

WHO'S THAT MAN?  
TOBY  
HITS  
30



HEARTLAND  
HOLLYWOOD

THE INTERVIEW

JOHNNY  
CHIANG



# COUNTRY AIRCHECK

OCTOBER  
2023

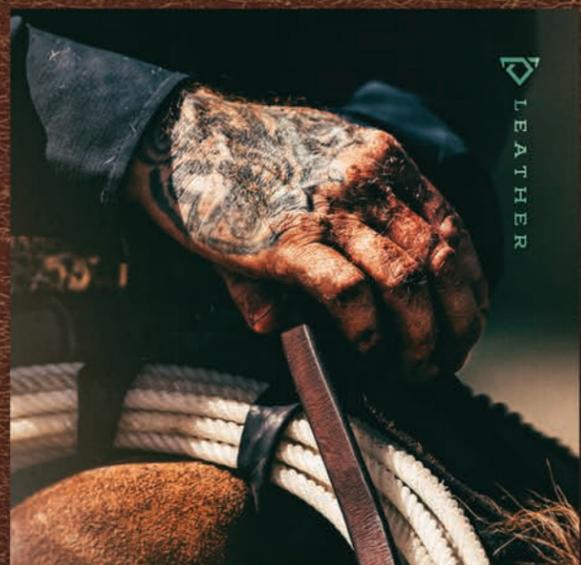


CODY  
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THE NEW ALBUM  
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AVAILABLE NOVEMBER 3

FEATURING THE HIT SINGLE "THE PAINTER"



# FOR YOUR CMA CONSIDERATION

ENTERTAINER OF THE YEAR

FEMALE VOCALIST OF THE YEAR

ALBUM OF THE YEAR  
*BELL BOTTOM COUNTRY*

SINGLE OF THE YEAR  
"HEART LIKE A TRUCK"  
"WAIT IN THE TRUCK" WITH HARDY

SONG OF THE YEAR  
"HEART LIKE A TRUCK"

MUSICAL EVENT OF THE YEAR  
"SAVE ME" WITH JELLY ROLL  
"WAIT IN THE TRUCK" WITH HARDY

MUSIC VIDEO OF THE YEAR  
"WAIT IN THE TRUCK" WITH HARDY



## LAINNEY WILSON

MALE VOCALIST OF THE YEAR

NEW ARTIST OF THE YEAR

SINGLE OF THE YEAR  
"NEED A FAVOR"

MUSIC VIDEO OF THE YEAR  
"NEED A FAVOR"

MUSICAL EVENT OF THE YEAR  
"SAVE ME" (WITH LAINNEY WILSON)



## JELLY ROLL



# RECORDS AND RADIO

## Episode IV A NEW SLOPE?

*A long time ago in an industry far, far away, country artists and their label reps ventured across the galaxy to develop relationships with radio decision makers and staff.*

*As radio became more centralized and staff sizes diminished, record companies found new ways to reach audiences and drive music exposure.*

*Now, Covid-informed efficiencies have pushed technology to the fore, shifting the industry away from former high-touch practices, but at what cost . . . .*

The R&R dynamic ... no, not the old *Radio & Records* (R.I.P.) – the trade publication from whence Country Aircheck was birthed – but rather the unique, longstanding relationship between record labels and radio stations ... is shifting. Personal interaction between artists, promotion reps and broadcasters seems to be on the decline. Bottom line results are paramount, but is there risk in allowing the tangible and intangible benefits of country's community to recede?

Recent realignment at major labels – Warner Music Nashville's shift to a Radio and Radio Accounts department structure, and Sony Music Nashville's shuttering of Arista/Nashville – belie the notion of diminished investment in promotion. Neither move resulted in significant changes in head count, and analysis of industrywide promotion staffs (see page 4) also confirms relative stability.



Joel Raab

That said, buoyed by streaming and other revenue sources, labels are growing and investing in areas other than radio. "The music industry is extremely healthy," says Consultant **Joel Raab**. "You don't see them laying off people. If anything, they're adding because they're making so much money from streaming. Certainly way more than the artists are, so they're doing fine."

Big Machine GM **Clay Hunnicutt** says changes in label focus have been additive. "I don't think we've subtracted anything," he argues. "We continue to do the things we've always done, but it's also important for DSPs to see artists as well."



Lee Adams

"The landscape has changed and to expect otherwise is to be behind the curve," says Broken Bow VP/Promotion **Lee Adams**. Still, doomsday has been coming for a long time. "When I joined the record side from radio in 1995, I was told record promotion had about 10 years left as radio consolidation would render us unnecessary. Fast forward to 2005, we



Clay Hunnicutt



Kurt Johnson

were made by music directors, program directors, OMs and corporate programmers. The labels and artist camps that are investing in building relationships at radio definitely have the competitive advantage for getting their artist up the ranks. That was true in Joe Galante's RCA days and it's true now."

Even deeply connected programmers in top markets see a difference, however. "Everybody feels it because we're all doing more with less," says Audacy Regional Brand Mgr. **Marci Braun**. "I still think we are far superior to any other radio format because we're so hands-on with artists and fans. I don't think that has changed at all. We have the nicest, best and most tangible artists – they're not untouchable." Most of the time.



Marci Braun

### HIGH TECH REDNECKS

Walled off by screens during the pandemic, the interaction between radio and labels adapted. "We don't have to sit for mindless hours in meetings, which is good, but it did stick a knife in the radio tour, which sucks," Braun says. "I remember Taylor Swift being in our conference room – Miranda Lambert, Sugarland, Sam Hunt. I would always tell the salespeople, 'You never know who they're going to turn into.' I miss the stories, breaking bread, having a couple drinks and getting to know each other. For example, outside of shaking his hand in the pit of a Kenny Chesney show, I never met Bailey Zimmerman and he has a No. 1 song. He's



George Briner

launched Jason Aldean at CRS with Country radio. Fast forward again to 2019, we launched Lainey Wilson with a radio tour. Ask any new artist what their top dream is and it's to hear their song on the radio."

"In the 1950s, airplay was decided by individual DJs," says Townsquare SVP/Content & Programming **Kurt Johnson**. "That changed as the business grew into a huge industry – decisions

awesome, but that's bananas."

Valory President **George Briner** points to strategic changes. "Before Covid with a brand new artist, you'd hit 100 stations before the single came out," he says. "Now, it's not about how many stations, but which people you reach. It's quality over quantity. There

are still opportunities to visit radio, but also for artists to tailgate with fans before a show, use social media to meet them at Starbucks on an off day or play a local bar after the show."

Albright & O'Malley & Brenner Consultant **Kenny Jay** calls the radio tour evolution "long overdue" and points to ways stations are changing those visits into events. "Labels should capitalize on the opportunities where radio has given artists a stage and an audience of engaged PI listeners for discovery," he says. "If you're in radio and aren't doing that, there's a new goal for 2024."

Events have leveled up in the eyes of Sony Music Nashville EVP/Promotion & Artist Development **Steve Hodges**. "We're not doing full-blown radio tours," he says. "Nor are we doing as many radio shows, but those have gotten better. Radio is doing a much better job realizing the old ways have changed. Most of them have skin in the game, trying to impress clients, so they're much more thoughtful in how they execute those shows."

And the post-Covid touring rebound is also a chance for radio and records to deepen their connection. "There's even more of a fever pitch at radio around tours and taking advantage of those opportunities in each market," Hunnicutt says. "That's not just about building relationships with the radio station, but building relationships with fans. That's a two-for-one."



Kenny Jay



Steve Hodges

### CHART OF THE MATTER

Words like "community" and "relationship" may feel good, but the old adage still applies: It ain't "show friends," it's "show business." Ultimately, the reason for connecting artists with radio is about the needles artists want moved. "This problem is somewhat self-induced by having too few people being influential in what does or doesn't become a chart hit," Raab says.

"It's always smart business to develop and maintain great relationships," Jay adds, "but if I were running a label today, I'd be focused on major markets and any size market with control of their playlist. That's smart business."

KSOP/Salt Lake City PD **Deb Turpin** is sympathetic to labels. "I'm not a promo person, but it has to feel frustrating sometimes to culture a relationship with a programmer that has no say in what they add," she says, adding the effort is not wasted. "If the playlist is coming from out of state and the PD has no power to do anything with the music, that might feel pointless, but it's probably not. Organically introducing your artist to a group of broadcasters can't be bad."

Even in large companies, decision making can be diffuse. "I send a recommended list each week, but it is not, 'You must play these 24 songs,'" says Cumulus VP/Country **Charlie Cook**. "If the situation in your market dictates playing a different song or artist, you have every right to do that. So when a label says to me, 'Someone in one of your markets wants to play a song not on the list,' my answer is, 'Well then call them and convince them to play it. I'm not doing your job, too.'"

Centralized programming exists, but efforts to connect with radio have transcended record companies. "There are big radio companies where you can talk about multiple stations with one person," admits iHeart/

Minneapolis SVPP **Gregg Swedberg**. "And management companies are smarter and have their own radio teams who cover shows, make calls and extend relationships. This trend seems like a good idea to me."

Radio's newfound ability to move quickly outside of the longstanding airplay slotting system may be a positive indication of its influence. "It's good that songs like 'Fast Car' and 'Last Night' that weren't originally intended to be singles are breaking through," Raab points out. "Radio heard the value and basically forced them to be singles. I'd love to see more of that."

Meanwhile, traditional regional-meets-station-staff relationships still work at exposing new music. "My reps are still really good at making sure this happens," Turpin says. "They help us create fan moments with on-air contesting, meet-and-greets, phoners and more. If nobody was doing that, we would lose a lot."

"The relationships make things happen," Braun agrees. "If we put on a concert series and sell a bunch of sponsorships, that makes money. But I can't get those acts without being able to get on the phone with labels and now even managers. Those touch points are important."

**CR ... MAYBE?**

Arguably the core of relationship building in the format is Country Radio Seminar. Meanwhile, awards show radio remotes – once as much schmooze-fest as content grab – continue to contract. "This time of year, a lot of PDs are asking me about budgets and if CRS is a valuable way to spend money," Cook says. "It's a \$2,500 to \$3,000 expense, which is tough to sell to a market manager in today's financial environment. Radio remotes can be passed off to a sponsor to some degree, but there's no way you can get somebody to sponsor somebody drinking too much for three days."

"CRS is more than four days of fun, though it is fun," Braun argues. "You learn so much and meet so many people. My Pop counterpart down the hall can't pick up the phone and have those conversations as easily. And that goes both ways – from the label side when they need airplay, and from radio's. The [ROI] might not be immediate, but it's there."

"I don't know if you can quantify it," Raab says. "There is some danger of that special relationship being diminished. Many of the labels are run by large corporations, so they're going to acquiesce to the bottom line."

Briner says the arrow is pointing the right direction. "CRS attendance has come back up since the pandemic. It's the premier event and all-encompassing now with DSPs and radio, and labels presenting their top wares. Hopefully they change the title some day because it's not just for radio. If you're going to spend money on anything, that's the one to attend."

"What other genre has an annual seminar with 1,500 artists, radio, managers, labels for three days?" Johnson asks. "What other genre has two vigorous trade organizations in CMA and ACM? The mayor of Nashville once proudly told me that there is no other city in the world that has a neighborhood community dedicated to a commercial music genre. We remain the envy of other formats in many ways. As long as we as a Country community continue to support and invest our time and resources in these organizations and events, we're golden."

Changes to awards remotes might be as much about efficiency as cost. "It's really helpful that groups can gather content and distribute internally so artists don't have to do 20 interviews with 20 stations," Hunnicutt says. "They can do five and cover a lot more ground across iHeart, Cumulus and Audacy. "There are still individual stations you have to cover, but radio and DSPs have done a great job with content days for artists. That's one area where technology and the business have changed for the better."

**WHICH MEN NORTH OF WHICH WHAT?**

To whatever extent the label-radio connection may be challenged, answering it may start with broadcasters playing to their strengths. "Radio is the connection between artists and their listeners," Cook says. "If Thomas Rhett, Cole Swindell and Nate Smith are playing Bridgestone, you hear about it on [the radio], not Spotify. Unless I'm missing something."

And those listeners aren't necessarily being reached elsewhere. "We know from the research, even this Oliver Anthony song, which wasn't played on radio that much, was pretty unfamiliar to that audience in spite of all the publicity," Raab says. "So Country radio's impact is still pretty [singular] relative to other media. To what degree it remains that way is kind of up to us."

"In a world with 100+ artists looking for radio play, radio needs to understand that our shelf space means something," Swedberg says. "We need to use it to make sure our audience knows what we do and stand for. I'd like us to be able to express that to the labels, and find what assets they can apply to help us so that we can help them. But the pendulum is swinging away from radio. It's important for us to be the local connection for country music."

Broadcasters have also prioritized relationships with Nashville. "Radio companies and DSPs have done a great job bringing their people together so labels can reach a lot of them at one time," Hunnicutt says, pointing to regular summits by iHeart, Audacy and Beasley. "And we're more strategic on the road, as well. When Carly Pearce played Boston, we had radio people from Portland and Hartford there. The tech doesn't replace that one-to-one personal relationship."

Explaining that reality has to be a priority, Jay notes, "New artists know that radio can be a big key to their success, but as their media usage evolves, it's on radio to more effectively control their narrative and demonstrate their (still powerful) place in the ecosystem."

And, crucially, radio must actually hold that place. "We want to be a one-stop for the country music fan to hear the best curated music and have access to artists via shows, social media, meet-and-greets and other experiences," Raab says. "This is something we excel at. Hopefully that remains meaningful, whether it can be one-to-one proven on the bottom line or not."

