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# Axtman shows off studio skills

## CD REVIEW

By [JOHN HANSEN](#)  
 Entertainment Editor

If this music thing doesn't work out, perhaps Keith Axtman can land an advertising gig for Dell computers or Adobe Audition 2.0. That's what he used to record his debut album, "Big Dreams," and rarely has a self-produced, on-the-cheap CD sounded so good.

The Fargo, N.D., musician is known to Brainerd lakes area music fans for his performances with Writers in the Round, which also features Lake Shore's Donny Vosen, whom Axtman cites as a songwriting mentor. WITR sessions are acoustic affairs, but this CD - featuring Axtman performing every instrument and all the vocals on nine of the 10 tracks - is richly produced.

We knew he could write. Who knew he also could rock?

Perhaps fans of Lonesome Run were in on the secret. Axtman fronted that Fargo-based country band for three years before getting burned out (perhaps he's never fully recovered from the road; outside of WITR shows, he rarely tours).

The disc opens with "Rollin' Over on Us," a countrified slow-burner that would be a radio hit if there was any justice in the music business. Axtman takes his crisp, passionate voice through peaks and valleys appropriate for a song about falling in love.

On "Caroline," Axtman shakes off the stiffness you'd expect from a home-studio effort. He treats the song like a three-minute guitar solo and it makes for irresistible listening. The straight-laced (as in, perfect for George Strait) "Tell Me All the Things" completes his country trilogy. It features the kind of twisty catchphrase - "Tell me all the things I don't wanna hear" - that mainstream country fans eat up.

While the country tracks stand out, Axtman shows off his songwriting skills on a trio of what I like to call "rockasilly" songs (silly rockabilly, but in a good way).

If "Rollin' Over on Us" is a love song, "I'm Goin' Under" is a lust song. "Hippie Wannabe" is a lyrical home run about marijuana smokers at a Yonder Mountain String Band concert; naturally, Axtman rhymes "bong" with "Cheech and Chong."

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Fargo, N.D., musician Keith Axtman released his debut album, "Big Dreams," in November.

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Genre: Country rock

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Songs about songwriting don't usually work, but "Victoria Secret" is a notable exception, if only because of the catchy guitar lick. Axtman claims to be a drummer at heart, but he lives up to his surname throughout the album.

Of course, songwriters can sometimes get too close to their material, and that's the case on "From This Day Forth," "Let It Ride" and "Do You Really Get It." They chronicle, respectively, Axtman's wedding day, homeless people in San Francisco and Axtman's strong feelings about churchgoing. A little self-indulgence is to be expected from a WITR singer, but these tracks don't cut it after gems like "Tell Me All the Things."

Axtman's versatility might be a commercial hurdle. In local terms, his style falls somewhere between the Eclectic Cafe and the Rail. Eclectic regulars might rail at the polished country tunes; Rail patrons who want to go "Fishin' in the Dark" for the 1,000th time might find the idea of original songs too eclectic.

"Big Dreams" probably won't earn Axtman a huge following - no matter how good the songs, he just doesn't tour enough - but Writers in the Round fans will find a lot to like about this debut.

On the Web: [www.keithaxtman.com](http://www.keithaxtman.com).

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**Highs:** Three country tunes are slick, catchy and ready for radio. Axtman's ax work is great throughout, and the production is surprisingly strong.

**Lows:** Songs about Axtman's wedding, the homeless problem and churchgoing seem out of place next to the country rockers.

**Grade:** B+

**On the Web**

For song samples from Keith Axtman's debut album, visit [brainerddispatch.com](http://brainerddispatch.com).

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