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NASHVILLE The freewheeling children of the 1950s were the first to be born into a mobile society. Dwight Yoakam was no exception. From his native Pikeville, Ky., to Columbus, Ohio, to Los Angeles, he has been gone, gone, gone.

Spinning a pencil around like a needle on a compass, Yoakam sat in an office of Warner Bros./Reprise here and explained how wanderlust shapes his album "Gone," released last week on Reprise Records.

"This is most disparate collection of songs I've ever recorded," said Yoakam, who debuted on Reprise in 1986 with "Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc." "Ironically, when I listened to the album for the first time, I realized it was the most connected group of songs I've ever put together - simply because of how dissimilar they were to begin with."

The 10 "Gone" songs include "Near You," affectionately dipped in Merseybeat pop hooks; the mystical "One More Night," where producer Pete Anderson resurrects spiraling electric sitar, and "Heart of Stone," a textbook Countrypolitan tune, replete in strings and kitschy Jordanares-styled backing vocals. Somewhere Chet Atkins is smiling. And sighing.

Before migrating to Los Angeles almost 20 years ago, Yoakam lived in Columbus, the home of the late Woody Hayes, White Castle hamburgers and WCOL-AM radio. His mother still lives there.

"WCOL rocked," Yoakam said with a sophisticated smile. "Columbus was a collision of where Kentucky and Ohio met, followed by Detroit and the factories. These are the musical noises I heard banging around my head as I made this record, sounds from when I was a child to now.

"I grew up at a time when, on AM pop radio, you could hear Buck Owens followed by Them, then with Sonny & Cher leading into the Statler Brothers and ending with Henson Cargill singing:

". . . *Skip a rope*. . ."

Once a Cowpunk rebel, Yoakam is on his best behavior. His visits to Nashville are few, his promotional trips are even farther between. Yoakam, 39, feels strong about "Gone," two years in the making. But that doesn't prevent him from scolding commercial country radio, which can't even figure out what to do with a purely traditional talent like Alison Krauss.

"When I was growing up, radio truly was an integrated format," said Yoakam, whose receding hairline makes him look more like a radio researcher than roots rock star when he removes his cowboy hat. "Tragically, we've gone back to a segregated format of presenting music to people on the radio. I understand why. " It's a plan to be culturally bigoted, but it's not healthy to the music community that an artist needs to develop and evolve in. It's an outgrowth of the need on the part of record labels and radio to market to broad audiences and capture an audience for their product, a context for a listener to go to, I guess."

And there's something for everyone in "Gone."

The ballad "Nothing," co-written by Yoakam, is a tribute to Memphis soul, drenched with gospel-tinged backing vocals and Skip Edwards' cresting Hammond organ. And just when the thumping bass lines of "Sorry You Asked" recall classic Johnny Cash, a horn arrangement charges in to the strains of "Ring of Fire" meets Herb Alpert.

"All my songs are composites of my experiences," Yoakam explained. "They may be taken from specific instances in my life or with a person in my life, but because they are composites, I can escape the confines of the literal reference."

"The theme of 'Sorry You Asked' is derivative of a specific relationship, but it came out as an observed experience. I've been on the receiving end as well as the delivering end of that conversation. Literally, the guy who walks across the parking lot from a hardware store is getting ready to get in his car and he sees another fellow he hasn't seen for three months. He'll go, 'How ya doin'? How's Rita?' And an hour and a half later you're still trying to open your car door and get away from this guy. So when we got to arranging that, (producer) Pete (Anderson) said a trumpet might work, a mariachi sound for the forlornness. Even during the talk back I said, 'Let's go even a little more Tijuana.' It's beautiful and very forlorn."

"Gone" guest artists include alternative country vocalists Jim Lauderdale and Joy Lynn White, as well as the Rembrandts. Yoakam personally asked White to contribute honky-tonkin' backing vocals on the Tex-Mex-sounding "Baby Why Not."

"Her voice is very complementary to mine," Yoakam said. "She has a very authentic feel." White's working-class roots in Mishawaka, Ind., are similar to Yoakam's beginnings in Pikeville. When Joy Lynn was 5, her father, a factory worker and millwright, formed the White Family gospel band, which traveled throughout the Midwest.

"The stuff out of the Kentucky mountains I heard as a kid was just hillbilly music," Yoakam said. "The Stanley Brothers and all that. You dismiss that as a child. 'That's not cool.' But I had an opportunity to sneak-listen to things like Stonewall Jackson, Johnny Horton and Stoney Cooper. Those were the things I sang as effortlessly as anything in my life. Because it came naturally. And it was a natural evolution from

that to this place."

Later this year Yoakam and his Babylon Cowboy band will begin a yearlong tour that will zigzag through the Far East, Australia and New Zealand. In between the concert dates, Yoakam will continue to pursue the acting career he started as a teenager in Columbus. Yoakam credits Peter Fonda for reawakening his acting interests in April, 1993, by directing the singer in the play "Southern Rapture" at the MET Theatre in Hollywood.

Billy Bob Thornton, who co-wrote the screenplay of the critically acclaimed "One False Move," has cast Yoakam in his latest project, "Some Folks Call It a Slingblade," which also stars Robert Duvall and John Ritter. Thornton is writing, directing and starring in the film. Thornton is also working on a biopic of Merle Haggard's early years.

"I was flattered by his request to have me join him in this long film," Yoakam said. "He had seen me in 'Roswell' (a 1994 Showtime film). He gave me the script last winter. I began to read the character and thought, 'Wow, what a great character, but what an awful guy.' He's the antagonist. He's a hair-trigger alcoholic, borderline psychotic. That spills onto all the other characters in the piece. In doing the role, it was a very dark, strange place to be for three weeks. But it was a great experience. He and I are hoping to work on a couple of other things."

"Roswell" was based on actual events that occurred in 1947 when debris, thought to be the wreckage of a UFO crash, was discovered in the desert outside of Roswell, N.M. Yoakam played the rancher who found the debris and became embroiled in an alleged coverup by the U.S. Air Force.

"I enjoy acting," Yoakam said. "I hope I can do it well. It's another release, another form of creative expression. It allows me to maintain enthusiasm for musical expression. It's another place to be."

And gone.