



**Joshua Hedley**  
*Neon Blue*

Joshua Hedley is “a singing professor of country & western,” he declares on his raucous and witty new album, *Neon Blue*. It might sound like a punchline, but it’s not. An ace fiddle player, a sharp guitarist, and a singer with a granite twang, he’s devoted his entire life to the study of this genre. Ask him about it and he’ll explain: “When all my friends went off to college, I went to Nashville. I was 19 years old playing honkytonks and getting an education.” His 2018 debut, *Mr. Jukebox*, showcased his deep knowledge of country’s history, in particular the beery ballads of the 1950s and ‘60s. His mentors were George Jones, Ray Price, and Glen Campbell, but his most remarkable accomplishment was putting his own spin on their style.

*Neon Blue*, on the other hand, examines a very different, often forsaken era: the early 1990s. “The last bastion of country music,” says the professor, “was the early 1990s, roughly 1989 and 1996. You could turn on the radio and immediately know you’re hearing a country song. You could still hear steel guitar and fiddle. But there was a hard fork around 1996 or ‘97, when country veered off into pop territory. *Neon Blue* asks, What if that fork had never happened? What if country kept on sounding like country?” Opener “Broke Again,” with its stuttering hook and bouncy riff, would’ve sounded right at home on a playlist between Garth Brooks’ “Friends in Low Places” and Alan Jackson’s “Chattahoochie, and the majestic “River in the Rain” sounds like a thousand lighters held high during an encore. That era may have been dismissed by traditionalists at the time as slick or overproduced, but Hedley finds something exciting in that old hat-act sound, and *Neon Blue* plays up the excitement of bigger-than-life choruses, the relatable emotions of those sad-eyed ballads, and the inventiveness of the lively production. “The sound is modern,” he says, “but it’s still discernibly country.”

Hedley has been a presence in Nashville for nearly twenty years, although you have to know where to find him. You have to brave the tourists on Broadway, bypass the three-story bars blasting Journey, and make your way to Robert’s Western World, a time-capsule honkytonk from a different era, an oasis in a town where twang is constantly being run down by pedal pubs. “It’s the last holdout. It’s exactly the same now as it was when I started playing there seventeen years ago. It never doesn’t feel like home because it never doesn’t feel familiar.” He’s got tenure at Robert’s, playing hours long sets full of his own songs and country classics, and he hates to miss a show. In

2018, when he opened for Jack White at the Bridgestone Arena (the largest venue in town), the next night he was back at Robert's playing to a boot-scooting audience. "I don't plan on ever, ever leaving that place! They're going to either have to fire me or I'm gonna have to die. I don't see either of those things happening anytime soon."

That place informed the sound and style of *Mr. Jukebox*, which introduced him to a wider audience beyond the city limits and established him as one of Nashville's most knowledgeable and exciting artists. But soon after its release, "I fell off the wagon and started drinking pretty heavily again. I'm always more creative when I'm sober, and all of that creativity just went out the window. I had nothing going on." Hedley worked hard to sober up and get his life back together, eventually landing a new record deal with New West. But the songs weren't coming as easily as they once had. Actually, they weren't coming *at all*.

But he had an idea for an album—a direction he wanted to take, an era in country history he wanted to explore—and he sought out some local songwriters to help him bring it to life. "If I was gonna make this happen, I knew I had to do some co-writing." First up was Carson Chamberlain, a Nashville legend who played steel guitar for Keith Whitley, tour-managed for Clint Black, and wrote hits for Alan Jackson and George Strait. "When I was growing up, I didn't know who he was, but I definitely knew his songs! Carson brought in Wyatt McCubbin and Zach Top, and pretty soon the ideas were bouncing off each other like molecules in an atom."

One of their first efforts was "Neon Blue," whose livewire energy and rowdy sing-along barely disguise its bruised heart. "For whatever reason that title just popped into my head, and I was obsessed with it. You've got the neon lights of a honkytonk, but you've also got that sadness. It was amazing to see how they can turn a loose idea into a really tight song. It was a crazy learning experience, and I came out feeling like a better songwriter. We got the vibe for the album from 'Neon Blue,' and every other song was built around it."

After making *Mr. Jukebox* with a loose group of hell-raising friends, Hedley decided to record his follow-up with professional session players—a Nashville tradition. Producers Skylar Wilson (Justin Townes Earle, Lindi Ortega) and Jordan Lehning (Rodney Crowell) corralled an all-star crew featuring some of the city's best players, who made Hedley step up his game. "All the players on this record are the people who are playing on Top 40 hits. They're the professionals playing two or three sessions a day, and it was crazy to see them work. All I had was solo work tapes—just guitar and vocals. They listened to those tapes, made charts, and cut the tracks. It's like I came in with skeletons and they put flesh on them. They made them into human beings."

During the process of co-writing and recording *Neon Blue*, the singing professor became the student, learning lessons he'll apply to everything he does next. "I learned so much making this record. It really changed me. I've always been a song guy, but I've become more interested in exploring a singular idea for an album. I feel much more confident in having a specific vision of what an entire record can be. Call it a concept album or whatever you want, but I think it's more about just having that focus and direction. It's definitely opened up another layer of the creative process, and I don't want to lose that."