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### Jelly Roll's "Save Me:" Hope Amidst Despair

Occasionally a musical artist makes waves and last summer I caught the wave set in motion by Jason DeFord, a rapper turned country music artist, better known by the moniker Jelly Roll. Written and produced by DeFord and David Ray Stevens, their song "Save Me" was first released in 2020 on DeFord's album *Self Medicated* (Benitez-Eves). DeFord then broke into the mainstream in 2022 following the success of his first country number-one single "Son of a Sinner." Following that first award, in April 2023, DeFord walked away with the most awards at Country Music Television's annual awards night (Rowley). The wave continued with the streaming platform Hulu releasing a documentary in May 2023, covering DeFord's career, then with the September 2023 re-release of "Save Me," featuring Lainey Wilson, DeFord's voice made it from the airwaves to my ears.

My curiosity around DeFord was piqued when mentions of the unusual name "Jelly Roll" began popping up on social media feeds. Then, on a long drive in late summer of 2023, "Save Me" played on a local radio rotation and it gripped something inside of me. Later, I asked my Alexa device who the artist was and searched online. DeFord, nicknamed Jelly Roll by his mother, is an artist who will catch one's eye, quite literally, with an assortment of visible body tattoos, including many that adorn his face. That initial listening experience and brief glimpse into DeFord as an artist moved me to take a deeper dive into his work.

“Save Me,” featuring Lainey Wilson, is a deeply moving 21st-century ballad that explores the depths and despair of addiction. DeFord's poignant story, shared via haunting lyrics and an eerily soulful melody, is a simple cry for help and salvation. DeFord told *American Songwriter*, “I don’t usually do these stripped-down acoustics” (Benitez-Eves) and as a consumer, I am glad he veered from his norm. The solo guitar allows listeners to fully experience the raw emotion of lyrics that beautifully reflect an appeal to be saved from the dark realities of addiction. The key theme of DeFord's plea is to be saved from his lifestyle of escapism fueled by substance use. The lyrics, “All of this drinkin’ and smokin’ is hopeless / But feel like it's all that I need” (Benitez-Eves) sets the tone as DeFord acknowledges the futility and paradox of his substance use.

Drawn in with an emotional plea for help from his self-destructive behavior the vicious cycle continues as Deford sings, “Somethin’ inside of me’s broken / I hold onto anything that sets me free” (Benitez-Eves). Ironically, experiencing destructive, abusive, or traumatic things in childhood tends to be what leads people to seek escape in the first place, perpetuating a downward spiral. DeFord then must escape again, this time from his self-sabotage, which is a compelling aspect of the song. Those touched by any type of addiction know the vast destruction caused by its snare and will recognize the emotional depths of this piece and DeFord’s vulnerability.

Vivid imagery contributes to the impact of the song, making it relatable and as the song progresses, Lainey Wilson enters, bringing a shift in perspective. The verse she sings offers a glimpse into the sorrow experienced by a loved one impacted by addiction. “What if the night sky was missing the Moon / There were no shootin’ stars to use wishing on you” (Benitez-Eves). The moon is often used as a symbol of peace, comfort, and stability, whether we see it or not,

simply because it's always there. In Western cultures, shooting stars are traditionally associated with making a wish, offering the observer a bit of awe, wonderment, and hope for a better future. With this line, we get a point of introspection and questioning, as if Wilson is lamenting how life is meant to go on if there is no hope for change.

While the song speaks to addiction issues, it also has crossover appeal for anyone struggling with life challenges. It conveys the conflicted emotions of an individual with underlying pain, feelings of hopelessness, and deep human longing. The repetitive refrain, "Somebody save me / me from myself" (Benitez-Eves), is ultimately a plea for connection and salvation. DeFord's storytelling ability is simple yet impactful with an authenticity to his message that resonates, and perhaps offers a much-needed glimmer of hope, like a winter waxing moon emerging from a dark cloud.

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