

Josh Kelley has covered a lot of ground, both musically and geographically. The Georgia-born singer/songwriter landed his first record deal while attending Ole Miss on a golf scholarship. He scored his first hit with 2003's "Amazing," and relocated to Los Angeles, where he crafted a string of catchy pop-rock albums. But by decade's end he'd moved to Nashville, where he scored another hit with the pure country sound of his *Georgia Clay* album. Now he resides outside Park City, Utah, with his wife, film and TV star Katherine Heigl, and their kids.

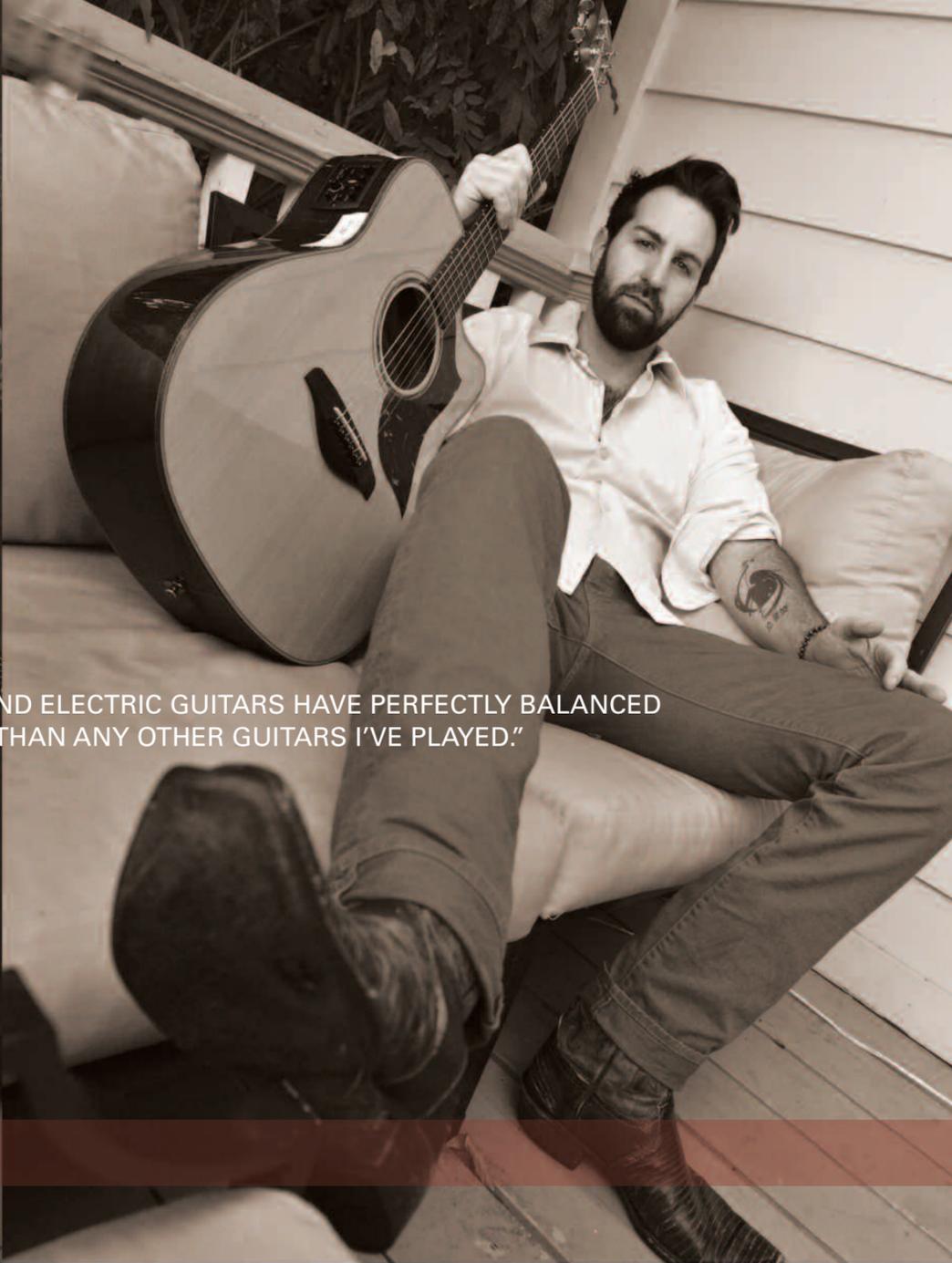
Fittingly, Josh's new music falls somewhere between polished L.A. pop-rock and Music City twang. "I just started making a new record this week," he says. "It's sort of like late-'70s Los Angeles meets Southern rock-country. It's like James Taylor, the Doobie Brothers, and Don Williams got stuck in a blender somehow. It's very soulful, and it's the best stuff I've ever done."