**THE PARENT TRAP**

And therein lies the rub. As much as people from outside the format marvel at the relationships in Country, convincing corporate overseers of the value proposition behind expensive and time-consuming "relationship building" is the trick.

"If you're looking for a direct payoff on something you invest time and money on, you're probably in the wrong business," Hodges says. "We are building this for artists so they can have long careers. Measure twice, cut once. Every time you earmark funds, do it for the right reason. It may not lead to immediate ROI, but if you do it for the right reasons then you're building something. The payoff may not be tomorrow or next week, but if we do right by the artists and music the payoff will come."

Even on an individual level, embracing the intangible can be worth it. "You want to feel you got a good return on your investment, whether it's a company paying or an individual," Hunnicutt says. "I've invested in my career many times where the company didn't pay. You do it to learn, network, increase your resources or gather content if that's applicable. You get out of it what you put into it."

That goes for people, as well. "You never know who will end up in the 'captain's chair,' or have more freedom to add new music in the future," Turpin says. "So it is still a good idea to network with as many [broadcasters] as possible."

And don't forget the big picture. "Because we are a songwriter, publisher, entertainment-driven community largely in one town, we still have something compelling no other format has," Hodges says. "Artists still have special relationships with the people who program their music and, as long as we can continue to introduce and foster those relationships, it is to the betterment of the format."

**LET'S STAY IN CONTACTS**

Here are some radio promotion all-stars who have appeared in each of Country Aircheck's annual Label Contacts guide, first published in 2007.



Mercury SVP/Promotion **Damon Moberly**, who is celebrating his 25th anniversary with the label this month, was Northeast regional in 2007. RCA Dir./Promotion & Artist Development **Dan Nelson** has been with the

label since 1998. SVP/Radio **Kristen Williams** celebrated 20 years with Warner Music



Nashville in September. She was Midwest regional in 2007.



Broken

Bow VP/

Promotion **Lee Adams** joined that company in 2001, while **Layna Bunt** has been



handling West Coast promotion there since 2002. Big Machine VP/Promotion & Marketing **Erik Powell** has been with the



label since 2006, holding the position of Northeast regional in the first edition of Label Contacts.



Sony Music Nashville Dir./Promotion & Artist Development **Bo Martinovich** has been with the



company since 1998, serving as Columbia Midwest regional in '07. **Larry Santiago** was Columbia's West Coast rep at that time, before later



moving to sister label RCA. MCA Nashville's Dir./Midwest Regional Promotion **Donna Passuntino** has been with that label



since 2006. Mercury Dir./Regional Promotion-Midwest **Sally Angeli** (née Green) has held various roles for the company since



2004. And Mercury Southwest regional **Jill Brunett** has been with the

company since 2007, including time at pre-merger Capitol/Nashville.



**SMILING AND DIALING**

Number of promotion staffers working charted records, by year.





# TOBY KEITH CONGRATULATIONS ON 30 YEARS!

52 Top 10 Hits  
32 #1s

40+ Million Albums Sold  
100 Million Airplay Performances  
More than 10 Billion Streams

UM<sup>e</sup>   
A UNIVERSAL MUSIC COMPANY

# Charlie Worsham

Has Written / Recorded with Eric Church,  
Luke Combs, Keith Urban, Kacey  
Musgraves, Dierks Bentley, Carrie  
Underwood, The Highwomen,  
Kip Moore, Brent Cobb & more.

## 2023 CMA MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

ACM Acoustic Guitar Player  
of the Year - (2022)

Host of Apple Music's  
Pickers Radio

### HOW I LEARNED TO PRAY FEAT. LUKE COMBS

#1 On  TikTok Country Chart

#9 On  TikTok Emerging Artist Chart

Most Streamed New Country Release On Debut Day  
Over 20.5k User-Created Videos With The Track On 

1.3M On-Demand Streams, First Week

Debuted on the  Spotify Viral 50



*"Combs' hearty, raspy vocal is nicely paired with  
Worsham's relaxed, euphonious singing."* - **billboard**

*"Worsham achieves a star-making turn..."* - THE TENNESSEAN

*"Soulful" // "Evocative" // "Beautifully sparse, drawn-in ode" // "The  
unmistakable gravitas of Combs' husky voice combines seamlessly  
with Worsham's faultless vocals, with the two artists' chemistry  
radiating warmly..."* - **Holler.**

*"...undeniable music talent."* - **npr**

## Compadres

AVAILABLE  
OCTOBER 13

LISTEN TO "HOW I LEARNED TO PRAY"  
(FEAT. LUKE COMBS) NOW!



CHARLIE WORSHAM

*Compadres*

1. Handful of Dust (Feat. Lainey Wilson)
2. Kiss Like You Dance (Feat. Kip Moore)
3. How I Learned To Pray (Feat. Luke Combs)
4. Creekwater Clear (Feat. Elle King)
5. Things I Can't Control (Feat. Dierks Bentley)

**ZACH BRYAN**

**I REMEMBER EVERYTHING  
(FT. KACEY MUSGRAVES)**

FOLLOW UP TO 5X PLATINUM SINGLE "SOMETHING IN THE ORANGE"



**ACADEMY OF COUNTRY MUSIC  
NEW MALE ARTIST OF THE YEAR**

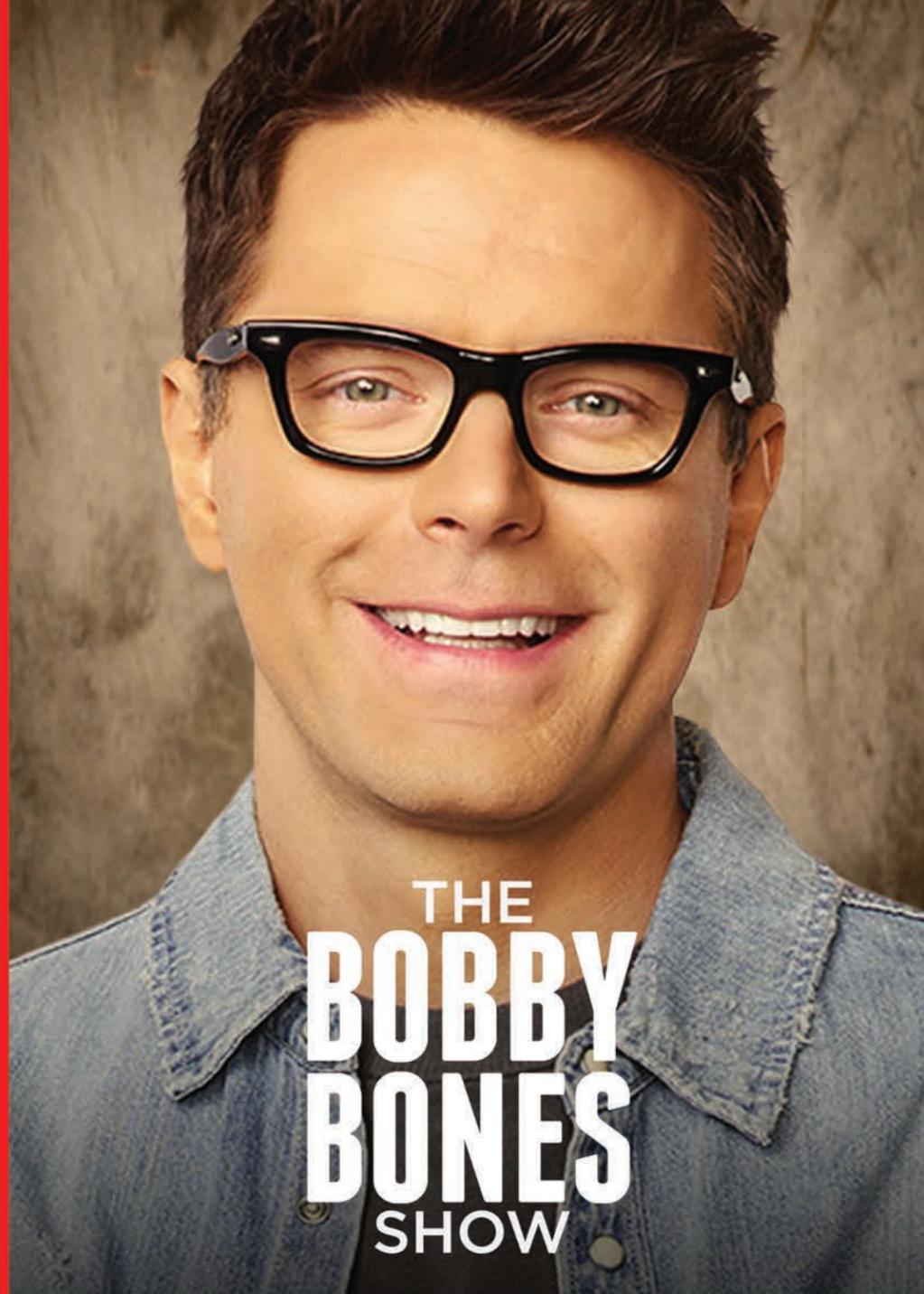
**FIRST MALE COUNTRY ARTIST IN HISTORY  
TO DEBUT A SONG AND ALBUM AT #1 ON THE  
HOT 100 AND BILLBOARD 200 SIMULTANEOUSLY**

**CMA NEW ARTIST OF THE YEAR NOMINEE 2023**

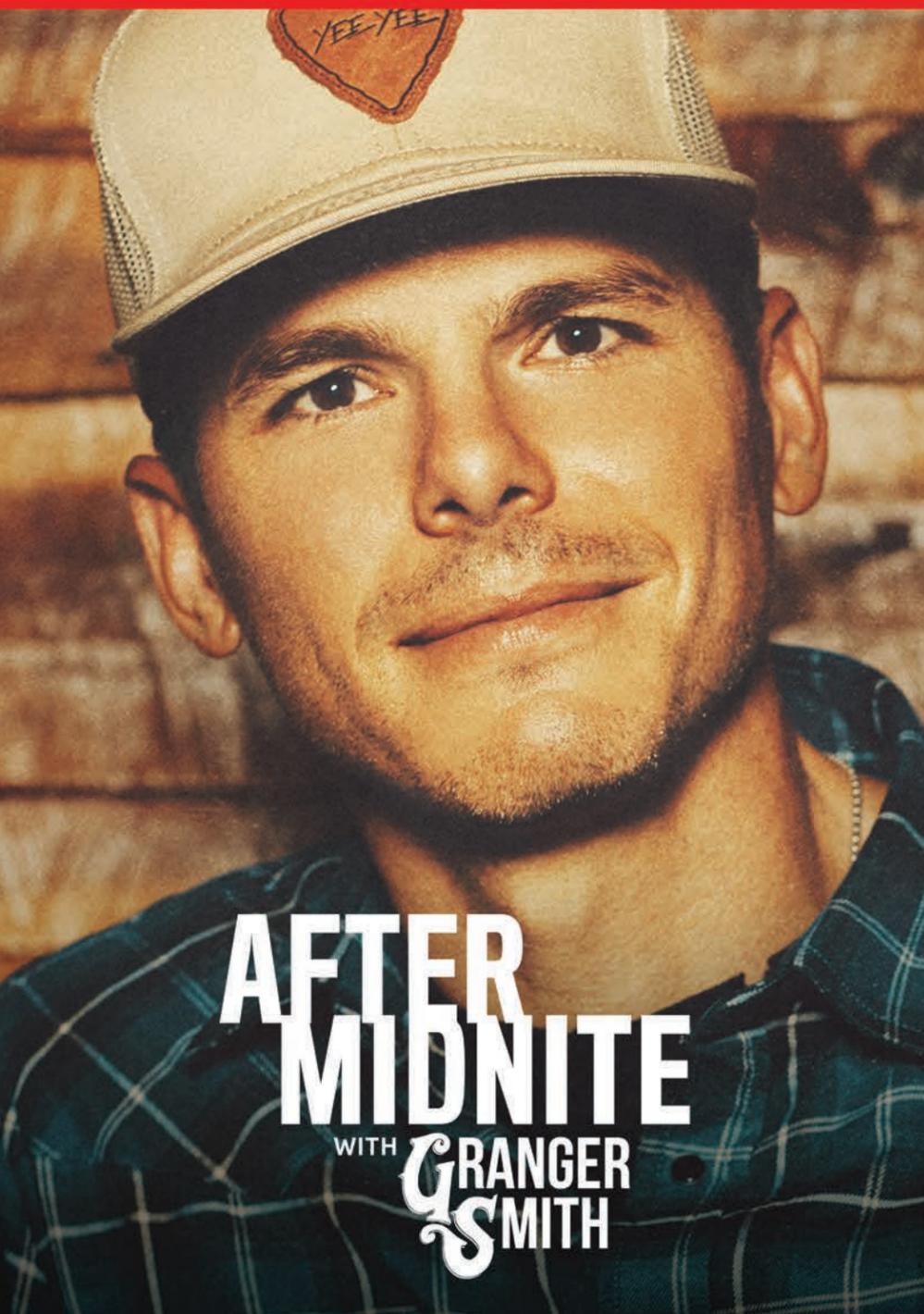
**2024 HEADLINE STADIUM TOUR**



THE  
**BEST**  
IN  
COUNTRY



THE  
**BOBBY  
BONES**  
SHOW



AFTER  
MIDNITE  
WITH GRANGER  
SMITH

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**POWER  
31**



# THE ARTIST LAND HOLLYWOOD

Challenged daily by the dynamics of a business built around creativity, the reader-voted leaders featured in Country Aircheck's annual Power 31 lists were given a similarly daunting assignment for this issue: **RECAST A FAVORITE MOVIE WITH COUNTRY ARTISTS AND/OR INDUSTRY COLLEAGUES.**

## ARTISTS & MUSIC

**1 Scott Borchetta**  
*Big Machine Label Group Chairman/CEO*  
*Ford vs. Ferrari* with Carroll Shelby played by **Kris Lamb**, Ken Miles played by **Tim McGraw**, Mollie Miles played by **Ashley Sidoti**, Leo Beebe played by **Brian Phillips** and Dan Gurney played by **Rod Phillips** (no relation). **George Briner** as Henry Ford, **Enzo DiVincenzo** as Enzo Ferrari, **Jimmy Harnen** as Lee Iococca, **Clay Hunnicutt** as Phil Remington and a pit crew made up of **Chris Palmer, Erik Powell, Ryan Dokke, Tim Roberts, Jackie Tigue-Caldwell, Lois Lewis, Meg Ryan, Meg Stevens, Justin Chase, Justin Case, Justin Moore** and **Justin Ford**. Soundtrack by **The Cadillac Three** and featuring Velvet Revolver's "Big Machine," Jan & Dean's "Dead Man's Curve" and the Beach Boys' "409."



