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Every crippled heart that listens to country music knows how Vern Gosdin turned the pain of divorce into a hit album called "Alone." Fellow lonely guys have enjoyed adding that when Gosdin's wife of 11 years walked out on him last Christmas, all she left behind was a coonhound named Smoke.

"Well, he's not a coonhound, he's a lab," Gosdin corrected during a recent interview from Nashville. "Actually, he's almost human. I wouldn't take nothing for him, but that is all she left me."

Well, where there's Smoke, there's fire, and Gosdin is one of the hottest acts in country music. The 55-year-old singer-songwriter will be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame later this month, and his 1988 album, "Chiseled in Stone," produced four hits. The title track is up for song of the year and single of the year in the 23rd annual Country Music Association Awards show, which will be televised Monday live from the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville.

Until Keith Whitley died, "Chiseled in Stone" would have been a good bet to grab single of the year (Whitley will probably win for the autobiographical "I'm No Stranger to the Rain"). "Chiseled" symbolizes a return to the traditional Nashville sound. The album is devoid of string sections, background singers and rock-influenced guitar licks. Instead, it frames Gosdin's pensive gospel vocals with grieving fiddles and steel guitars.

Gosdin's vulnerable and melodic approach was just as appropriate for "Alone," which features change-of-address shuffles such as "That Just About Does It, Don't It," "Do Me a Favor (And Don't Do Me No Favor)" and "Right in the Wrong Direction."

The whole thing feels like tears going down a water slide.

"I tell you, I really did love my wife - I guess I still do," Gosdin said. "When most people think about a divorce, it don't take but a little while to get over it, then it's a joke. Well, it wasn't a joke to me. It really hurt. I guess being in the condition I was in, it was an ideal position to write songs. Not meaning to, I took advantage of it. I didn't have anything else to do."

The late Steve Goodman used to write much of his material when he was in a lousy mood. He reasoned that when you're in a good mood, you're having too much fun to sit down and write a song.

"He was right," Gosdin said. "It helps to be in a sad mood, whatever it comes from. And I was definitely in a sad mood for a long time."

The record's relief comes in "Tanqueray," which has a calypso-meets-Nashville sound that places it right next to Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" as a celebratory drinking song.

"I was one of four songwriters sitting in a bar in Amarillo, Texas," Gosdin said. "Jim Vest (his steel guitarist) was sitting there with an empty bottle of Tanqueray in his hand. We were all going to write a song, but we didn't have anything to write about. So somebody said, 'Let's write one about Tanqueray and get it in commercials.' So we sat there and wrote it because we didn't have anything else to write about."

Gosdin said he thinks about writing all the time and has disciplined himself to carry a small notebook with him wherever he goes. "I can be talking to somebody and they say something that grabs me, and I'll write it down," he said. "I've got about 150 ideas in my notebook right now."

For some people, Gosdin is a new face on the country scene. He has appeared on 27 different record labels solo and with the Gosdin Brothers. He even played on "Gene Clark with the Gosdin Brothers," a record that included former Byrds Chris Hillman, Michael Clarke and Gene Clark, as well as Leon Russell and Glen Campbell.

His 1977 debut album, "Till the End," spawned hits such as the title track and "It Started All Over Again." In the early 1980s, Gosdin released a few chart poppers, such as "If You're Gonna' Do Me Wrong, Do It Right" (based on an earlier divorce) and "Today My World Slipped Away."

Gosdin describes himself as a "ramblin' man," playing bluegrass

During the early 1960s with Chris Hillman (currently of the Desert Rose Band) in California, singing gospel in the early 1950s with the Gosdin Family Gospel Show in Birmingham, Ala., and playing honky-tonk in the late 1950s in Chicago.

"Around 1956 I played a little club on the South Side of Chicago," Gosdin said. (The Encyclopedia of Country & Western Music says Gosdin also ran the club.) "I think it was called the Drift Inn. We lengthened that title a little later to Drift Inn - Stagger Out. Boy, I'd never want to go through that again. Buford Pusser was our bouncer. We could probably get 30 people in there. It had a pool table, a bandstand and about three or four tables to sit. I played straight-ahead country there."