

Tony Joe White ... *The Shine*

Tony Joe White has accomplished much in the years since he emerged from his home in Louisiana's swamp country and the hardscrabble circuit of Texas honky-tonks. His music is part of America's soundtrack – sparse and elegant, filled with shadows, sadness and beauty. Nobody else writes songs like these – songs that evoke both the mysteries of the place where he was raised and the spirits that haunt us all in our most private, lonely moments.

Nobody sings them like White either. That dark baritone, scarred and sweet, brings these songs to life like none other. Even so, others have memorably interpreted his songs, from Brook Benton's unforgettable take on "Rainy Night in Georgia" in 1970 to Tina Turner's intensely soulful rendition of "Steamy Windows." Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Roy Orbison, Dusty Springfield, Etta James – iconic artists in their own right have honored "the Swamp Fox" by cutting his tunes. Others have joined White, with Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Michael McDonald, Waylon Jennings, Emmylou Harris, Lucinda Williams and Shelby Lynne among those who have paid tribute as guests on recent, theme-oriented projects such as *The Heroines* and *Uncovered*.

But with *The Shine*, released September 28 on White's Swamp Records imprint, this long road circles and comes back toward where it began. Before exploding onto the Top 10 with "Polk Salad Annie" in 1969, before beginning his ongoing commitment to perform regularly for fans in markets as distant as Europe and Australia, White built his vision on a bedrock of blues, backwoods country, and sounds too much his own to categorize. This foundation is simple yet seductive and strong: Within its fabric of raw guitar, hypnotic rhythm and spellbinding lyrical imagery, White's soul pulls from its roots and reasserts itself with deep conviction.

There are no all-star cameos on *The Shine* – only White on guitar, harmonica and vocals, bassist George Hawkins, drummer "Swamp Man" Jack Bruno, Tyson Rogers on keyboards, John Catchings on cello, and a selection of songs that had sprouted in White's imagination over the previous few months. "They just started stacking up on me and my wife Leann over the wintertime," White says. "They hit me every day and every night. When I'd go to bed, they were going through my mind. It was really cool stuff, and I was like, 'Man, I've got to put these down, just to see what they sound like.'"

Each one told a different story, but taken together they seemed to call White back to the well that had first nourished him. From the feverish, dreamlike images that course through "Season Man" to the heartbreak that colors the romantic nostalgia of "All," these tracks live on their own yet exist together as memories and premonitions of a single story.

"They're all about truth and life and daily or nightly happenings," White says. "They all came to me, the guitar parts and the words, maybe at a campfire down by the river with a few cold beers. I'll sit there, strum a little bit, and all of a sudden a lick will come – except for the ones I wrote with Leann. She's a real word person, so she'll say 'what do

you think about this,’ and all of a sudden a little light goes off in my head, a guitar chord will pop up and here we go.”

“Paintings on a Mountain” is one example of this collaboration between Tony Joe and Leann White. “We have a place up in Taos, New Mexico,” he says. “Our house sits on land that backs up to an Indian village. It’s a magic spot. In the late afternoon, the sun makes so many paintings on the mountainside; they change as the sun moves on. A lot of that was written by Leann.”

The guiding principle for *The Shine* can be heard in one of its details, from “Tell Me Why,” which preaches “it’s all about the song, keeping it simple. Got to have passion. Got to have soul.” That was the mission when White and his musicians began cutting these tracks in the living room of his home south of Nashville. Beneath high ceilings, on original hardwood floors in a building old enough to have been used as a battlefield hospital during the Civil War, they played with minimal direction, trusting in the moment as they brought these songs to life. “Sometimes I would say ‘simplify,’ but that’s all,” White remembers. “It was almost like I was a bystander. I had this weird feeling of looking at everybody as we played, watching the song happen without really trying very hard to make it happen.”

Most songs were captured in one take. The emotions and connections were so strong that even without any rehearsal, with only the barest indication of which chord followed the next, each one seemed to draw deeper from somewhere within White. He sensed this himself, sometimes not even singing where he was supposed to because the music they were laying down was so compelling. “All of a sudden I’d remember, ‘Hey, you should have been singing right there,’” White says, chuckling. “So I’d go back later and punch it in. But we were all very aware that something was happening in the air between us. Maybe there were some spirits walking about.”

They roamed especially free on the one track where White recorded solo, “Roll Train Roll.” “I think that one was a matter of being taken back,” he reflects. “That’s what made it sound like I was going back to listening to Lightnin’ Hopkins, when I lived on the Boeuf River in Goodwill, Louisiana, first learning the guitar. That’s the kind of stuff I’d play out on the porch at night.”

One doesn’t have to have been a Tony Joe White fan to appreciate that there is something elusive and hard to define in this music. But these depths surface in *The Shine*. More than a return to an artist’s seminal references, this project seeks the seed from which his work took form. White finds it on *The Shine*; from here, all that he produced before and all that will follow come into a revealing and enduring light.