Church is on a mission. You might expect someone coming off of their first two Top Ten country singles and an ACM Award for “Top New Solo Vocalist” to lock down the formula and go for more of the same, but with third album, *Chief*, Church is trying something bolder and using the opportunity provided by his success to push his music even further.

“I have a theory that all of us only get a small window of time to make records when people will really listen and care,” he says. “It’s up to us to move the needle. People like Waylon and Cash or Garth and Strait - they all took the format and said ‘We’re going over here,’ and they all changed the direction of the music a little bit.”

Church’s 2006 debut album, *Sinners Like Me*, established him as one of the most acclaimed new songwriters in country music. The follow-up, 2009’s *Carolina*, includes the singles “Love Your Love the Most” and “Smoke a Little Smoke,” which—along with the continually escalating popularity of his hard-charging live show—elevated Church to the top ranks of today’s country stars. Although “Smoke” was peaking on the charts, Church decided to take a step back to give some thought to his next creative direction.

“I took about a month off and went to a cabin in North Carolina,” he says. “We’ve always blazed our own trail and I was trying to figure out where it needed to go and, honestly, I wasn’t sure. So, I didn’t go anywhere for a month. Writers came out and we just wrote songs all day and all night. That really stoked the creative flame. Then, I spent the next six months on tour writing whenever I could.”

The songs that resulted illustrate Church’s impressive range. Some of the titles like “Drink in My Hand” or “Hungover & Hard Up,” instantly show that he’s still comfortable with the expectations of his rowdy live audience. “You’ve got to know what’s going to fire them up,” he says, “but, you also need to give them a twist, something they can’t just go back and get from the other two records.”

Other songs, like the ambitious “Springsteen” or “Like Jesus Does,” reveal complicated emotions and sophisticated song structures. Perhaps the bravest track on *Chief* is the first single, “Homeboy,” a provocative appeal from one brother to another to get back on track and make peace with his family.

“‘Homeboy’ deals with social issues and with everyday life,” says Church. “It was pretty challenging for me to take that term ‘homeboy’ and use it as slang, as a destination, and then at the end, as a spiritual place. Sonically, it’s like three or four different songs.”

"It's not something people are used to," he continues, "and there can be a price to pay for that. I've had people say 'that's strange,' 'it's odd'—things that some people might run from but, I think it's fantastic."

When it came time to record the album, Church had a sound in mind that felt different from his first two releases. "This record, more than anything else I've done, is breathing and alive," he says. "There's a wildness to it. It's untamed and not very harnessed."

This energy started with the singer's own role in the sessions. Much of *Chief* was cut live in the studio. Church played guitar with the band (and for the first time on record, electric guitar on "Like Jesus Does") and some of the final versions even use the original tracking vocal.

Church gives credit to producer Jay Joyce, with whom he has made all three of his albums, for helping to bring this excitement out on the tracks. "There's just a comfort level with Jay," he says. "We've both learned to sit back and let each other try different paths and get farther out there. A lot of stuff we just tried, like the handclap loop on 'Homeboy,' just because we weren't afraid. We never thought there was anything we couldn't do. I think it's the most aggressive record I've made because of that."

Though Eric Church's focus is on looking forward rather than looking back, he does acknowledge that the surprising success of "Smoke a Little Smoke" allowed him to explore and experiment with his new songs. Church explains, "This was the first time I picked a single because of the reaction on the road and it paid off."

The desire to capture the intensity of his live show on record is indicated right in the title of the new album. "'Chief' was my grandfather's nickname, and it has become my nickname on the road," Church reveals. "When it's show time, I put on the sunglasses and the hat, and that's how people know it's game time. This album was made from a live place; we recorded it with the live show in mind, so it just seemed right to make that the title."

If there is one thing country music needs more of, it's the attitude that is driving Eric Church, the approach behind every song on *Chief*, the fearlessness that lets an artist swing for the fences and try to leave a mark on history. "There were safer choices I could have made for sure, but I just can't feel that helps anybody," he says. "If you have any respect for the music, you'll use each chance you get to try to be one of the ones who moves the flag."



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