THREE-AND-A-HALF MINUTE MOVIES





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Josh is working at the Valencia, California, studio of legendary engineer Jim Scott, and some of his excitement stems from the fact that, for the first time in his career, he's recording everything live. "That makes the biggest difference in the world," says Josh. "Never again will I piece tracks together a little bit at a time."

What's the appeal of that '70s approach? "It sounds like your favorite vinyl album," replies Josh. "Right before I went into the studio, I got on Netflix and watched documentaries on my favorite artists of the era: Elton John. Fleetwood Mac. Steely Dan. I never would have gotten what I did out of my sessions with Jim Scott without that inspiration."

The old-fashioned, organic approach seems to suit Kelley's soulful, unpretentious songs. "These days I want my songs to be real, relatable stories," he says. "I spend lots of time on my lyrics, trying to make sure that the songs don't automatically fall into buttoned-down structures, but actually tell a great story. I don't want anything to be too predictable. I want to make three-and-a-half-minute movies."

In the studio and onstage, Josh plays his acoustic songs on Yamaha's A3M guitar, whose electronics simulate the sound of a miked instrument, even when recording direct. "I freakin' love the A-Series guitars," he declares. "The pickup system just blows my mind. The first day I tried one in the studio, I put it on its ribbon mic setting, and my engineer freaked out, because it sounds so much like a finished record when you plug it in. It's a warm, woody sound that reminds me of Jerry Douglas or Alison Krauss & Union Station. For the new recordings, I combine a miked sound with the direct-in ribbon mic sound, and it sounds so good! For live shows, I use only the direct line, and it sounds really, really dope. That's what I used this summer when I played on the Lady Antebellum tour." (Lady Antebellum's Charles Kelley is Josh's brother.)

For his electric numbers, Josh straps on an electric Yamaha SBG1802, a hefty double-cutaway model. "That guitar just screams," says Josh. "Actually, both the acoustic and electric guitars have perfectly balanced tones, more so than any other guitars I've played. In fact, the SBG1802 has such a great tone that I've even recorded it acoustically, just using a microphone."

Josh also owns an original late-'70s Yamaha SG. "It sounds as mean as the devil," he says, "It has a dark, beefy sound, and when you plug in into a nice old amp, it's the coolest sound in the world." Josh says he writes on both acoustic and electric. "Sometimes writing to acoustic can get boring, so I grab my electric and plug it into a little Yamaha THR5 amp with built-in effects. It has some cool textural-sounding delays and things that have inspired some very cool songs."

But Josh says his primary inspiration these days is fatherhood. "I've got two kids now, and that's changed everything for me. Artists and entertainers can get selfish, because it's always about you. But now I do everything I do for my family." In fact, his daughter inspired one of the best songs from *Georgia Clay*, "Naleigh Moon." "Her name is Nancy Lee, but her nickname is 'Naleigh,'" he explains. "We'd just adopted her from South Korea when I was working on that album. The lyric goes, 'I couldn't see past me till I saw you, my sweet Naleigh Moon.'"

"Having kids changed everything for me," says Josh. "It made me a lot more selfless, and it made we want to write about things like that—things that are more real."