

IT'S GOOD TO BE *Home*

He's been an actor, a model and a musician. He dates beautiful women, travels, surfs, rides motorcycles and advocates for causes he believes in. But there are two places singer-songwriter Mark Wystrach feels grounded — at home on the family ranch near Sonoita, and onstage with his Midland bandmates.

BY KELLY VAUGHN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT BAXTER



It's a Saturday night in Phoenix, and the Celebrity Theatre is at capacity. Moths flutter under parking lot lights, casting funny little shadows and lifting and dropping and fluttering over Willie Nelson's tour bus.

Two snaking lines — one for merchandise, the other for beer — are out the theater door. The building hums. That's for Willie, of course. But when the house lights go down, the stage lights go up and the opening act, Midland, comes on, there's a collective hush.

Then whispers.
Who are they, again?
Whoa.

Old-style honky-tonk. Modern country rumble. Close your eyes, and you're in a roadside bar in the sticks. Open your eyes, and you're pulled to the three friends from Dripping Springs, Texas, who are making all the noise.

The lead singer, Mark Wystrach, croons: "Second row, pretty girls, we turn 'em on. Then we're gone." And the pretty girls in the second row — and elsewhere in the theater — eat it up.

Wystrach is — as the saying goes — one tall drink of water.

Then this, as he ends the song, *Electric Rodeo*:

"My whole family's up here from our ranch in Sonoita, where I learned all about honky-tonk," Wystrach says. "It's good to be home."

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Wystrach should be unloading bags of feed from a trailer. Instead, he's sitting in front of the fireplace in his parents' ranch house, playing his 1968 Fender Newporter and singing an old Johnny Horton song.

... While one survivor, wounded and weak, Comanche, the brave horse, lay at the general's feet. ...

Wystrach's mother, Grace, stands in the kitchen, listening. She joins him in the song for a few lines. Just quietly, though — maybe a little moved and proud and trying not to split at the seams about it.

It's the Friday morning after Thanksgiving at the Mountain View Hereford Ranch in Rain Valley, near Elgin. The air is cold, the sky leaning toward sepia — that color of an almost storm. If the rain comes, it might build over the hills to the south, rich mounds of mesquite and grass that line the Mexican border, then sweep into the valley, drenching

the cattle, turning the rich soil of this region to mud.

But the house, built in 1979, is warm. Grace runs the ranch. Wystrach's father, Michael, a former U.S. Marine Corps colonel and pilot, oversees the family's lodging and dining operations in town, the Sonoita Inn and The Steak Out. Four older sisters often visit the ranch, as does Wystrach's twin brother, Mike. One sister, Amie, helps Grace with the day-to-day operations.

The ranch is a family affair, and it's here that Wystrach began cutting his musical teeth.

"My mother grew up here in Rain Valley," he says. "It's very isolated, and she and her sisters had a record player and could go and buy a record once a month. She basically grew up on Hank Williams Sr. and became a country music fiend."

So, naturally, Wystrach and his siblings grew up on the classics. Johnny Horton. Jim Reeves. Marty Robbins. Conway Twitty. George Jones. Johnny Cash. Waylon Jennings.

"Music was so important to my parents," Wystrach says. "They went to see shows, and when they were growing up, they only had AM radio and books. My

Singer Mark Wystrach plays his 1968 Fender Newporter guitar at his family's ranch house in Rain Valley, near Elgin.



dad was gone a lot for work, so we'd just hang out at the ranch and my mom would play tapes for us."

After the Wystrachs bought The Steak Out in 1978, the children spent every Friday, Saturday and Sunday there, working as they got older and listening to live country music. It both fed Colonel Wystrach's own dreams and planted a seed in the head of his youngest child, who, when he was born, was a surprise. The Wystrachs expected one baby. Instead, they got two, in the form of the twin boys.

"My dad wanted to be an actor and a musician so badly," Wystrach says. "I get being a ham from him. I get my sincerity, my sensitivity, my emotion from my mother. But whatever charm I have? That comes from him."

The "whatever" charm he tries to downplay is, in reality, a helluva lot of charm. And he's done all right by it in his career.

Before he started to make it as a musician, Wystrach was both a model and an actor, maybe best known for his role as Fox Crane on the NBC soap opera *Passions*. He's been in a Gucci ad campaign and on the pages of fashion magazines here and in Europe. He dates beautiful women, travels, surfs, rides motorcycles, advocates for causes he believes in. But there are two places Wystrach feels grounded — home at the ranch, and onstage with the men he calls his brothers, bandmates Jess Carson and Cameron Duddy.

"Music was always this huge part of me, and now it's this dream coming true," Wystrach says. "And how it's happened was never premeditated. It's serendipitous. We all met each other in Los Angeles and had commonalities about the sorts of music we like to listen to and wanted to make."

Although they became friends in L.A., they played together for the first time at Duddy's wedding in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Then it became a habit. They started writing. They pulled their name from Dwight Yoakam's song *Fair to Midland*. And they worked and worked and worked.

It worked.

They opened for Yoakam in 2016. Wil-

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lie, too, of course, for several shows. This summer, they'll tour with Faith Hill and Tim McGraw. A full-length album should drop in September. The band, it seems, is riding the wave of acclaim that came with its self-titled EP, released last year. *Entertainment Weekly* lists the band among the "10 Artists Who Will Rule in 2017," and *Rolling Stone* dubbed the boys "Solid. Country. Gold."

Still, Wystrach retains the humility and even keel he learned on the ranch, where he still helps with roundups,

fence mending and more.

"It's a privilege to get to do this for a living," he says. "We want to give everyone the bang for their buck, just like Willie Nelson and our other inspirations do. You get a sense that they're not jaded, that there's still a joy in what they do. We see ourselves equally important as singers and songwriters as we do as entertainers. We never mail it in, and we'll work really hard to make each show a little different."

So much so that the band regularly

plays shows of three or three-and-a-half hours. It's exhausting, Wystrach says, and people don't know who you are, and sometimes it's just a grind. That's when he escapes to the ranch, when he goes back to Sonoita, even if it's only in his head.

"This will sound corny, but I come to this place a lot," he says. "I come here when I meditate. I could walk this entire valley, walk from here to Sonoita, from here to Mexico and back, in my mind. This place is always inside me.

The ranch is still very much a part of Mark Wystrach's life, and he visits often, both to see his family and to work, often alongside Bella, an Australian shepherd.

The Chiricahua Apaches made their last stand right over here. This was a sacred place for them, and my mother raised us in that spirit — to be stewards of the land and to leave it better than you found it. That spirit's in me. My parents' spirit. My grandparents' spirit."

He pauses as he feels the weight of his words and runs a hand through

his hair. It's a habit. Part of the charm, maybe, as is the beautiful swell of emotion as he talks about the ranch. He apologizes. It's unnecessary.

"A lot of emotion runs through what I do, what we do," he says. "I don't want to do this if it doesn't make you feel something. I couldn't do this if it doesn't make you feel something." **ah**



