

ZACH BRYAN GOES ALL OUT ON HIS SPRAWLING COUNTRY ODYSSEY,

‘With Heaven On Top’

by **Elijah Polance**
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/THEY/THEM
elijah.polance@uconn.edu

At a time when some of the biggest faces of contemporary country music are the likes of Morgan Wallen, whose lengthy albums hinge on a highly produced trap-infused pop aesthetic, and Jelly Roll, who often features on genre crossover songs with other artists, the mainstream success of Oklahoman Zach Bryan can feel like an anomaly. Unlike some of his peers, Bryan keeps his music relatively simple and organic, drawing more from contemporary folk music to influence his sound than what’s most popular on the radio.

Something about Bryan’s sentimental songwriting and his lack of sterilized autotune and pop-filtered country pastiche stuck when his popularity exploded in the early 2020s. His momentum hasn’t faltered since, and he’s had a successive run of albums since signing with Warner Records and releasing his major label debut, “American Heartbreak” in 2022. But three albums within five years just wasn’t enough for the songwriter, who seems to never run out of things to say.

So, on Jan. 9, 2026, Bryan released “With Heaven On Top,” a staggering one-hour and 20-minute-long endeavor made up of 25 tracks. Even more astonishing is the release of a self-recorded acoustic version of the album that came three days later, a move he described in an Instagram post so he “didn’t have to hear everyone whine about more stuff,” citing those who might listen and take issue with the album’s production style.

Without listening, the move to record and release an entire extra hour of material for an already long project might seem self-indulgent. After all, while Bryan’s catalog is filled with acoustic, guitar-centered ballads, he hasn’t shied away from more dynamic rock embellishments before. But the band-based presentation feels like the norm for “With Heaven On Top,” where there’s an entire instrumental assembly brought on to support Bryan. Most riveting and noticeable of all are the horns, with three trumpeters collectively appearing on half the track list, not to mention multiple trombone and saxophone credits as well.

Still, you wouldn’t be able to infer the brass-built spirit from the album’s opener, “Down, Down, Stream,” where Bryan recites his poem reflecting on different experiences he’s had, all fickle moments that pass like running water. The sense of continuous change, both in personal character and geographic location, set up for the album’s recurrent themes of travel (the number of times different states get refer-

enced in the lyrics are endless) and finding ways to better oneself.

The following “Runny Eggs” carries the same sentiment, with Bryan murmuring about wanting to travel out west to try and find himself, a crooning pedal steel guitar and solemn harmonica accompanying his wishes. The rest of the band emerges to punctuate Bryan’s angsty vocals on the subsequent “Appetite,” a jaunty ride rebelling against the expectation to settle down and start a family.

While “Appetite” is among the most energetic and catchy moments on the record, it’s far from the only one. “Say Why” jaunts confidently through verse after verse of reflections on drinking habits and other temptations. Not long after, “Santa Fe” transitions from an acapella start into an explosive, jittery string tune, with anthemic group vocals coming together to deliver each chorus.

The quieter moments prove to be equally memorable. “Drowning” is particularly ear-catching, especially with the angelic backing vocal contributions from Heaven Schmitt, and “Cannonball” is beautifully simplistic in its own right.

Many of the problems referenced in the lyrics are more personal, but “Bad News” homes in on Bryan’s growing sense of disillusionment with the United States. He reflects on all the tragedies and discontent experienced daily, referencing political polarization from both parties, shootings and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids as examples of “bad news” contributing to “the fading of the red, white and blue.” There’s no solution at the end, only Bryan’s weary, worried observation of the U.S. in the current moment.

Despite its long length, “With Heaven On Top” remarkably avoids feeling bloated, even without deviating from its country style. That’s not to say some trimming wouldn’t be welcomed: “Slicked Back” tries a smidge too hard to be catchy, and

two of the later tracks, “Camper” and “Sundown Girls,” wouldn’t be too missed if tossed aside. Even then, the final run of tracks offers some real gems, with “All Good Things Past” moving with a melancholy lightness comparable to something off Bon Iver’s album “For Emma, Forever Ago.”

Bryan closes the experience with the title track, a nod of perseverance despite the anxieties detailed across the album. The chorus sees Bryan in a moment of uncertainty as he muses about how home and living vicariously through others doesn’t always provide enough experience to keep persisting life’s challenges. But in the end, he circles back to faith, leaving off with the affirmation: “And every hard time, song rhyme, friend you’ve got/You’ll have, with Heaven on top.”

Bryan’s lengthy “With Heaven On Top” is a compelling and impressively engaging record that truly draws you into the songwriter’s world and vision of the U.S. The added acoustic renditions provide a new angle to appreciate these songs in an even more intimate manner.

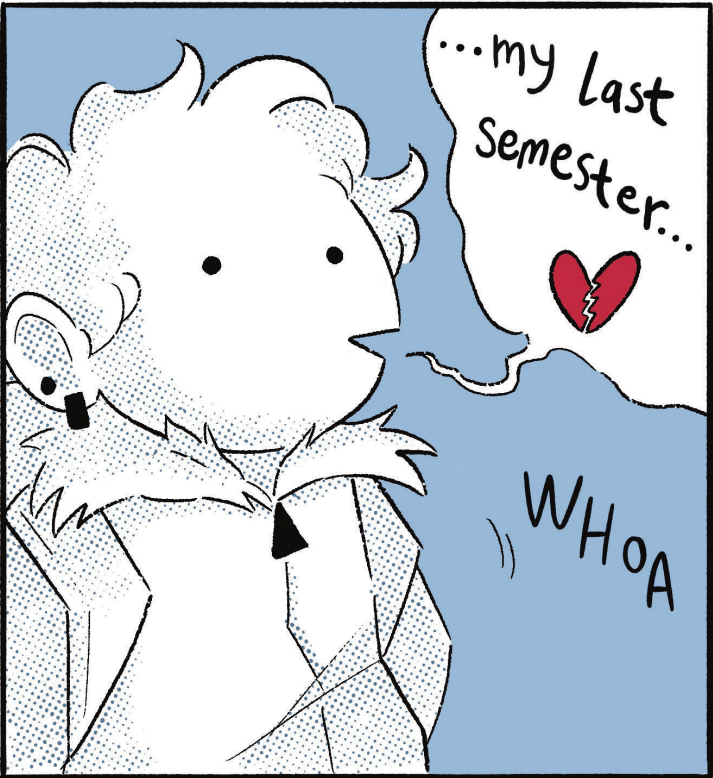


The cover of Zach Bryan’s new album, “With Heaven on Top.” The album was released on Jan. 9, 2026.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @ZACHLANEBRYAN ON INSTAGRAM

Rating:
3.75/5

CoMiCs



CARTOON BY SAM HASS, ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS