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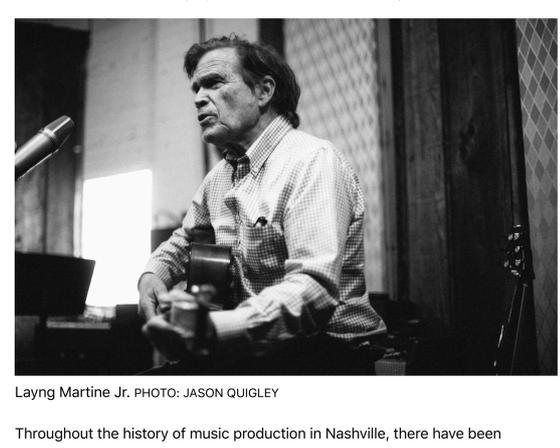
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**'Music Man'** by Layng Martine Jr. Review: Voice of a Nashville Veteran

The 81-year-old songwriter has mostly stayed behind the scenes during his decades-long career, but on a new album he sings his own songs with felicitous country style

By Barry Mazor  
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Laying Martine Jr. PHOTO: JASON QUIGLEY

Throughout the history of music production in Nashville, there have been successful, esteemed songwriters who may have seen themselves as potential performers but are less well known because, by choice or by fate, their focus narrowed to writing only. They may have been celebrated by insiders and fellow practitioners, but not so much by the larger audience for celebrity singer-songwriters.

Layng Martine Jr. is a case in point. He's an inducted member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, yet few outside of the songwriting community would have known him before his poignant 2019 memoir, "Permission to Fly," spelled out his story—from errand boy for Benny Goodman, to apprenticeship in the pop circles of New York's Brill Building in its early '60s heyday, and on to Nashville's Music Row and hard-fought but lasting success.

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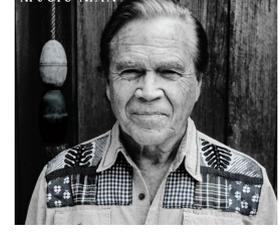
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Working across the country/pop borderlines, he's had songs recorded by the British Invasion's Dave Clark, by the Pointer Sisters and Barry Manilow, as well as by Reba McEntire, Trisha Yearwood, Ray Stevens, Tanya Tucker, Jerry Lee Lewis and Robbie Fulks. His most celebrated songs are "Rub It In," a 1974 No. 1 hit for Billy "Crash" Craddock, and "Way Down," which in 1976 was the last new charting number for Elvis Presley. Both of those have been recorded by over 20 others.

He could always sing but didn't focus on it, and few ever heard him; his vocalizing was limited to song-demonstration records and a few small-label singles in the '70s that functioned as little more than demos for others as well. (His own version of "Rub It In," preceding the hit, was his only charting record—at No. 65 in 1971.) Yet now, at age 81, he has an intriguingly contemporary album of his own, "Music Man" (Bloodshot), featuring songs he'd written across the decades since 1964.

It came about because his son, Grammy-nominated engineer, producer and keyboardist Tucker Martine, who has worked with performers of quite a different generation—R.E.M., My Morning Jacket, Beth Orton and Neko Case, for example—thought recording some tracks with his dad would make for a nice Christmas present for him. He brought in the likes of Bill Frisell and Peter Dinklage on guitars, and K.D. Lang as a backup singer, with Drive-By Truckers' Patterson Hood contributing admiring liner notes.



Metaphorical connections that the senior Mr. Martine had made in his compositions all through the years are a clue to a way that a man born in 1942—raised in Connecticut and a master of mainstream Nashville musical idioms—can relate to latter-day indie rockers. In much of his work, the musical and the sensual have been portrayed in an airtight clinch. "Way Down" referred to feelings "way down where the music plays," but nobody misses that it's

not just the tune that's stirring. In "Music Man," the title track here—written in 1974 and now provided with an expansive, open-spaces roots-rock sound—Mr. Martine, apparently as a midnight DJ now home, sings, "Baby I am / your music man / I'm gonna fill your soul with song." I believe listeners will get the picture there, too. In choosing which of his father's songs to revisit, Tucker Martine has emphasized these thematic tendencies.

Given how voices so often deteriorate in range and clarity by the time singers get up over 80, it's good to be able to report that Layng Martine Jr. is entirely capable of handling, still, the broad range of genre styles, speeds and variations in thickness or lightness of production that get put to work here. The father's singing and son's production choices serve the tracks, and that's clearly what they were after.

In songs the senior Martine wrote before age 30, the teenager of the 1950s shows through, in that the links between music and physical intimacy often bring to mind cars—speeding around in them in updated rockabilly ("Love You Back to Georgia"), or falling for a girl who's singing at a drive-up food window, with harder-core country steel guitar swelling ("Summertime Lovin"). There are also calm ballads originally recorded by such gentle, laid-back crooners as Jody Miller ("Try Me Again") and Glen Yarbrough ("Let the World Go By"). The latter is one of several songs that focus on a continuing secondary theme, taking things as they come, taking it easy—a mood more likely to be heard in the "party, then chill" themes of today's country, so those are curiously ahead of their time.

Mr. Martine created new material right through enormous changes in the sounds that dominated country and pop in that 1960s-to-21st-century expanse, but there are telling indications of his ties to more traditional country in his songs that recognize prices paid for choices in love and life ("I Can't Be What You Want"; "Love Comes and Goes") and a story song that has the narrator, haunted by a lost love, bolting from town to town on pipeline jobs, trying and failing to forget ("Get Your Things").

They don't write them like that much any more, and it's a real kick to hear the sound and sensibility of a veteran who always has.



—Mr. Mazor reviews country and roots music for the Journal.

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