

For singer/songwriter Jesse Daniel, country music is nothing short of a life force. Hailing from a rural mountain town on California's Central Coast, the Austin-based artist first explored his innate passion for music by playing drums in punk bands, then drifted down a troubled path that included years of battling addiction and spending time in and out of jail and rehab. As he took his first steps toward getting clean, Daniel immersed himself in the pure joy of writing country songs, fully embracing the unbridled vitality of California country and bringing a lived-in honesty to his lyrical storytelling. Since releasing his 2018 self-titled debut on his own record label, he's earned great esteem as a country traditionalist and built a wildly devoted international following—thanks in no small part to his freewheeling live show and tendency to tour nearly 200 days a year. Recently signed to Lightning Rod Records, Daniel now offers up his fourth studio album *Countin' The Miles*: a high-powered body of work born from his commitment to contributing to the legacy of country music.

His first release for Lightning Rod (a Nashville-based independent label whose catalog includes LPs from Jason Isbell, James McMurtry, and Billy Joe Shaver), *Countin' The Miles* takes its title from a soul-stirring track that speaks to the beauty and struggle of a life lived mainly on the road. "That song's about being a traveling musician, and about how going after your dreams isn't always easy or glamorous," says Daniel. "Over the years we've worked our way up from playing to nobody to playing sold-out shows, and at some point I realized that this is what I was born to do. It felt right to name the album after a song that's ultimately about my commitment to country music."

The follow-up to his 2023 live LP *My Kind Of Country Live at The Catalyst*, *Countin' The Miles* marks Daniel's first time at the helm as sole producer. "I had such a clear vision for this record, so I knew I had to take ownership over every aspect of the instrumentation, arrangement and sound," says Daniel, who's previously co-produced his albums alongside the legendary Tommy Detamore. Recorded at Arlyn Studios in Austin, *Countin' The Miles* features a stacked lineup of A-list musicians, including pianist Ronnie Huckaby and fiddle player Gene Elders (both members of George Strait's Ace in the Hole Band) and bassist Kevin Smith (a longtime member of Willie Nelson's touring band). But while the album bears all the hallmarks of Daniel's brand of the Bakersfield sound—the twanging guitar tones, crying pedal-steel and hard-hitting honky-tonk rhythms—Daniel instills every moment with a gritty intensity held over from his punk days. Also featuring the soulful vocals of Jodi Lyford (Daniel's partner, bandmate, manager, and frequent co-writer), the result is a selection of songs both exquisitely crafted and electrifying in impact.

In a glorious introduction to its force-of-nature energy, *Countin' The Miles* kicks off with "Comin' Apart At The Seams": a raucous yet reflective track that tells the story of his upbringing. Backed by hard-charging drumbeats, Daniel embeds his lyrics with indelible wisdom gleaned in part from his mother (an artist and welder) and father (a Kelly-Moore Paints employee who played in country and classic-rock cover bands and frequently gigged in local bars), who split up when he was nine. "That song's about where life has taken me, what I overcame, the lessons I've learned so far," says Daniel. "It took me a long time to figure out, but one of the biggest messages is that there's nobody coming to save you. If you're losing your way and everything's falling apart, it's your job to pick yourself up and get back on track again."

An album rooted in Daniel's deep conviction in country as a way of life, *Countin' The Miles* next launches into the lighthearted swing of "That's My Kind Of Country." "I've had a lot of fans tell me, 'Jesse Daniel plays my kind of country,'" he explains. "We took that and ran with it, it's become our credo." Later, on "Tomorrow's Good Ol' Days," Daniel takes a more incisive look at the world around him, arriving at a stomping piece of social commentary featuring singer/songwriter Ben Haggard—son of country legend Merle Haggard, an essential touchtone for that track in particular.

“When I wrote this song, I immediately heard Ben’s voice on the second verse. I just knew it would make the song and when I heard him sing it, it all came together.”