**2 Seth England**  
*Big Loud Partner/CEO*

**3 Cris Lacy**  
*Warner Music Nashville Co-Chair/Co-President*  
*"Back To The Future"* with Marty McFly: **Bailey Zimmerman**. Nobody moves faster! "Doc" Emmett Brown: **Charlie Cook**, the mad scientist of radio. Lorraine Baines-McFly: **Madeline Edwards**. She's confident and knows what she wants. George McFly: **Cole Swindell**. Steady and a thinker. Biff Tannen: **Blake Shelton**. Have you seen the way he picks on Adam?! I also just want to hear him say "McFly!" Jennifer Parker: **Ingrid Andress**. She's smart and takes it all in stride.



## AIRPLAY & EXPOSURE

**1 Rod Phillips**  
*iHeartMedia EVP/Country Programming Strategy*  
*Game of Thrones*. **Gator Harrison** revives the role of Jon Snow – he's so pretty. **Royce Risser** as Ned: sorry 'bout the whole head chopping thing. **Steve Hodges** is Jamie Lanister. Sorry 'bout the whole sister thing. **Gregg Swedberg** as Tormund Giantband – Gregg with a beard. **Jackie Tigue-Caldwell** as Cersei Lanister; she will be the Queen of Music Row one day anyway. And **Kristen Williams** as Daenerys Targaryen, because she is far more vicious than she appears.



**2 Stacy Blythe**  
*Big Loud SVP/Promotion*  
 I can't get past the following casting of my favorite movie, *Stepbrothers*: Dale played by **Morgan Wallen**, Brennan played by **Ernest**. Brennan's brother Derek played by **Hardy**, and Mom and Dad played by **Brent Michaels** and **Meg Stevens**. It should all be self-explanatory.

**3 Charlie Cook**  
*Cumulus VP/Country*  
*The Godfather* with **Joe Galante** as Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) and **Scott Borchetta** as Michael Corleone (Al Pacino). Since he was named for the character, my dog Santino as Sonny Corleone (James Caan). **Marci Braun** as Kay Adams (Diane Keaton), **Bill Catino** as Clemenza (Richard S. Casatellano), **Lon Helton** as Tom Hayden (Robert Duvall) and **Stacy Blythe** as Connie Corleone Rizzi (Talia Shire).



ARTISTS & MUSIC

4 Jon Loba

BMG/Nashville President

*We Are Marshall*, because I love assembling teams of underdogs to fight for underdogs and/or those who might not be given a chance elsewhere. While the normal success metrics are of course important, just getting on the field and relentlessly pursuing a perceptually unattainable goal together is a worthy and meaningful endeavor.

The cast would be Jack Lengyel (me), Nate Ruffin (JoJamie Hahr), Red Dawson (Lee Adams), Annie Cantrell (Katie Kerkover), President Dedmon (Ken Tucker), Paul Griffen (Scott Borchetta), Carol Dawson (Shelley Hargis) and Young Keith Morehouse (Adrian Michaels).



5 Cindy Mabe

UMG/Nashville President

6 Randy Goodman

Sony/Nashville Chairman/CEO



7 Ben Kline

Warner Music Nashville Co-President

"Toy Story" with, as Woody: **Kenny Chesney**. He's the leader of his pack, and he loves his hat! Buzz: **Shay Mooney** – a voice that goes to infinity and beyond. Jessie: **Ashley McBryde** – just a total badass. Slinky Dog: **Ian Munsick**, with that loong hair and distinct voice. Bo Peep: **Gabby Barrett** – levelheaded and kind-hearted. And as Mr. Potato Head: **Kurt Johnson**, for obvious reasons.



8 Ken Robold

Sony/Nashville EVP/COO

9 Michelle Tigard Kammerer

Amazon Music Head/Country

Since I'm a Kansas girl, I'm going with *The Wizard of Oz!* **Kacey Musgraves** as Dorothy, but instead of "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" she sings her incredible song "Rainbow," which would fit perfectly both lyrically and musically. **Jelly Roll** as the Lion with "Save Me" as his song, because it not only took courage to write and release, but



connects with a deeper message of finding internal courage [while] not being afraid to ask for help.

**Breland** as the Scarecrow – using the thoughtful lyrics and message in his song "Cross Country" would expand the character into a seeker of knowledge and acceptance for all. **Tim McGraw** as the Tin Man singing his full-of-heart "Humble And Kind," truly transforming the character into what he wanted most ... a human. And **Dolly Parton** as Glinda the Good Witch singing "I Will Always Love You." Is there a better song for Glinda to sing to Dorothy?!

10 George Briner

Valory President

One of my favorite movies would have to be *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*. Del Griffith (John Candy) would be played by **Jelly Roll**. Neal Page (Steve Martin) would be played by **Justin Moore**, who really hates to fly. **Jon Pardi** would be the State Trooper, and **Ashley McBryde** would be the car rental agent.



11 Ben Vaughn

Warner/Chappell President/CEO

**Chris Stapleton's** voice as *The Terminator*. You can't stop it, and he'll "be back" with a jaw-dropping record this fall.



12 Craig Wiseman

Big Loud Owner/Managing Partner



AIRPLAY & EXPOSURE

4 Tim Roberts

Audacy VP/Country

I'll cast a *Guardians of the Galaxy* sequel, titled *Guardians of the Opry* with **Morgan Wallen** as Star-Lord, **Luke Combs**, of course, is Groot ("I am Luke"). **Lainey Wilson** is the perfect Gamora and **Jelly Roll** is Drax the Destroyer. I've got **Carrie Underwood** as Nebula, and ... drum roll ... as Rocket Raccoon I'm casting **Joe "the Tweez" Carroll** from Black River Entertainment.



5 Kristen Williams

Warner Music Nashville SVP/Radio

Every day I come to work, I'm entering the *Animal House*.

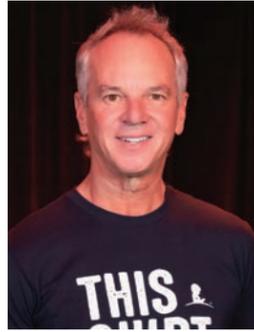
6 Carson James

BBRMG SVP/Promotion

7 Steve Hodges

Sony Music EVP/Promotion & Artist Development

*The Wizard of Oz* with **Lauren "LT" Thomas** as the redhead Dorothy, who solves everyone's problems in the end. **Mike Dungan** as The Lion; come on, everyone can picture that big smile in your head, no problem. **John Ettinger** as The Scarecrow, always movin' and shakin' trying to figure it all out in his head. **Miranda Lambert**, the "Tin Man" – okay, that was too easy. And **Bill Simmons** as The Wizard; loveable Bill, always heading somewhere, not specifically in a hot air balloon, solving his clients' issues.



8 Kurt Johnson

Townsquare SVP/Content & Programming

The Music Row production of the cinema classic *Animal House* has **Alex Valentine** as Flounder – "Oh boy! Is this great!!" **Jimmy Harnen** as Bluto – "Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?" **Lon Helton** as Dean Wormer – "Who dropped a whole truckload of fizzies into the varsity swim meet? Who delivered the medical school cadavers to the alumni dinner?" **David**



**Friedman** as Otter – "I'll be brief. The issue here is not whether we broke a few rules or took certain liberties, we did." **Michael Chase** as Hoover – "They confiscated everything. Even the stuff we didn't steal!" And **Steve Hodges** as Niedermeyer – "A p-pledge p-pin?!"



9 Bobby Bones

The Bobby Bones Show Host

10 Marci Braun

Audacy Regional Brand Mgr./Central Steel Magnolias with **Katie Dean** as

Ouiser because, duh. **Katie Neal** as Clarice because she's always cheerful and everyone loves her. **Kristen Williams** as M'Lynn; she's always keeping everything and everyone in line. **Elaina Smith** as Shelby – Incredibly sweet, everyone also loves her but, sorry, you die \*spoiler alert\*! **Dolly Parton** as Truvy, because only Dolly can play Dolly's roles. And **Paisley Dunn** as Annelle – she's the new girl in town!



11 Johnny Chiang

Pandora/SiriusXM Sr. Dir./Country Programming

12 Gator Harrison

iHeartMedia/Nashville SVP/Programming

One of the greatest movies of all time for the greatest family I've ever been a part of: *The Godfather*. iHeartCountry's **Rod Phillips** being his best



**Brando** as Vito, *The Godfather*, directing this family of killers. **Jackie Caldwell** as Mama Corleone holding the family together with heart. A full cast of iHeartCountry PDs all playing Pacino's part in mastering the mafia mission. The full Corleone Country Family is made up of the full Country music artist family, all with assassin talents and gifts given for the greater good of the Family. I'd likely be the horse's head or more likely, its other end.



# OPRY **NEXT** STAGE

## CLASS OF 2023



**ASHLEY COOKE**



**JACKSON DEAN**



**ERNEST**



**CHAPEL HART**



**COREY KENT**



**KAMERON MARLOWE**



**MEGAN MORONEY**



**IAN MUNSICK**

**EXPERIENCE COUNTRY'S RISING SOUND**

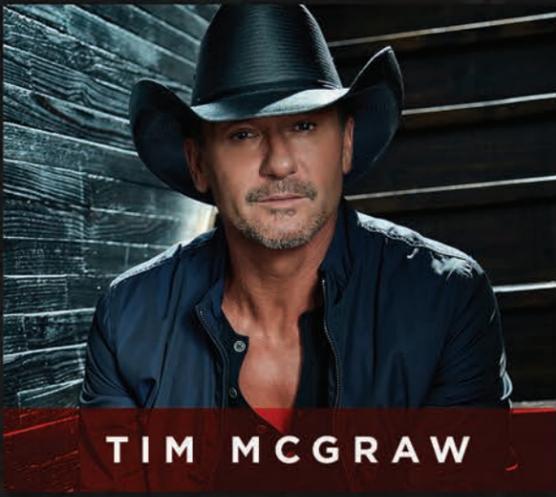
# BIG MACHINE

LABEL GROUP



MAKE EVERY DAY COUNT

# MAKE EVERY ARTIST COUNT



TIM MCGRAW



SHERYL CROW



LADY A



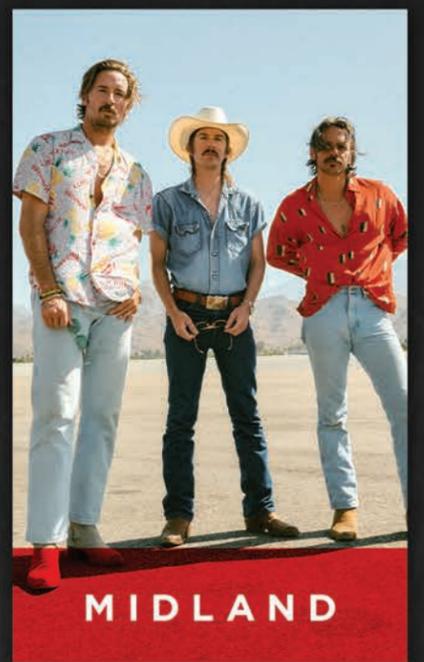
BRANTLEY GILBERT



CHRIS JANSON



AARON LEWIS



MIDLAND



ELI YOUNG BAND



DANIELLE BRADBERRY



JACKSON DEAN



CONNER SMITH



CHASE MCDANIEL



LECADE



GREYLAN JAMES



MAE ESTES

ARTISTS & MUSIC

**13 Rusty Gaston**  
Sony Music Publishing Nashville CEO



**14 JoJamie Hahr**  
BMG/  
Nashville EVP

*A League of Their Own.* This film portrays girl power and the bond that develops when you build a great team. Here's my Rockford Peaches roster: Dottie (me), Kit (**Jan Morgan**), Evelyn (**Katie Kerkhover**), Doris (**Elise Stawarz**), Alice (**Shelley Hargis**), Marla (**Lee Adams**) and Ellen Sue (**Lainey Wilson**).



**15 Mike Curb**  
Curb Word Entertainment Owner/Chairman

My favorite movie is *Kelly's Heroes* starring Clint Eastwood. I co-wrote the title song, "Burning Bridges," which went No. 1 internationally and hit *Billboard's* Top 40. I also co-wrote "All For The Love Of Sunshine," which was in the movie and was recorded by **Hank Williams Jr.** and **The Mike Curb Congregation**, and went to No. 1 on the *Billboard* Country chart.

I would put **Lee Brice** in Clint Eastwood's role, **Dylan Scott** in Telly Savalas' role, **Mark Miller** of **Sawyer Brown** in Donald Sutherland's role, **Ray Stevens** in Don Rickles' role, **Rodney Atkins** in Carroll O'Connor's role and **Tim Dugger** in George Savalas' role.



**16 Kerri Edwards**  
President/  
KP Entertainment



**17 Dann Huff**  
Producer  
*Dumb*  
and *Dumber*: **Randy Goodman** as Jim Carrey and me as Jeff Daniels.



**18 Chris Kappy**  
Make Wake Artists  
Founder/Chief  
Navigation Officer



**19 Brian O'Connell**  
Live Nation  
President/Country



**20 Shane McAnally**  
SmackSongs CEO,  
Monument Records Co-President  
My dream movie would be *9 To 5* with **Lainey Wilson** as Lily Tomlin, **Hailey Whitters** as Dolly Parton and **Carly Pearce** as Jane Fonda. **Kacey Musgraves** would play Margaret, the woman who would just say "atta girl" every time they went to the bar.



**21 George Couri**  
Triple 8 Management Founder, Triple  
Tigers Managing Partner

*Toy Story* with UMPG's **Troy Tomlinson** as Woody, the trusted sheriff. Yeah, that tracks. **Chuck Aly** as Buzz – the optimist. Potato Head is me because, you know, look at my head.

**Johnny Chiang** is Rex because Godzilla. **Kevin Herring** is a ham and, thus, is Hamm. And **Annie Ortmeier** is Bo Peep because everyone loves her.



**22 Candice Watkins**  
Big Loud SVP/Marketing



AIRPLAY & EXPOSURE

**13 Tom Martens**  
Warner Music Nashville  
VP/Radio Accounts

*Star Wars*. Luke Skywalker: **Marci Braun** – isn't she everyone's hero? Princess Leia: **Jackie Caldwell**, iHeartMedia – duh! Darth Vader: **Rod Phillips**, iHeartMedia – leads the evil empire. Yoda: **Monta Vaden**, The Big 615 – Yoda is actually a bit taller. Chewbacca: **Adam Burnes**. Valory – have you seen his beard? Han Solo: **John Reynolds** – piloting Beasley programming is easier than the Millennium Falcon.



**14 Kris Lamb**  
Big Machine SVP/Promotions & Digital

My version of *Get Him To The Greek* reflects back on the years I represented **Steven Tyler** for Dot Records. I'm casting Steven as main character Aldous Snow and I'm splitting the role of baby Pinnacle Records rep Aaron Green between **Michelle Tigard Kammerer** and myself (we're keeping this true to life). MTK and I traveled the United States with Steven, his girlfriend, and his two Yorkies – all while exclusively flying private – dropping in and out of major markets to introduce Steven's country

project to Country radio. Obstacles along the way are rabid fans, the Yorkies relieving themselves on carpeted radio hallways during visits, random excessive shopping excursions at stores you would never expect, and losing your artist in New York City only to glance at a TV and notice a live broadcast with him randomly in Central Park throwing snowballs. We couldn't make it up if we tried, so we didn't.

**15 Gregg Swedberg**  
HeartMedia/Minneapolis  
SVP/Programming

iHeartCountry people work best in a team, so let's recast *Ocean's Eleven*. **Rod Phillips** in for George Clooney (that'll be the only time those two get mentioned together!), **Gator Harrison** for Brad Pitt (I lost a bet to Gator) and **Meg Stevens** for Julia Roberts. Because I'm the veteran, I get Carl Reiner's part, and **Steve Geoffries** for Matt Damon. The rest of the eleven: **Jeff Kapugi**, **Michael Jordan**, **MoJoe Roberts**, **Hoss Michaels**, **Dave Taft**, **Alek Halverson** and **Dan E. Zuko**. Instead of breaking into a Vegas casino, we're all in Vegas for the iHeart Music Festival trying to break into **Bobby Bones'** hotel room (in Andy Garcia's role). I wanted to include iHeart's great Women PDs (the **Ashleys**, **Carletta** and **Shanna**) but there are hardly any women in that cast. I blame Clooney.



**16 Michael Levine**  
KKGO/Los Angeles Station Manager/PD

I would do an update of *Mrs. Doubtfire* with **Blake Shelton** as Robin Williams, **Carrie Underwood** as Sally Field, **Luke Bryan** as Pierce Brosnan and **Jon Pardi** as Matthew Lawrence, who played the older son, Chris. And **Cole Swindell** singing the Aerosmith song, "Dude Looks Like A Lady." It's a favorite movie of mine, and would be fun with them.



**17 Lauren "LT" Thomas Fowler**  
Columbia VP/Promotion & Artist  
Development

I'd cast *A League Of Their Own* with our core, all-female Columbia promotion team, including **Lauren Bartlett**, **Paige Elliott**, **Anna Widmer**, **Lisa Owen** and **Christy Garbinski**. Lots of personality, camaraderie, and a desire to win. There's a bit of Dottie, Kit, Mae, Doris and Ellen Sue in each of us.

**Steve Hodges** as Coach Jimmy Dugan. Not only does he lead the team, he very likely agrees there should be no crying in baseball ... or promotion. We have an incredible national team in **Bo Martinovich**, **Houston Gaither**, **Nicole Walden** and **Emilie Gilbert**, and without a doubt **Paul Grosser** is Stillwell Angel ... taunting the people around him in an endearing fashion. On-brand.



**18 Rachel Whitney**  
Spotify Editorial Head/  
Nashville



# JAY ALLEN

## *No Present Like the Time*

### THE COOL STUFF

41-city tour coming in 2024

Has raised over \$100-million to fight Alzheimer's

Just performed at the White House

Huge success on NBC's *The Voice* - as Blake says, Jay will have "hits on country radio!"

### THE FACTS

346K Facebook followers

275K TikTok followers

104K Instagram followers



### THE 16CAMINO TEAM MANAGEMENT

John Ettinger • Ryan Barnstead

615-438-7667 • 615-414-4665

Stacy Stavola

732-275-2513



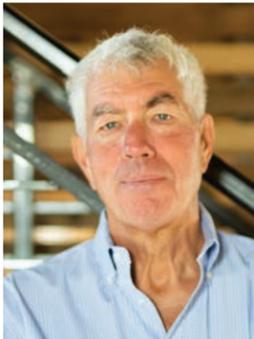
ARTISTS & MUSIC



**23** **Scott Hendricks**  
*Warner Music Nashville EVP/A&R*  
 When **Harry Met Sally**, with **Blake Shelton** in Billy Crystal's role and **Gwen Stefani** in Meg Ryan's.



**24** **Ashley Gorley**  
*Tape Room Music Founder*



**25** **Clint Higham**  
*Morris Higham President*



**26** **Coran Capshaw**  
*Red Light Management Founder/CEO*



**27** **Ebie McFarland**  
*Essential Broadcast Media Owner*  
 I'd do a remake of *Legally Blonde*. Since it's a film about proving yourself over and over, I'd cast **Miranda Lambert** as Elle Woods (complete with a MuttNation rescue pup cast as Bruiser) and **Ashley McBryde** as Vivian Kensington (since they become such great friends by film's end, yet start out as perceived competition for one another). I'd have **Ian Munsick** teaching his western hip circles move instead of the bend-and-snap. I'd still have "Get Down On It"

as one of the songs on the soundtrack, only performed by **Darius Rucker**, because his version is incredible!



**28** **Clarence Spalding**  
*Maverick President*  
*The Wizard of Oz* with **Jelly Roll** as Dorothy. It starts with Jelly singing, "Somewhere over that fucking rainbow, when I get high." He's trying to find his way home and runs into a Cowardly Lion, Tin Man without a heart and a Scarecrow without a brain – all played by **Jon Loba**. They have to see the Wizard, also played by Loba, and encounter the Good Witch and the Bad Witch, both played by **JoJamie Hahr**. That's what happens when you are the No. 2. There are a bunch of Munchkins played by all those *Idol* winners Loba has stacked up. At the end, the Wizard convinces Jelly that he is at home because the Lion, Tin Man and Scarecrow had the courage, heart and brains to sign him.



AIRPLAY & EXPOSURE

**19** **Ali Matkosky**  
*Big Loud VP/National Promotion*  
 I would do a Big Loud remake of *A League Of Their Own* starring our midwestern queens, **Nicolle Galyon** as Dottie and **Hailey Whitters** as her hard working, eager little sister Kit. **Dave Kirth**, the man we already affectionately call coach, as Jimmy Dugan, and the dynamic duo we didn't know we needed – **Ashley Cooke** and **Lily Rose** – as Mae and Doris. And because no baseball movie would be complete without him, **Ernest** as Marla Hooch.



**20** **Damon Moberly**  
*UMG/Nashville SVP/Promotion*  
*The Shawshank Redemption*. **Josh Ross** as Andy Dufresne. Suave dude, married to a pretty lady, wrongfully convicted of murder. Josh would figure out who to befriend on the inside and how. **Chris Stapleton** would play Red – so calm, smooth and cool. The kind of guy who could "get you things." He'd serenade the whole prison to sleep at night with his silky voice and killer lyrics. **Priscilla Block** would be Warden Norton. She would turn this role upside down and have the whole cast in stitches every day. Plus, "Warden Block" sounds cool as hell.

She'd make Andy/Josh cook her books and shine her platform boots, and force him to drink shots with her before he could retire to his cell.

For Captain Hadley, **Jordan Davis**. He'd be tough and he'd look mean with that awesome beard, but buy the inmates beer after they re-tar the roof, and he'd end up being a solid human in the end (like Jordan). WGNA/Albany's **Matty Jeff** would be the young inmate Tommy, who knew too much about the real killer of Andy Dufresne's wife, since he's the kind of guy who always knows too much! And I'm putting KNCI/Sacramento's **Chad Rufer** in the role of Brooks Hatlen, except my rewrite has him slipping off from his job bagging expensive wine to join Andy and Red running their hotel by the sea in Zihuatanejo, Mexico.



**21** **Ashley Sidoti**  
*Valory VP/Promotion & Digital*  
*Smokey and the Bandit* with **Morgan Wallen** as Bandit (Burt Reynolds), **Blake Shelton** as Cledus (Jerry Reed), **Lainey Wilson** as Carrie (Sally Field), **Luke Combs** as Buford T. Justice (Jackie Gleason), **Justin Moore** as Little Enos (Paul Williams), **Luke Bryan** as Junior Justice (Mike Henry) and **Trace Adkins** as Big Enos (Pat McCormick).

**22** **Mike Preston**  
*Cumulus KPLX & KSCS/Dallas PD*  
 My favorite movie is *All The President's Men*. **Cody Johnson** as Bob Woodward (the serious one), **Jason Aldean** as Carl Bernstein (the one who speaks his mind), **Eric Church** as Deep Throat (mysterious behind those sunglasses), plus – as a gender bender – **Reba McEntire** in the role of *Washington Post* editor Ben(ni) Bradlee. She's in charge.



**23** **Anna Cage**  
*Warner Music Nashville VP/Radio*

**24** **David Friedman**  
*MCA Nashville VP/Promotion*  
 The Dude still abides in *The Big Lebowski*, Nashville-style. **John Osborne** of Brothers Osborne would be



perfect as The Dude (Jeff Bridges), with **Jelly Roll** as Walter (John Goodman) and **Jon Loba** as Donnie (Steve Buscemi) rounding out the trio. I can see **Alek Halverson** as Jesus (John Turturro), complete with hairnet and purple jumpsuit. **Kassi Ashton** would provide grit and grace to Maude (Julianne Moore), and fiction would mirror real life as **Gregg Swedberg** and **Pat Knight** would be cast as Mr. Lebowski (David Huddleston) and Brandt (Phillip Seymour Hoffman), respectively. And there's only one possible option for *The Stranger* (Sam Elliott): **Chris Stapleton**. This motley crew is as crazy as the original, but, "That's just, like, my opinion, man!"

# MEDIABASE<sup>®</sup>

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MUSIC

Spins, Streams & Scores

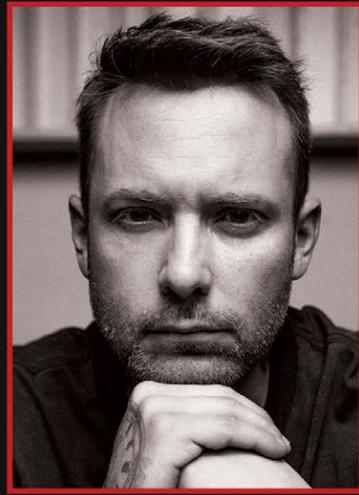
For more information about any and all of these services,  
please contact Robin Rhodes [ROBIN@MEDIABASE.COM](mailto:ROBIN@MEDIABASE.COM)

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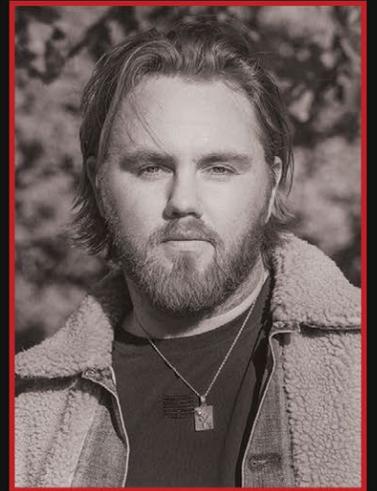


ASHLEY COOKE

CHARLES  
WESLEY GODWIN

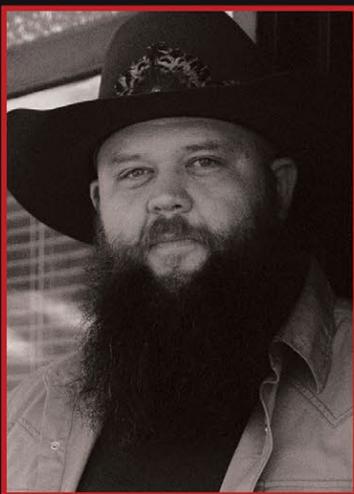


DALLAS SMITH



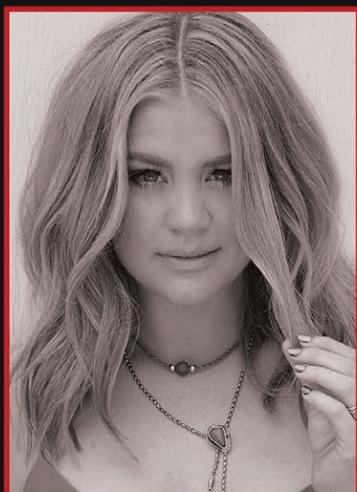
ERNEST

# 2023 **BIG**



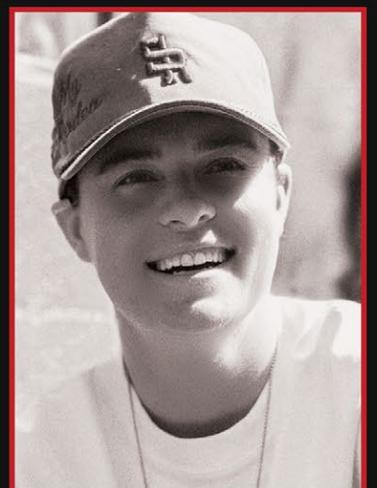
LARRY FLEET

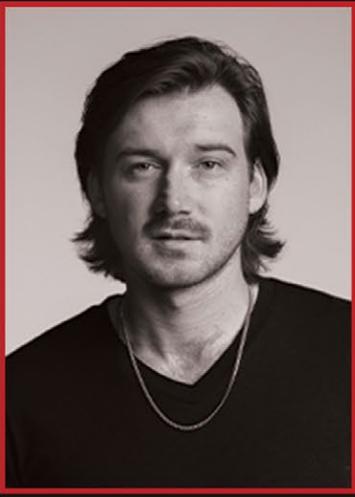
LAUREN ALAINA



LAUREN WATKINS

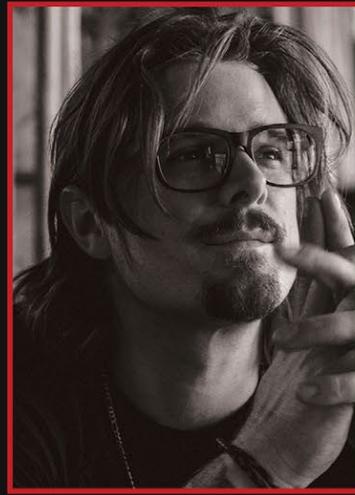
LILY ROSE





MORGAN WALLEN

HAILEY WHITTERS

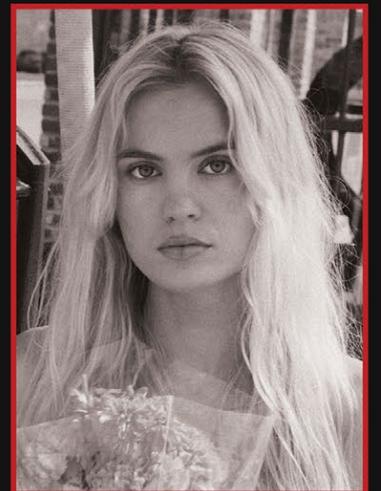


HARDY

JAKE WORTHINGTON

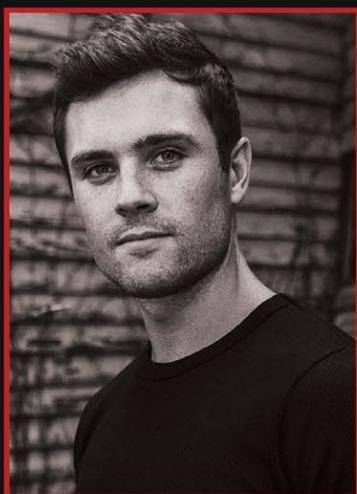


# LOUD



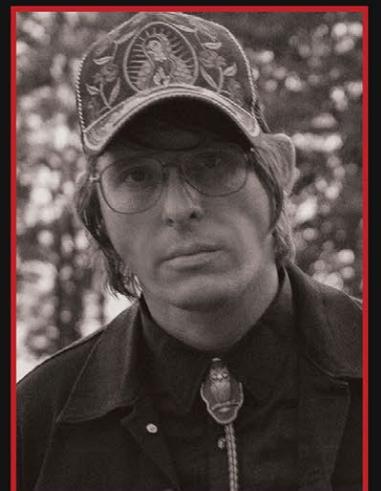
ZANDI HOLUP

MACKENZIE PORTER



GRIFFEN PALMER

SHAWN AUSTIN



STEPHEN WILSON JR.

ARTISTS & MUSIC



**29** Sandi Spika Borchetta  
Big Machine Label Group EVP/  
Creative

The 2019 comedy drama *The Art Of Racing In The Rain*, based on the best-selling novel by Garth Stein, is narrated by a witty and philosophical dog named Enzo (voice of Kevin Costner), who helps his owners to an elevated perspective on life and unconditional love. Casting: Enzo is played by my Dutch Shepherd, "Billy The Kid," and voiced by **Tim McGraw**. The husband is played by **Scott Borchetta** (using a stunt driver, of course). I'll

play the wife/medic/race car mechanic. Original music written by Big Machine Music's **Jessie Jo Dillon** and **Laura Veltz**. The soundtrack on Big Machine Records features **McGraw, Daughtry, Carly Pearce, Thomas Rhett, Lady A, Jackson Dean, Brantley Gilbert, Danielle Bradbery** and **Chase McDaniel**. Trailer music by McGraw. Singles and videos by McGraw and Daughtry. Lyric videos and visualizers for all on the soundtrack. The movie premiere will be a charity event benefiting the Music Has Value Fund's music therapy and education.



**30** Joey Moi  
Producer



**31** Shane Tarleton  
Warner Music Nashville  
EVP/Artist Development

*The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy: **Avery Anna**. She was born to sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in ruby red slippers! Scarecrow: **Dan Smyers**. One heck of a brain! Tin Man: **Charlie Worsham**. He has a heart of gold. Lion: **Tyler Braden**. Voice like a mighty roar. Wizard of Oz: **Blake Shelton**, our very own Beverly Hillbilly. And Glinda the Good Witch: **Ashley McBryde**. She's pure magic!



AIRPLAY & EXPOSURE

**25** Kevin Herring  
Triple Tigers Co-President

*12 Angry Men*: They get to decide the fate of my innocent records! It would be fun to have these guys all argue in a room for a few days: **Tim Roberts, Grover Collins, Charlie Cook, Brian Michel, Kurt Johnson, Rod Phillips, Joel Raab, Johnny Chiang, John Reynolds, Drew Bland, Gregg Swedberg** and **Scott Roddy**.

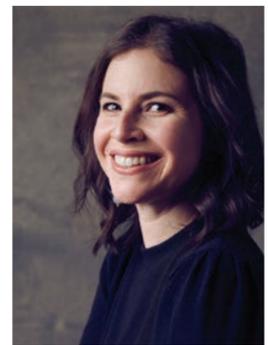


**26** Annie Ortmeier  
Triple  
Tigers Co-President

The movie is *Barbie*, and I'm filling out the roles with DSP providers and partners. **Brittany Schaffer** is Professor Barbie. **Rachel Whitney** is Half-Marathon Barbie. **Margaret Hart** is Working Mom Barbie. **Michelle Kammerer** is Bulldog Rescue Barbie. **Allison Laughter** is Stand-Up Comedian Barbie. **Emily Cohen Belote** is Baking Barbie. **Sarah D'Hilly** is Rock 'n' Roll T-shirt Barbie. **Jay Liepis** and **Copeland Isaacson** are both "Kens," and used to often being the only guys around a lot of women.

**27** Emily Cohen Belote  
Amazon Music Principal Music Curator

I'd remake *The Fast and the Furious* with **Jelly Roll** as Dominic Toretto (Vin Diesel) and **Hardy** as Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker), **Lainey Wilson** in Michelle Rodriguez's role (Letty), and **Madeline Edwards** as Mia Toretto (Jordana Brewster). There is a famous quote in the *Fast & Furious* franchise where Dom says, "I don't have friends. I've got family." This cements the idea that the crew is more than just a team to Dom — they're a chosen family that sticks together. The Country music community does the same thing. It rides for each other, the fans and the genre overall.



**28** Adrian Michaels  
Stoney Creek VP/Innovation,  
Radio & Streaming

Cheech & Chong's *Up In Smoke*. The roles of both Cheech and Chong would be played by **Jelly Roll**, since he would have out-smoked the two of them. It would be filmed in **Parmalee's** van from the cover of their new album, and **Frank Ray** would play Sgt. Stedenko. Plus, Frank and his band could remake the song "Low Rider" from the movie for Hispanic Heritage Month. Sounds like a hit!

**29** RJ Meacham  
Curb SVP/Promotion

*Titanic* recast with **Jelly Roll** as Jack and **Carrie Underwood** as Rose. Playing Rose's betrothed would be **Dustin Lynch**, because of that million-dollar smile of his. **Jon Loba** steps in as Jack's sidekick, Fabrizio. The Unsinkable Molly Brown could be played perfectly by either **Lainey Wilson** or **Ashley McBryde**. And I'm really wanting this just because I want **Midland** to be the band playing straight-up Country music in place of the string quartet at the end. "People say I've got a sinking problem ..."



**30** Mark Razz  
WXTU/Philadelphia PD

Okay, follow me: **Elle King** and **Miranda Lambert** as *Thelma & Louise*. **Keith Urban** as J.D. (Brad Pitt's character), **Hardy** as Darryl, and **Morgan Wallen** covers Glenn Frey's "Part of Me, Part of You."



**31** Brent Michaels  
KUZZ/  
Bakersfield PD

*The Avengers* with **Cody Johnson** as Captain America, **Jordan Davis** as Iron Man, **Lainey Wilson** as Black Widow, **Kane Brown** as Thor, and **Jelly Roll** as The Hulk. Basically, these are five of the superheroes in our multiverse. Cody is the all-American, traditional hero. Jordan is the likable, witty one. Kane Brown is just ripped, and I kinda feel like Lainey and Jelly Roll are self-explanatory.

CAC





# Impacting Oct. 16

THE SMOOTH, SOARING HARMONIES COMING FROM THESE THREE BROTHERS DESERVES THE ATTENTION OF THIS OFTEN JADED INDUSTRY.



