

Chris Young is a study in contrasts and dualities. He’s frequently complimented by music press as being a country “traditionalist” — with good reason — but he’s equally fond of pushing against stylistic boundaries. He’s an old soul with songs that express deep wisdom as well as youthful rambunctiousness. He’s got a mind for the music business and one of the nimblest voices in Nashville, but he knows when to let art speak on its own terms. Somehow, he makes it look effortless.

“I still love what I do,” says the Tennessee native, who’s notched 13 career Number Ones and more than two dozen R.I.A.A. certified projects. “I love creating music and I love making it and the fact that I get to do that for a living is a pretty incredible thing.”

After pushing through the deflating Covid-era remote songwriting trend and scoring one of his biggest hits alongside his pal Kane Brown with 2020’s “Famous Friends,” Young again embraced working without restrictions and reveling in those extreme contrasts of his artistry. The result is *Young Love & Saturday Nights*, Young’s ninth studio album and a bold statement that he’s one of the most versatile and durable talents of his era.

At 18 songs, the project is Young’s most ambitious release yet, the result of countless writing and listening sessions. Instead of chasing trends, Young turns things up — emotionally, sonically, stylistically. The ballads hit harder, the rowdy tunes are more raucous, and the anthems hit new highs. “This is what this album felt like it needed to be for me,” he says. “It’s a little louder, a little more raw. Even the stripped-down songs are heavier.”

The title track flips the iconic guitar riff from David Bowie’s “Rebel Rebel” into something new — a story of wide-eyed love and freedom about a young woman who “loves his southern drawl from north of Atlanta, that Silverado he got parked outside” that maintains the spirit of the original. Written by Jesse Frasure, Ashley Gorley, and Josh Thompson with Bowie getting a posthumous credit for the riff, it showed up in Young’s listening session with zero explanation.

“I had no idea what it was. The minute it started, I’m like, ‘Are they playing me “Rebel Rebel” right now? That’s weird,’” Young recalls. “Then I realized it was an entirely new song.”

Young tackles mortality and aging with a grace and sincerity that belies his years. “Getting Older” is dedicated to his father, Mike Harris, who has a “mind just like a wellspring full of lessons.” Young had been trying to write something along those lines, but it turned out that Johnny Clawson, Dave Fenley, and Kyle Sturrock beat him to it. The moment Young heard the song, he asked to cut it. “It’s really, really special,” he says. “It’s one of those where you hear it and you’re like, ‘Damn, I wish I wrote that.’”

There’s also “All Dogs Go to Heaven,” a powerful ode to man’s best friend. Young, who adores his own canine companion, Porter, a six-year-old German Shepherd, wrote it with a friend who was grieving the loss of his pet. “That song is going to mean a lot to people. I don’t have any kids, but my dog might as well be my kid,” says Young.

Of course, Young still excels at producing sexy, swaggering songs, a stylistic hallmark of his since “Gettin’ You Home (The Black Dress Song).” New tracks like “Call It a Day” and “Don’t Stop” continue that approach while bringing lived-in tenderness and sensitivity.

“You’ve gotta be careful, because I’ll try to turn every song into that,” Young says. “Sometimes a sexy song can come off as too corny or too aggressive if you’re not careful. There’s a very fine line you have to walk, but I’m never going to stop cutting them.”

Young goes farther than physical intimacy by exploring different phases of relationships on the album. Some of them, like “Million Miles,” are about painful memories, while “What She Sees in Me” is, in Young’s words, “like a first dance at a wedding song.” Others find complicated spots somewhere between. “Right Now” imagines a couple of people still trying to define where it’s all going. “You’re in that in-between phase of a relationship going, ‘It’s late, I can’t sleep. I’m wondering where you are and you’re wondering where I’m at. Let’s not wonder about it anymore. Let’s be in the same place,’” Young says.

Even when love has run its course, Young has an interesting way of looking at it. The closing song “Down,” which surges with Springsteen-like intensity, looks back in gratitude for a relationship that burned bright while it lasted. “It’s like, ‘Hey we knew this wasn’t going to last, but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t amazing while it did,’” he says.

*Young Love & Saturday Nights* also capably demonstrates Young’s confidence as a producer. He’s inhabited the role in various ways since he and Corey Crowder recorded 2015’s *I’m Comin’ Over* on their own, not knowing if the label would even like it. “It ended up blowing up and being one of the biggest records I’ve ever done,” he says. It’s a little-known fact that Young is quite the studio geek with specific, hands-on opinions on how he wants his records to sound.

That level of focus and attention to detail can’t be overlooked in Young’s career longevity. He signed his record deal with Sony Music Nashville at the age of 20 and has seen numerous trends come and go, all of which he and his team have navigated without losing sight of what makes him unique. He says it’s key to be always aware of what’s happening, but not let it dictate the decisions. “I’m gonna keep doing this and I refuse to take no for an answer,” he says. “I want to have my music heard and I’m going to stick around until as many people as possible get a chance to hear and experience it.”

It's a savvy balance of understanding the marketplace as well as being able to trust one’s gut when it’s pulling in the opposite direction. It’s the kind of thing Young has shown he can do extremely well, although having an abundance of dogged determination doesn’t hurt either. Thankfully, Young has both things going for him.

“The business has changed many times over the course of my career, and you’ll fall victim to not being aware,” he says. “But at the end of the day it’s still about making the best record you can.”