

Harlan T. Bobo



Photograph by Don Perry

Even after his debut release, *too much love*, captured the imagination of Memphis' music lovers, Harlan T. Bobo still remains a mystery. Arriving in Memphis nine years ago after traveling a route as circuitous as that of any fugitive, Harlan has been busy endearing himself to local fans and soaking up as much of the city's rich musical history as possible. Instead of shedding light on the man behind the music, his intensely personal lyrics have actually served to help perpetuate his enigmatic persona. However, with the release of his second album, *I'm Your Man*, one thing about Harlan T. Bobo can no longer remain an uncertainty—his musical talent is the real thing. It's true, the man with a name that could've come straight from *A Confederacy of Dunces* can write classic heartbreaker songs with the best of 'em.

Whereas *too much love* was about a relationship's soul-wrenching dissolution, *I'm Your Man* is the post-breakup album—dealing with a wide array of emotions—from fits of false confidence to the comforts of self-delusion to the relapses of despair. In terms of George Jones albums, *too much love* is *Memories of Us* and *I'm Your Man* is *The Battle*. Accordingly, the musical styles on *I'm Your Man* are more varied than on his debut. The playful whimsy of the opener, "I'm Your Man," is immediately offset by the unhinged heaviness of "God's Lamb," a powerful, propulsive number that could stand alongside Nick Cave's Book-of-Revelations-styled stompers. The aggressive, distorted voice on "Sick of It" surely can't

belong to the same guy who is practically whispering on such fragile, gentle songs as "Baptist Memorial" and "Pretty Foolish Things."

The songs on *I'm Your Man* were definitely written by Harlan with performance in mind and it shows. There is a theatrical nature to the songs, most noticeable on the monologues and dark cabaret style of "My Life." Fans of the first album should not fear, however, that Harlan has completely changed his style. The majority of the songs on *I'm Your Man* undeniably contain his signature elements—tuneful country-fied, nocturnal laments and articulate, discomforting lyrics in the confessional vein. What listener could remain unaffected when Harlan sings remorsefully of babies unborn in "So Bad?" or when he desperately tells an ex-paramour, "you'll wish you'd stayed," on "One of These Days," arguably one of his best songs yet.

The Memphis influence stands out most on the white soul stirrer, "Last Step," which could have been pilfered from Dan Penn's back catalog. It's impossible to be a musician in Memphis and not be inspired by the fascinatingly diverse tradition of the city's musical output. Though his debts are occasionally discernible, his newest ultimately reveals that Harlan is finding his own unique voice. He's already won the collective heart of Memphis, it's time for the rest of the country to discover him. He's too good to be a secret any longer.