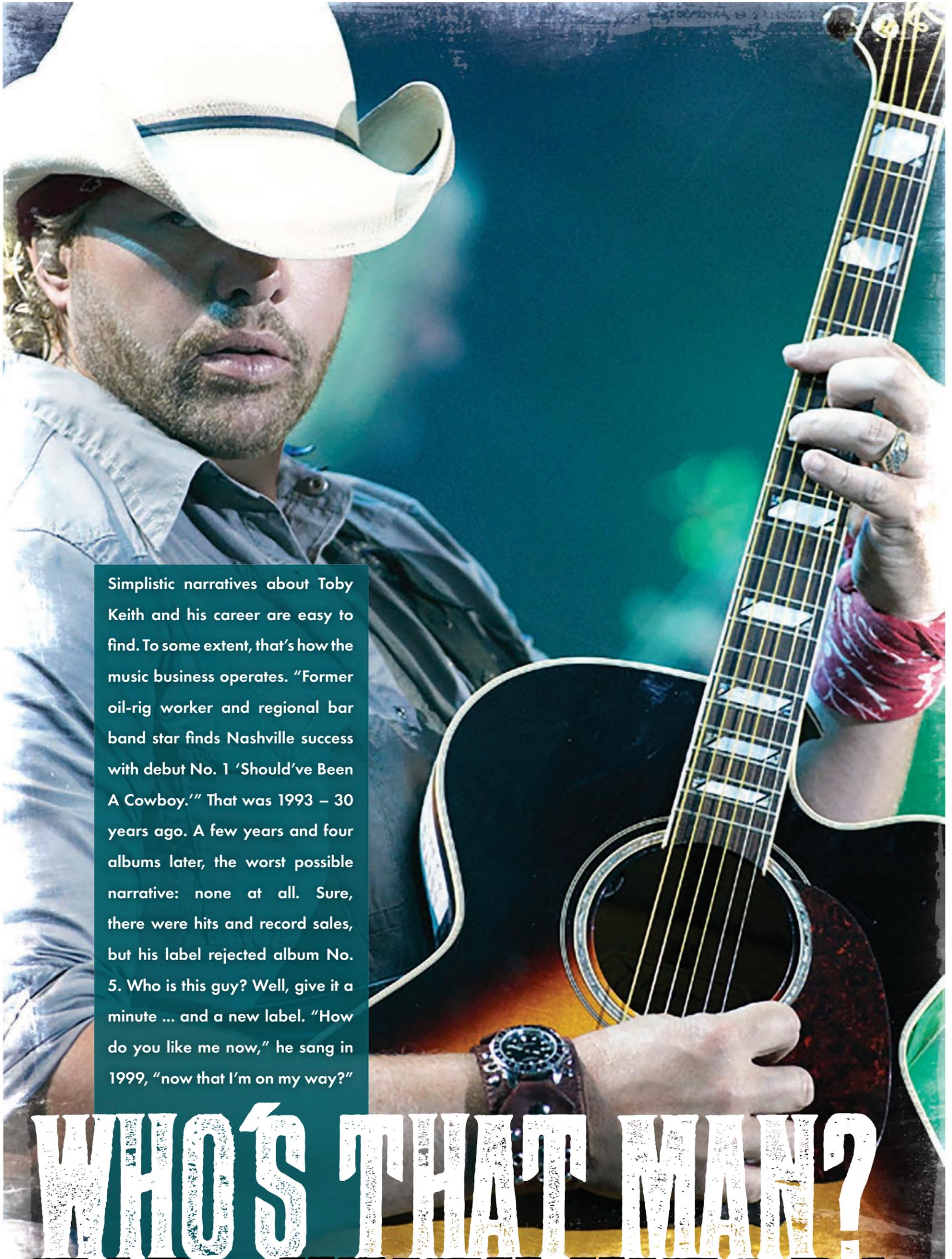
**THE  
KINKEAD  
ENTERTAINMENT  
AGENCY**  
NASHVILLE, TN



**Show Dog Nashville**  
*congratulates*  
**TOBY KEITH**  
*on 30 years of excellence.*

**Thank you for taking us all  
on your American Ride.**





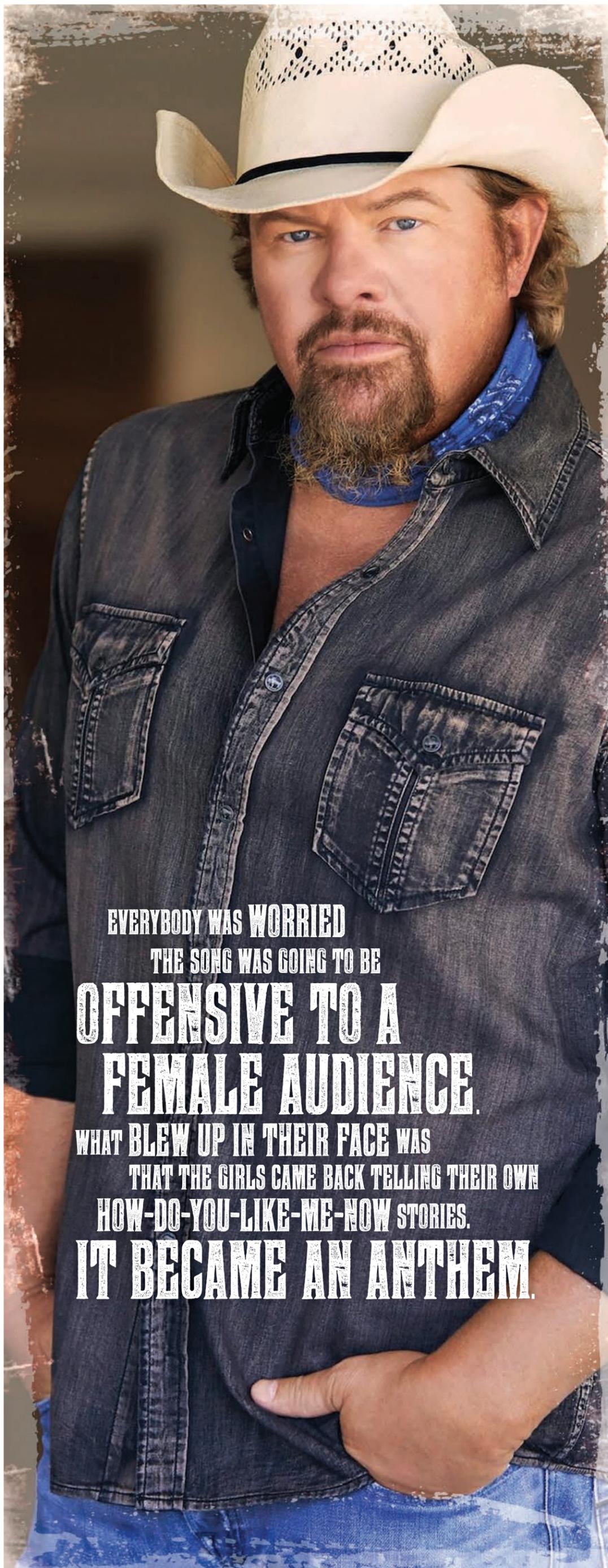
Simplistic narratives about Toby Keith and his career are easy to find. To some extent, that's how the music business operates. "Former oil-rig worker and regional bar band star finds Nashville success with debut No. 1 'Should've Been A Cowboy.'" That was 1993 – 30 years ago. A few years and four albums later, the worst possible narrative: none at all. Sure, there were hits and record sales, but his label rejected album No. 5. Who is this guy? Well, give it a minute ... and a new label. "How do you like me now," he sang in 1999, "now that I'm on my way?"

# WHO'S THAT MAN?

## TOBY KEITH HITS 30

And on his way he was, piling on the weeks at No. 1. To date, 56 weeks at the top – tied for fifth of all-time with Alan Jackson.

Like Jackson – also an accomplished songwriter – Keith had a visceral reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. "Country singer paints himself in an 'angry American' corner," the media seemed to say. Meanwhile, he was in the midst of a creative explosion – hits ranging from "You Shouldn't Kiss Me Like This" and "I Wanna Talk About Me" to "Who's Your Daddy?" and "Beer For My Horses." Simultaneously, he was commencing 11 years of USO Tours, visiting and lifting up the young men and women who also had angry reactions to their country being attacked ... and put their lives on the line for it.



EVERYBODY WAS WORRIED  
THE SONG WAS GOING TO BE  
**OFFENSIVE TO A  
FEMALE AUDIENCE.**  
WHAT BLEW UP IN THEIR FACE WAS  
THAT THE GIRLS CAME BACK TELLING THEIR OWN  
HOW-DO-YOU-LIKE-ME-NOW STORIES.  
**IT BECAME AN ANTHEM.**

At the height of his career, Keith had *Forbes* calling him the half-billion-dollar man, Ford building its truck marketing around him, his own label and a cavalcade of business interests and industry honors. If forced to reductionism, however, even Keith himself leans on one moniker above all: songwriter. His inductions into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame and the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame certainly support that. Still, the depth and complexity of a music maker in rare company can't be so simply distilled. The next several pages will attempt to encompass much of Toby Keith's 30-year career, but will be – inevitably – incomplete. The story is still being written.

#### HOW DID MUSIC GET AHEAD OF YOU?

My grandmother owned a supper club and my mother was a singer who basically gave up her career when she had me. Every time we went to Fort Smith, AR, I would visit my grandmother at the bar and see that band playing – how much attention they got and how much respect they commanded. That's what I wanted to do. My grandfather worked at OTASCO, which stood for Oklahoma Tire And Supply Company. They had a little bit of everything – washers and dryers, tires and oil, but also they had a guitar. She saw me looking at it and bought it for my birthday when I was seven or eight. I learned a few chords, then put it down and started playing football. Somewhere around 14 I picked it back up, and tried to learn more chords and get better. Sitting in my room, singing along with my heroes.

#### HOW DID THAT TRANSITION INTO THINKING YOU COULD MAKE A CAREER OF IT?

Somebody would say, "Hey, they're writing songs over at this guy's house." You don't have to have a very good song to make people who aren't songwriters enamored. I'd see the girls sitting cross-legged on the floor clapping for the songs these guys were writing, and I was thinking, "My songs are that good." First, you have to get over the stage fright. You have to be willing to perform. At some point people started saying, "Wow, those songs are really good." Then a guy said, "We've got a band and need a singer." They were a little more rock and roll than what I was, but I got them playing some Alabama. They saw it was closer to the Eagles and Bob Seger than they first thought. I was working in the oilfield and had all these songs written. We won some local contests, then the oilfield went bust. The boys said the only thing we've got going is playing weekends in bars. If we could get somebody to book us, we could play all week and go regional. So we did.



LIKE SUNDAY MORNING: An early Easy Money Band performance.

After about a year, we became one of the big rotating bands. We kept climbing that ladder until we were high enough up to see out over everybody. "Let's give this a shot." But you had to have somebody open the door. The best and worst part of the internet is everybody gets to be heard, but it's just a big wash of music with no filtering system. Even though it wasn't fair, the filtering system back then meant if you were a good songwriter, you were going to get a shot. Somebody's going to listen and try to do something with you. There are a lot of talented people who didn't make it, but still they got the shot.

#### WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALIZE YOU HAD A HIT SONG?

At that point I'd never had one, so I didn't know. I thought my songs were good enough that I might get a chance to record them. When [then-Mercury exec.] Harold Shedd heard "Should've Been A Cowboy," he told me I had a smash. But I didn't really know. After I got 10 years into it and was running my own show, I could tell if a song would work before I released it. Back then? No.

"Does That Blue Moon Ever Shine On You" was written way before my record deal, even recorded for an independent label out of Texas. Everywhere we went, it charted. People would come up and request it at shows. But when I got to Nashville and wanted to record it for my first album, I got the old speech, "You can't just take three chords and write moon, June and spoon and expect it to be a hit." So we recorded other things.

After the second album was out, I was touring with Reba. I'd had a few hits, but no ballads and she does a lot of them. So me and my piano player started doing it live, just so Reba's big audience could hear us do a ballad. All of a sudden the label calls going, "Hey, what's this song you're singing on tour with just a piano?" I said, "That's the one you didn't like from the first album that rhymes with moon, June and spoon." It ended up being the title cut on the third album and a No. 1 song.

# I WANNA TALK ABOUT HE

## Colleagues share thoughts and stories about Toby Keith.



**COWBOY & STEELER:** Celebrating the 25th anniversary of "Should've Been A Cowboy" are (l-r) Terry Bradshaw, Harold Shedd and Keith.

Former Mercury/Nashville head **Harold Shedd:** "On a flight from L.A. to Nashville, a flight attendant told me about a singer named Toby Keith, and I told her to have him send me a tape. She replied that she'd tell him, but she had a tape with her and asked me to listen when I got home. Driving away from the airport, I put the cassette in and the first song was 'Should've Been A Cowboy.' 'He Ain't Worth Missing' and 'Wish I Didn't Know Now' were also on that tape – two No. 1s and three

top fives out of four songs. I called the flight attendant and she arranged a meeting.

"Toby was playing at an Oklahoma City club called Chastains. I flew out, saw him live, was really impressed and had breakfast with him the next morning. I didn't know at the time that some labels had heard and didn't care for those songs, but I told him I was going back to Nashville to structure a deal and that I wanted him to do his songs. That turned out to be a good thing for him and certainly for Mercury. When his album went gold, we rented a stagecoach and rode it from the river on Broadway to 19th Avenue where the party was. We gave him a gold album and a few dollars he could use to catch up on back rent on his trailer home. He's come a long way since then, all because of his ability to write some really great songs."

Former WAMZ/Louisville PD **Coyote Calhoun:** "We had dinner during his first radio tour in 1993 and, after I told him I was also from Oklahoma and a huge Sooners fan, we didn't talk about music the rest of the night. At the time I was one of three partners in Coyote's Music & Dance Hall, which is one of the places that hosted Mercury's Triple Play, which Toby headlined. Later that year, he played our free concert series at Louisville Motor Speedway. He played it again a few times and, in 1999, brought me on the bus afterward and, even though he'd had a lot of chart success, he told he just needed that one song to get him to the top level. He said he was working on something. 'Maybe I've got this thing,' he said. 'If I do, nothing's going to stop me.'

"A few months later, I was in Chicago with DreamWorks' George Briner, who said, 'Let me play you this new song from Toby. You're going to be blown away.' Rarely have I ever been blown away on a first listen, but he played 'How Do You Like Me Now?!' and I was. My God. We called Toby right then and I told him it could be Single or Song of the Year. That started a roll he never looked back from.

"He invited me to his suite for Sooners games, brought me on the sideline and into the locker room to see the coach do pregame and halftime pep talks. He called me to tell me I was going into the Country Radio Hall of Fame. And when I retired, [iHeart's] Michael Jordan booked a concert retirement party at the KFC Yum! Center. His first call was Toby, who didn't even ask when it was. He just said, 'I'll be there.' Toby headlined and the event sold more than 18,000 tickets in less than two hours. After the show, I got to hang on the bus with him, Lon Helton, the Cubs' Jimmy Bank and Bob Moody until about 5am. I had to do an interview at 10am and I'm pretty sure I was still drunk."

Songwriter **Scotty Emerick:** "When we finished writing 'Beer For My Horses,' Toby told me, 'I hear Willie Nelson singing on this.' Neither of us had ever met Willie, and I thought that was a bit of wishful thinking on Toby's part. But that's the thing about Toby – he's got great vision. And of course, I watched all of it come to fruition – meeting Willie, having him sing on the song and all the rest that went along with that."



**ICON O' CAST:** At the 2022 BMI Country Awards where Keith was honored as BMI Icon – Scotty Emerick, Dean Dillon and Keith (l-r).

