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BRENT COBB ON FINDING HIS WAY HOME ON NEW ALBUM 'PROVIDENCE CANYON'

Georgia songwriter's superb LP, an infectious mix of country-funk and introspective fare, is a road map back to where he grew up

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

MAY 9, 2018

Brent Cobb is answering a mundane question about being nominated for a Grammy when, all of a sudden, he finds a way to steer the question back to his favorite topic: South Georgia.

"When I think about the Grammys, I think about what me and my old group of friends would have thought about it," says Cobb, the 31-year-old singer who still approaches his everyday life as though he's never left his hometown of Ellaville, Georgia, despite having moved away more than 10 years ago.

"I just feel like the 17-year-old me and my buddies would have probably been like, 'Grammys, huh?'" Cobb, who speaks in a slow drawl, now puts on a thick, affected Southern accent: "Oh yeah, we go to Grammys every Sunday and eat fried chicken after church."

With that recent **Grammy nomination** under his belt and a brand new album, *Providence Canyon*, Cobb, like Chris Stapleton before him, is poised to become the latest country singer to stand out in the blurry mid-space between Americana and mainstream country.

But in this moment, even while seated in the swanky New York City offices of his parent label, Atlantic Records, Cobb remains fixated on South Georgia. Ask the singer anything, really, and there's a decent chance the conversation will end up winding back to Cobb's native home.

The namesake of his excellent new album? That comes from Providence Canyon State Park in Lumpkin, Georgia, about 45 minutes from Ellaville. The reason Cobb sings several new songs in a newly rhythmic, almost spoken-word cadence? Cobb says he was simply trying to mimic the musical style that he hears in the way his relatives speak. Specific reference points that Cobb had in mind while making his latest record? Primarily country singer Larry Jon Wilson, born and raised a few hours east in Swainsboro, Georgia.

The swampy, bluesy roots music of Wilson, **Tony Joe White**, and Delbert McClinton and Glen Clark provided the template for *Providence Canyon*. Cobb was looking for a tougher, more lowdown sound (he and his manager came up with the goofy term "Southern-icana") after the peaceful, folksy storytelling of his 2016 breakthrough *Shine on Rainy Day*.

"There was a lot of stuff in the Sixties and Seventies that lent itself to Southern-icana," says Cobb. "It seemed like everything sounded a little more rural, maybe because of the way people grew up. Everybody grew up harder back then. Playing music in rural areas, everybody's always just trying to mimic their surroundings and their environment."

With songs indebted to Southern rock and blues, *Providence Canyon*, Cobb's second major-label release, is the singer-songwriter's attempt at showing off a different side of his Georgia-bred musical roots. Up-tempo country-funk songs like "Ain't a Road Too Long" and "Mornin's Gonna Come" set the tone. Cobb settled on a louder, raucous sound more fitting for the live stage after spending much of last year touring arenas and amphitheaters as Chris Stapleton's opening act.

"Being on that big of a stage," says Cobb, "I thought, 'Man, I gotta bring the funk, some kind of energy.'"

Cobb headed to the studio once again with his cousin, in-demand country-roots producer Dave Cobb. "Dave and I have been trying since 2006 to make a country funk album," he says. "I don't know if we achieved it yet, but it was a lot of fun trying to make it happen."