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Southern sounding singer-songwriter Ken Will Morton's latest release *True Grit* brings to mind a cross between Tom Waits, Marah, Steve Earle circa *Exit O* and Ryan Adams. Whether it's the safe but solid opening title track to the roots-rock nugget "Gamblin' Man's Blues," Morton can pen a song with an equally strong melody. And **thankfully** Morton doesn't ease off that quality pedal for a moment judging by the mid-tempo "Hard Weathered Life."

Even when Morton slows things down slightly for a **folksy** train-chugging "Restless Heart," his chops come to the fore. The melancholic ballad "Breathe" could be a disaster in some hands, but here it's given a world-weary Americana hue which makes it soar effortlessly. What makes this record great is Morton's knack for hitting all the right notes, from the sweet, memorable "On My Feet Again," the rocky "Open Road" and the Jayhawks-ish "Don't Feel Bad For Cryin'." The simple pop of "Muscadine Wine" is equal parts Marah and John Mayer, but overall Morton excels at a time when even alt.country is beginning to sound formulaic.



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After seven albums -- five on his own and a pair with early ensembles -- Ken Will Morton ought to be well entrenched among the roots rock hierarchy. Sadly, he's still on the fringes of Americana acceptance, a scenario that's clearly at odds with his expressive designs. Morton's sandpapery vocals and tattered sentiments are informed by blue collar sensibilities and the bittersweet encounters that accompany some hard-fought struggles. If the title isn't enough of an indication, then the song titles definitely tell all - indeed, "Hard Weathered Life," "On My Feet Again" and "Don't Feel Bad For Crying" offer first indication of Morton's everyman ambitions.

Happily then, *True Grit* isn't all bruised and battered. Morton's honest appeal is apparent early on, in his amiable shuffles and aw-shucks humility. "Gamblin' Man's Blues," "Cannot Win For Losin'" and the aforementioned "Don't Feel Bad For Crying" retain an equal mix of resolve and resignation, in narratives that are steady yet subdued, weary but resolute. He's Steve Earle without the belligerence, a down-home troubadour possessing Steve Forbert's formidable charms. Mostly though, he stands on his own merits, one of the best - albeit belated - discoveries in quite some time.

**Standout Tracks:** "Breathe," "Open Road," "Hard Weathered Life" LEE ZIMMERMAN