"I didn't care about the controversy around 'Courtesy Of The Red, White & Blue (The Angry American).' I'm a progressive, and I totally understood the song. His voice was wonderful, the writing was great and, in a generation, you don't get that many who are that good. I wanted to work with him so bad, I told TK I would do his publicity for free for the first month. If you don't like it, don't pay me and go somewhere else. That was 20 years ago."

Producer/musician **Kenny Greenberg:** "I've played on Toby's records for a long time and what I don't think people realize is what a song and songwriting historian he is. We'd be on a session and I'm ready to do a guitar part and say something like, 'This will be kind of like the part on Waylon's 'Rambling Man.'" Toby would then list off the writers, who played the session and all the lyrics. We played a couple gigs in a band he did called The Incognito Banditos – cover tunes – and any old Hoyt Axton or Roger Miller tune someone brought up, he could recite the lyrics and tell you all about it. Seeing that up close like I have is fascinating. He's a very deep well."

BMLG Chairman/CEO **Scott Borchetta:** "I'm in the middle of my afternoon when [then-DreamWorks head] James Stroud comes bounding into my office. 'What do you think about Toby Keith?' Without a second thought I said, 'He's not done.' James says, 'Great,' and disappears. Next thing I know, we have this album that had been recorded at Mercury and turned down by Luke Lewis.

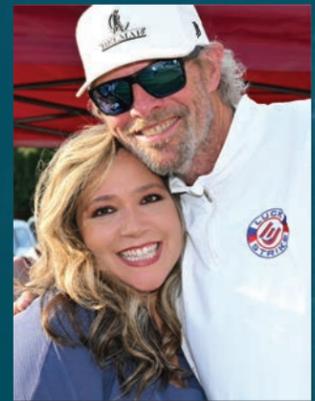


**SOONERS THAN LATER:** Keith and Coyote Calhoun.

Shock Ink Founder **Elaine Schock:** "If you've seen Billy Joel live, you know his performances are almost beyond compare. I was his publicist for a long time and always loved his shows. TK Kimbrell invited me to see Toby perform, even though I had only dipped my toe into country. When I saw his show, I thought Toby's abilities as an entertainer were comparable to Billy's."

One thing a lot of us are guilty of is, if you're not working a record, it's competition. You don't go out of your way to grasp who somebody's audience is and how it's working. I'd seen Toby perform at Fan Fair and awards shows, but I hadn't seen a full blown concert until after we signed him. I went to Phoenix where the crowd was more redneck and rowdy than I expected. But a lot of the singles he'd put out weren't that hard-hitting. There were a lot of lighter-weight, poppier things. He told me Mercury wouldn't let him do two 'attitude' records in a row. But that's who he is! He's the other stuff, too, but that's not central. I remember clear as day riding in a golf cart with Toby after that show and saying, 'Now I get it.'"

Toby Keith Foundation Exec. Dir. **Juliet Bright:** "When I started working with the team to build the OK Kids Korral – a cost-free home for families of children battling cancer – Toby was very involved, but then he went on tour and was very busy. We all kept going with the construction, of course, until the grand opening. Toby hadn't seen it in a while, so that day I walked him around to show him the facility and he was very quiet the whole time. Very stoic. But I was stressed because he wasn't saying anything. We stepped outside where everyone was gathered for the grand opening. Toby stepped up to the mic and said, 'I'm actually really blown away. This place is the Ritz Carlton meets Disneyland.' I just started crying. What I saw as being reserved was actually him being intensely observant and preparing to come out with that perfect comment. He set the tone for what everyone who showed up that day was about to see."



**OK WITH ME:** With Juliet Bright.

Live Nation President/Country Touring **Brian O'Connell:** "Toby did 12 USO Tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, annually and consecutively. Curt Motley, Mitch DeNeui, Scotty Emerick and I were members of the 'A Party.' Curt was the ringleader, working with the USO on the scheduling; he also served on the USO board. The Easy Money Band was also there for the majority of the trips to perform at the larger bases. We would make our way to Frankfurt, Germany, switch to military aircraft, and 'in country' we went.

"The schedule had us sleeping in military quarters – tents basically. The A Party was up at 6am to eat, pack and be on a Black Hawk helicopter by 9am. We would fly to the smallest place we could get to, a COB (Contingency Operating Base). Meaning, in my slang, 'Way the f--- out there.' As few as 10 or 20 people would be on the base, and half of them might be out on patrol – actually fighting. Time after time, these service members were stunned when Toby walked in, sat, played for them, signed everything and took time to visit. Then we would load back on the Black Hawk and head to a FOB (Forward Operating Base) and he would do it again for maybe 100 service members. Two-man show with Scotty. Around 3pm, it's back on the helicopter and to the host base for the larger show on a makeshift PA for several hundred service members.

"Very little to no sleep, very few breaks, hot, dusty and at times taking mortar and rocket fire. Schedule changes because where we were going wasn't there any more. We got pulled off stage in Kandahar and sheltered in a concrete bunker. Absolutely zero times did Toby complain, miss a show, not shake a hand, not take a photo. He never took a break. Those two weeks a year, for 12 years, in a world of total and complete chaos, the man never broke. That is Toby Keith."

UTA agent **Curt Motley:** "We were in a pop-up tent in Afghanistan and getting ready to head out to the bird. There were maybe 75 guys at this base, and a bunch of them are coming up for autographs. I'm taking pictures for them. One guy comes up to me with some paper folded over. Inside were eight rubies and a note. He was like, 'Please deliver these to my mother. The only person I trust to hand this to is Toby Keith.' I don't know why, but we took them.

"We had to go back through Europe and customs with these undocumented rubies in my backpack, but we got home. That was in April. In June, I was at Toby's house after his charity event and it was getting late. He came over and said, 'Hey, you still got those rubies?' We didn't tell anybody, we just went to his garage, got on bikes and rode out to Purcell, OK as a giant storm was coming up. Lightning everywhere. I called before we left and they thought I was a crank, but I said, 'I'm telling you, I'm Toby Keith's agent. We met your son in Afghanistan and he gave us something to deliver to his stepmom.' They still didn't believe me, but gave me their address.

"When we got there, we parked our bikes right out on the street, went up to the door and they were losing their minds. They're taking pictures and it turns out the stepmom and Toby have the same birthday – July 8. Randomly, the soldier, Sgt. McKenna, called home right in the middle of our visit. He gets on the phone with Toby and he's like, 'I knew you'd do this!' About that time, a big, bright light comes through the storm door. Cops have stopped because our bikes are in the street and there's like \$3,000 in cash and a gun in the wide open trunks. Looked like drug dealers or something. The stepmom goes to the door and tells

the police it's Toby Keith, which they don't believe until he goes over to the door. They're like, 'Damn. It is Toby Keith.' "The entire thing is one of the most mind-blowing experiences I've ever had. The sad part is, a couple years later, Sgt. McKenna was killed in action in Afghanistan. Really glad Toby and I got to make that happen for him and his family."



**A BRIDGE TO FAR:** Playing cards in a C-17 are (l-r) Mitch DeNeui, Keith, Curt Motley and Brian O'Connell. Scotty Emerick is the odd man out.



**WEARIN' MY SIX-SHOOTER:** Celebrating a multi-week No. 1 at DreamWorks with promotion staffers (l-r) Scott Borchetta, Bruce Shindler and George Briner.



# TOBY KEITH

**30 YEARS  
AND COUNTING...**

★ 100 Million+ performances at radio ★

★ 40 Million+ Albums Sold ★

★ 32 #1 hit songs ★

★ 20 straight years of writing a #1 hit ★

★ 26 #1s as a songwriter ★

★ 11 #1s written 100% by Toby Keith ★

★ 100% Songwriter ★

**CONGRATS ON A LEGENDARY CAREER.  
Here's to the next 30.**

**TKO**

ARTIST MANAGEMENT

**WHEN DID YOU START TO FEEL THE ROCKET TAKING OFF?**

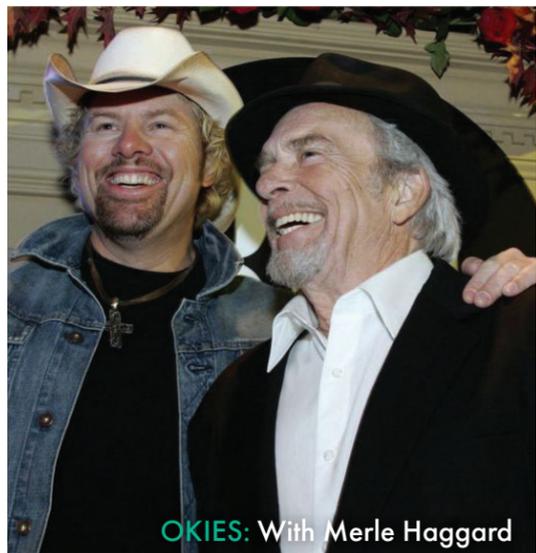
Harold wanted to put me out, but the people in power really weren't as high on me as they were some other acts they had. The Triple Play Tour [Ed. Note: With Shania Twain and John Brannen] was created because they had two budgets and three artists. Everybody got 30 minutes and when they sent us out, they had me opening. I was a little pissed because that told me they thought the least of me. Within a few weeks, "Should've Been A Cowboy" got so big that they flipped and put me in the headliner slot. After that tour I had every booking agent in Nashville coming after me and I started to feel it. We were about to fix all our problems.

I'd been working five or six nights bringing home \$300 for the week. Any extra money went to fixing the van, trailer, whatever. Now they're telling me, with a hit, I can get \$5,000 to \$7,500 a night and every once in a while on weekends they can throw me a \$10,000 or \$12,000 bone. That's for 75 minutes, which is my album, anything new I've written and a few covers. They ask, "How many of these you want?" And I'm like, "All of 'em." "You want to work every single day?" "I'll work every single day." So the next three months, I tried to make enough money to take care of my family, pay some bills and get ourselves in a better situation.

**DO YOU REMEMBER ANY MILESTONE MEDIA APPEARANCES OR MEETING ANY HEROES?**

The first awards shows you go to, you're walking through the back hall and seeing all these people you've only seen on TV or heard on the radio. George Jones had his own show on TNN, and I remember being on there, Ralph Emery and Jay Leno. I remember doing a song with Alabama when they were on the big stage out at Opryland.

The guy who took me under his wing was Merle Haggard. I remember going to California the first time and getting a note from him. And then I remember sending my mom and sister to his show in Oklahoma. He sat them down backstage, played them some songs and just made their night. The next time he went through, he called me and asked if my mom was okay. I said, "Yeah, is there something I don't know about?" He said, "No, I'm just back in Oklahoma and she's not here." I was like, "She can't make every show. Heck, every time you come to Oklahoma, she's not going to show up!"



OKIES: With Merle Haggard

My great-grandparents came to Oklahoma around the run of 1889, when the land was opened up to the citizens. Six of my grandpa's siblings were born back east in Alabama or Georgia. He was the last one born. During the Dust Bowl, a bunch of them packed up and went to California, just like in *The Grapes Of Wrath*. I'd always hear these names and stories about the cousins, aunts and uncles my dad had. My first time in California – I had a couple songs out – my road manager tells me I've got a bunch of cousins at the gate. I'm like, "I don't have cousins here." He goes, "Well, they've got pictures of your dad and your grandpa." There was a big group that landed out there in the San Joaquin Valley. They had pictures and knew the names, but also you can just tell when you see some of them. They look like you. They look like family. And I don't think my dad met even half of them. A moment like that shows you you're having a little success.

**AT LAST YEAR'S BMI DINNER YOU TALKED ABOUT YOUR EARLY DAYS AND SAID YOU WERE "UNGROOMABLE." DO YOU REMEMBER BEING ASKED TO DO THINGS YOU DIDN'T WANT TO DO?**

The first thing they do is take you in this room and start walking around you. "We gotta do something about the hair. The jeans. The t-shirt. This and that." I tried to tell them I wear jeans and a pearl snap, but everything was suits and ties. It wasn't me. Once I convinced them to let me do my songs, I also had to argue over which to release. The promotion staff always wants to be safe. One time we put out the song they wanted and it was a five-week No. 1 but had the lowest sales of my career. Friendly to the ear, but a turntable hit. "Red Solo Cup" only went to No. 5 or 6. "You Ain't Much Fun" never went to No. 1. But they



ALL GOING TO POT: With Willie Nelson

both sold records. Once I started dressing out of my closet and putting out the songs I wanted, it became apparent we were doing the right thing.

**WERE YOU NERVOUS ABOUT LEAVING A MAJOR FOR DREAMWORKS?**

No, because they didn't have a superstar roster and were still getting things done. Plus, [label head] James Stroud was my producer and Scott Borchetta is an incredible promotion guy. We didn't always see eye-to-eye, but I knew he could promote records. When I left Mercury we went to eight or nine labels. I don't think many people took me seriously. I had that last album I'd made, but no one wanted to pay for it. It felt like courtesy meetings. James said, "Bring it over here, I'll get you some money and we'll get this thing going." He'd produced the album, thought it had hits and he was running the show so he could make the call. That being said, he let the promotion staff do their safety trick again. We didn't come with "How Do You Like Me Now?!" first. We came with something else that didn't work.

In that era, conglomerates were buying up all the radio stations and there was a push to drive all the men to Sports and Rock, and the women to Country. Everybody was worried the song was going to be offensive to a female audience. What blew up in their face was that the girls came back telling their own how-do-you-like-me-now stories about a guy, or a boss who fired them. Everybody has something that can relate and it became an anthem. We shoved out more than three million albums on that song. Single, Song and Album of the Year at the ACMs.