Echoing Daniel’s desire to “showcase all the things I love about country music,” *Countin’ The Miles* encompasses everything from the brooding murder balladry of “Ol’ Montana” to the heavy-hearted reminiscence of “When Your Tomorrow’s In The Past” (one of several songs written with Lyford, who duets with Daniel on the gorgeously aching slow-burner). “It’s a song about looking back at a love you thought would last forever, just to realize you let it slip right through your hands. Life happens, things get real. It takes hard work and dedication to make a relationship work, and unfortunately it doesn’t always work out.” Daniel says of the latter. Closing out with a bang, *Countin’ The Miles* ends on the breakneck catharsis of “Cut Me Loose”—a downhearted but sublimely frenzied track further revealing the sheer depth of Daniel’s musicality. “That song’s a classic story of wanting to drink your troubles away after getting your heart broken,” he says. “I love how in country music you can take what would be a sad song and put it to a fast beat with some ripping guitars, and all of a sudden it’s an anthem.”

Built on Daniel’s strongest songwriting to date, *Countin’ The Miles* serves as a vessel for the one-of-a-kind storytelling voice he’s steadily cultivated since childhood. “When I was eight or nine I started writing poems and short stories about people going on all kinds of adventures, and then in high school that turned into writing songs,” he recalls. Growing up in a barn house as the oldest of five brothers, he sometimes sat in on drums with his father’s band but soon became enmeshed in a destructive scene in nearby Santa Cruz. “By freshman year of high school I was selling pot, taking pills, getting drunk and high at school and basically flunking out,” says Daniel, who was later expelled. Addicted to methamphetamine and heroin throughout his late teens and early 20s, he sold drugs and busked on the street to support his habit and found himself homeless much of the time. During a fleeting period of clarity, he met Lyford while playing a gig at a venue where his now-fiancé was working as a tattoo artist—a turn of events that eventually led him on his journey of leaving the past behind. “I was living in a very dark place for years, and finally had had enough. I didn’t want to live that way anymore,” says Daniel. “I got back to my roots and started focusing on my songwriting, and it felt like free therapy.”

Sober since January 2017, Daniel joined forces with Lyford to launch their label Die True Records the following year, with *Jesse Daniel* marking their inaugural release and their catalog now featuring his 2020 album *Rollin’ On* and 2021’s *Beyond These Walls*. With his job experience including electrician’s apprentice, butcher’s apprentice, and plumber (as well as ranch work, construction work, and “probably a hundred restaurant jobs”), Daniel next applied his stringent work ethic to his touring schedule and set off on a trajectory that’s brought him from tiny biker bars on the West Coast to touring in the UK and Europe. “All my heroes were road dogs, so it’s always been an aspiration of mine to tour a lot—that’s how you really get to connect with the people who love your music,” he says. To that end, Daniel’s countless conversations with fans at shows have profoundly reinforced his sense of purpose. “I’ve had a lot of people tell me how my music has changed their lives for the better, especially people who’ve had their own problems with addiction,” he says. “It’s become my mission to use my story to help people in some way—not to be a poster child for being clean and sober, but to help anybody realize that you can live a totally happy and productive life without whatever it is that you’re struggling with.”

As his following continues to expand, Daniel recently experienced a major boost in his audience after teaming up with Lyford to create the theme song to *Workin’ Man*—a Netflix special from fast-rising comedian Dusty Slay, who later talked up the track on a podcast hosted by arena-headlining

comedy star Nate Bargatze. Now gearing up to hit the road again in support of *Countin' The Miles*, Daniel remains intent on delivering a live show that's transcendent on multiple levels. "It's funny because even though it's country music, people sometimes end up crowd-surfing like it's a punk show; the energy is just so high," he says. "Our goal is to always give people the rowdiest, most fun show that they've ever been to, and to create a space where they can have a good time and escape from everything. It doesn't matter if you're a redneck from the sticks or a city guy who works a tech job—you're in this room with us, so that means you're a country fan."