

COUNTRY MUSIC'S AUSTRALIAN

twang



WORDS **DAVID SLY** PHOTOGRAPH **TONY SHEFFIELD**

COUNTRY MUSIC DOESN'T EQUATE TO DUSTY western trails and big hatted cowboys in the mind of Doug McIntyre. This aspiring Mittagong singer/songwriter's take on country music revolves around the Australian landscape – encompassing his job as a paramedic with the Ambulance Service of New South Wales, his role as a husband and father of three young children, and as a travelling entertainer who gets genuinely moved by the tales of many people that he meets on the road.

“The country music I love is about celebrating the Australian life,” says Doug. “Some may see a lot of what I sing about as being rather ordinary, but these are stories that people relate to, because they carry the ring of truth about ordinary people's lives.”

The product of a rural upbringing, having grown up in Goolgowi in the northern Riverina area, 36-year-old Doug has an affinity for the land and the people who work it – a theme

that runs through his first album, *Turn the Tide*, an independent release that has sold most of its first pressing since its release late last year. The album title track, for instance, tackles the delicate subject of men in rural areas suffering depression. “Mateship is a big part of Australian culture,” says Doug, “and helping mates when they're doing it tough is something we all have to remain aware of.”

In his day job as a paramedic, Doug gets to see personal drama at especially close range, and while no specific incidents in ambulances have made their way into song lyrics, it has given him a rich understanding of human emotion. “I've seen people at their very worst and at their very best, and that has given me a huge appetite for understanding the human condition. I suppose I'm trying to grasp that in my songs, though these two jobs of mine are quite separate. They don't intertwine, and even though they are both very intensive, I've learned to switch them on and off. It's an unusual but quite happy marriage between these two sides of what I do.”

Other poignant songs from Doug's debut album are the product of personal reflections. When visiting the Australian National War Memorial in Canberra, Doug showed his young son the name of his great uncle who had died during World War I, serving in the Fourth Light Horse. The moment put him in a reflective mood, which prompted the emotive song *The Man Who Might Have Been*. "It was a proud but also very sad moment as I lifted up my son to place a poppy by the name of Nan's brother," says Doug. "I couldn't stop myself from thinking about the potential of our great young men that never came back from war." The song has become a favourite with audiences, as Doug gets invited to perform it at Anzac Day ceremonies in the Southern Highlands, and it earned a Top 5 nomination at the Tamworth Songwriters' Awards.

"I feel that I need to tell stories in my songs – the genuine stories of the real people. If I wasn't doing that, I'd feel as though I'd be short-changing an audience," Doug says. "I have a great love of Australia and the characters that I meet along the way, and being proud of Australia means that I take pride in our history. These are the stories we should tell."

While his CD collection is eclectic – everything from the Three Tenors to jazz – Doug believes that country is the right medium for his songs. "It's a vehicle for storytelling, with an audience attuned to listening intently. A lot of people come to country music when they are older and more appreciative of emotive sentiments in a song. I find that audiences get touched by my songs; that they strike a chord with something in their own lives."

But what makes them country songs? Doug says it's not about the chords or the instruments used, but something more primal. "It's no great mystery, really – it's the twang that cuts through in some form, whether it be in the voice, the guitar, even the lyrics. It's gotta have that twang; you don't hear it in hip hop; you don't hear it in hard rock songs – the twang is the signature of country."

Doug says his twang is purely Australian. "I've always sung in my own accent. I'd think of myself as a phoney if my singing voice sounded American. When he started singing in his rich Australian accent, John Williamson created a benchmark; he's made it OK for the Australian drawl to be our take on the country twang, and he's paved the way for artists like me to just be myself when I'm singing."

While *Turn the Tide* is Doug's first album release, music has been simmering inside him since childhood. He got his first guitar at 14 and became a confident lounge room performer for friends, though ambition eventually saw him turn to local talent shows to get heard by a bigger audience – and he succeeded. Three years ago he entered the songwriter category of regional club contests and started winning prizes and enthusiastic responses from audiences. Encouraged, he pursued the talent show circuit for 18 months – a testing period that taught him stagecraft and gave him belief that there was a willing audience for his original music.

It also enabled Doug to win a scholarship to the Country Music Association of Australia's Australian College of Country Music. As one of 22 participants in a two week residential course at Calrossy School in Tamworth, Doug was tutored in performance, songwriting and business techniques – skills that are greatly helping him now as he manages his own flourishing performance and recording career. "The big names in country music came in to work with us, and I was like a sponge, learning and networking as much as I could," he says. "It was a great step forward for me because it means I'm now doing what I love." 