**DID THAT MAKE THINGS EASIER?**

As we went on with DreamWorks it got to be more of a battle about what direction my music should go. I'm like, "Until I'm wrong, why do you care? Don't fix it." I had an extended video – a mini-movie with Willie Nelson on it – and videos were expensive back then. We had a new album planned and they wanted to get "I Love This Bar" out in time to run it up the charts for Christmas, but it was April and we were sitting at No. 12 with a ballad we shouldn't have released. They wanted to push for No. 1 and I had a \$300,000 video for "Beer For My Horses" in the can. I said, "You're going to have to pull this one, release 'Beer For My Horses,' run it through the summer and then go with your single off the new album." Man, that created a shit show; just a fight to the death. Guess what? "Beer For My Horses" was a six-week No. 1.

**EVEN WITH ALL THE SUCCESS, DREAMWORKS WAS STILL A STRUGGLE?**

DreamWorks had seven genres of music and they were losing money everywhere. If I sold five million albums and they get \$8 a pop, that's \$40 million to the bottom line. But instead of that flowing to DreamWorks/Nashville to sign and promote acts, they were using it to pay off their losses at these other labels.

We had a new album coming and went to L.A. to meet with the bigwig over there, Mo Ostin. My manager, TK Kimbrell, told him we'd like a couple million to promote the album – billboards in Times Square. Big stuff. He said, "Yeah, I'm not doing that." We told him we knew he was using all the money to pay off his other debts, and I said, "You've got to protect your cash cow." I can't remember the name of the pop or hip hop group, but they'd been the top seller the prior year, and Ostin says, "They did four million albums. Do you think you're going to do that?" TK says, "I'll bet you \$10,000." Mo goes, "I learned a long time ago on Frank Sinatra not to bet against the artist, but I'll bet you a \$2 bill." When we crossed the four-million mark, TK called up and said, "We're coming after our \$2 bill one way or the other."

I got tired of those fights. When I got down to my

last album, they came to me for a re-up. All that meant was giving me some money that's recoupable. It's just a loan, not a signing bonus. I still owed them an album, so I went to the people at Universal who distributed DreamWorks and said I was going to open a label. They'd get first rights to distribution and I'd split the last album with them.

**DID LAUNCHING SHOW DOG END THOSE BATTLES?**

Yeah. If I go make that kind of money, or even sell just a million, I don't have to split it with anybody or pay for any other labels or debts. For one stretch, I was partners with Universal South and [producer/label exec.] Mark Wright. Every time I saw him I'd sing that big Earl Thomas Conley song he wrote, "Nobody Falls Like A Fool." When I was recording "Red Solo Cup," he walked in the studio and couldn't believe I was cutting that song. I saw him the next day, eyes all red and set back in his head. I said, "What's wrong with you?" He goes, "I stared at the ceiling all night. I can't get that earworm out of my head! You're right. It's a smash."

**WHAT DID LEARN FROM THE CONTROVERSY AROUND "COURTESY OF THE RED, WHITE AND BLUE (THE ANGRY AMERICAN)"?**

I don't know if I understand any of it, really. When I look back, I see Johnny Cash and John Wayne talking about the flag and the people going to war. They were well-respected for it. For me, it exposed the media for what they do. For years I just turned the news on and took it as the news. No one explained to me, "You understand what you're watching here?" Now, everyone gets that if you're watching Fox, you know what you're getting. And if it's CNN, you know what that is.

It was a real kick in the throat when they came out of the woodwork on me. All I was doing was writing a battle cry for our guys to get over, get the job done, get back and find justice for the ones who killed all those people on 9/11. Others have been respected for that. Then here comes the conservative media and they're propping me up like a king. So these are my friends over here? But after a while, you come to understand they're exactly the same. Two sides of the mirror. Then you learn it does no good to apologize. If you feel like you need to, do it once. Every time you apologize, they just rake you back over the coals. Just own it. At least half of the people will respect your position.

**SOME SAY YOU WROTE THE BEST SONG OF YOUR CAREER AFTER YOU WERE INDUCTED INTO THE SONGWRITER'S HALL. IS WRITING THE SAME FOR YOU THESE DAYS?**

Over the last seven or eight years, I didn't have the hunger to put an album out every year and write as much as that takes, but when I hear something intriguing I will get obsessed. I was driving with my wife, who was trying to talk to me, but I was circling the boat on one phrase for "Don't Let The Old Man In." She punches me. "Hey, you haven't heard a word I've said." I was like, "I'm trying to finish that song." She just throws her hands up. She knows how that goes.

**WHAT HAVE THE TOBY KEITH FOUNDATION AND OK KIDS KORRAL MEANT TO YOU?**

A lot of people have foundations, and they're getting asked for things all the time. OK Kids Korral was a way for me to have a central focus. This is what I do. Anybody who invests in me, my foundation and this wonderful place gets to see with their own eyes what we're doing. Building that was not free. Feeding those kids isn't free. Those shuttle vans aren't free. People see exactly where their help goes.

**OF ALL YOUR SIDE VENTURES — THE GOLF COURSE, THE RESTAURANTS, MEZCAL, MOVIES, THE FORD DEAL — WHICH WAS YOUR FAVORITE?**

The Ford thing was nice because it was so long and so lucrative. Obviously, the golf course is a blast. Everybody wanted me in whiskey, but at the time they didn't have enough barrels. I didn't really want to go into tequila because Sammy Hagar is my buddy and he's got one. They convinced me to go with mezcal and we became No. 1 with it, but we were still losing money. So I shut that down. The bars and grills are fun. I've got a roadhouse near my house and did a couple shows the other night. It's 97 years old with lights out in the trees, an outdoor bar and bandstand. Lots of fun. Probably the most expensive but most enjoyable one is running horses. I love to race thoroughbreds.

**AND HOW YOU OWN A BAIT AND TACKLE COMPANY...**

Luck E Strike fell in my lap. Jimmy Houston, the famous fisherman, built one of the first spinnerbaits for Walmart right out of college, then won two Bassmaster classics. Jimmy was hand-making and delivering them to the first 13 stores until Walmart got so big he couldn't keep up. They'd gotten in trouble and some guy cleaned all the inventory out of it, so I bought it. I've gone down to the ICAST fishing show in Florida and talked to the people at Walmart. They're excited to have Luck E Strike back up and running. I've got a full factory in Arkansas. We've changed the colors to red, white and blue. We've got the coolest looking stuff you've ever seen.



**WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER MOST FROM THE USO TOURS?**

We landed late in Baghdad and they rush us from the C-130 to some helicopters. Scotty Emerick and I like to do funny stuff — drinking songs and things to make them laugh. But we walk in and the whole camp is really somber. The commander pulls me aside. "We'll let you talk to them, play a couple songs — maybe 'American Soldier' — we'll cut this big cake the chef made and get you on your way. We've just lost four guys." So we did. Then they flew us to Fallujah, which they'd just taken. No infrastructure, no lights. We played for a bunch of guys laying on their [helmets].

They put us in a Marine helicopter to go back to Baghdad at 2am and suddenly start descending in the middle of a field. It's dark, no moon. The guy goes, "We've got to get this chopper to a fire. We're going to leave you here and the Army will come get you." There's eight or nine of us in an old hay barn, including a couple women with the USO. I'm like, "Guys, let's not end up in orange jumpsuits here. Somebody shows up, we're fighting." But 20 minutes later, we hear choppers and two Army Black Hawks show up. We got back, checked into our rooms at 3am and I'm thinking, that's just the first day.

We've seen Abraham's oasis, Alexander the Great's castle and the Garden of Eden. We set foot in Pakistan — all kinds of stuff not many people get to do. But it's the relationships that still show up. The other day we were out of minnows and got some from a guy who told us to leave the bucket on his dock when we were done. When we went back, another guy was there waiting for us who says, "I saw you in Iraq and Afghanistan." He tears up and starts telling me how important our visit was to him.

We don't drive five minutes up the cove and my phone beats. A buddy from Homeland Security is sitting in a bar in Midland, TX. He's seen a dude with a veteran's hat on and hears him telling the bartender what his highs and lows were in Iraq. My name was mentioned. My friend goes, "Let's video with him." It's amazing how much so many of them deeply appreciate that we went over there because, to us, it felt like we were getting to give back. We had the easy part. We knew we'd get to come home.



**AMERICAN SOLDIERS:** Meeting and greeting in Afghanistan, 2008.

**WHAT'S THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN?**

If I can beat cancer, I'll get back out on the road. We need to start figuring out what we're doing, but it's hard to ramp up when you've been off the road this long. Singing the other night showed me I can do it. It's now just about fending off that devil.

**THIS AMERICAN RIDE**

**TK Kimbrell was managing Sawyer Brown, among others, when he first crossed paths with Toby Keith. After getting to know each other on tour, they formalized a working relationship that is now approaching its 30th year.**

"Nelson Larkin came to my office and played 'Who's That Man,'" Kimbrell says. "When I found out he wrote it by himself, I was like, alright, this cat's the real deal. He already had 'Should've Been A Cowboy' and 'He Ain't Worth Missing.' I didn't even call Mark Miller. I knew we couldn't go wrong putting him on the tour. I said, 'This is a done deal.' I met Toby the first day of that tour in Sydney, Nova Scotia."

The tour ran for more than 80 shows. "We played golf and basketball every day I was out on the tour," Kimbrell says. "About a month in Toby asked if I would manage him. I said, 'Well, you're my kind of guy because you write your songs.' I had Sawyer Brown at the time, and Mark Miller wrote a lot of theirs. Chris LeDoux had written most of the stuff that got him started. And I had Mac McAnally, who's one of the greatest songwriters. In the '80s I'd been Steve Wariner's day-to-day. So Toby fit me and I knew he had had the goods to go all the way. I even told him early on, 'You're a hall of famer.' He's in a half-a-dozen of them now."

Accepting the BMI Icon Award in 2022, Keith joked that as the record industry tried to groom him, it found out he was "ungroomable." "He'd worked in the oil fields and the bars of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arkansas," Kimbrell says. "People might have considered him ungroomable, but he's also a brilliant guy with a photographic memory who knows how to act when he needs to."

"Because he was such a commercial songwriter, the industry pushed him toward the middle. He played the game ... went along with it to some extent. He took his chew out when he needed to. (laughs) But he got tired of being pushed. He knew he was a lot more than what they wanted to see out of him. He had to fight for 'How Do You Like Me Now?!' We were told it couldn't be a hit. Too much attitude. Females wouldn't want to hear that. But everybody on earth has had their 'how do you like me now' moment, so it resonated."

**BOOMTOWN**

One of several defining moments in Keith's career, "How Do You Like Me Now?!" was a deeply rooted sentiment. "That song came out in November of 1999, but he had that phrase on his backstage pass when I started managing him in '94," Kimbrell says. Mercury's resistance to the song led to his departure from the label and signing with DreamWorks. But the move was risky.

"Rarely had that worked, Kimbrell says. "The labels that have an artist's catalog have a lot more to gain than a label that just has one record on you. But he was like, 'No, it's time for me to dress out of my own closet instead of being who they want me to be. I'd rather succeed or fail doing what I know I'm supposed to be doing.' I can recall that conversation as clearly as I recall this morning. He never wavered."

DreamWorks hadn't had an unqualified success prior to Keith's arrival. "The owners had a kill-button ready to push on DreamWorks/Nashville, and they were close to pushing it," Kimbrell says. "When 'How Do You Like Me Now?!' came out and was a huge hit, that bought the label the next four years of its life. And over those years, Toby spent 51 weeks at No. 1 on the various charts. Basically, a quarter of the time he was on the label, he held the top spot."

In 2003, Universal agreed to acquire DreamWorks, putting Keith back in the fold of his former label. "That didn't sit well with us," Kimbrell says. "[Then UMG/Nashville Chair] Luke Lewis had let Toby go from Mercury to Polydor after his first album. When his third album came out, he was on A&M, but then wound up back at Mercury with Luke. We did another album that had 'How Do You Like Me Now?!' but they didn't believe in it. So Luke dropped Toby a second time. Four years later, he's the biggest artist in country music — arguably all of music — and they put us back with Universal and Luke. We were like, 'Damn. Why would you do that to us?' We had to get out of that deal."

**HE AIN'T WORTH MISSING**

Maybe it was personality conflict between Lewis and Keith, or maybe Lewis just didn't hear the music. "It might've been a little bit of both," Kimbrell says. "When DreamWorks merged into UMG, Toby had 'As Good As I Once Was.' And I remember being told, 'Nobody wants to hear Toby sing about a man being with two women.' They wouldn't even put it out. They put out 'Honkytonk U,' which Toby never wanted as a single. Finally, we put our foot down and said, 'You guys can screw around all you want, but we're going after 'As Good As I Once Was.' It spent six weeks at No. 1 and was BMI's Song of the Year."

Keith launched his own Show Dog Nashville in 2005, though artist-owned labels at that level were rare. "Herb Alpert had done it successfully with Jerry Ross and A&M Records, but it had only happened once at that point," Kimbrell says. "We told the powers that be at Universal, we're either going to start our own thing or Toby's never making another record. They were like, 'No one ever means that.' I said, 'Well, you don't know Toby.' A lot of people act like they don't give a shit, but Toby actually doesn't."

Unlike the uncertainty in moving to DreamWorks, the Show Dog launch was done with confidence. "We hadn't had a failure," Kimbrell says. "Toby was writing songs, finding songs and racking up while the business was falling. But we had a Ford Truck deal and this whole world going on we had to keep going — way too many income streams to let a label dictate to us. So it was an easy decision."

**AMERICAN SOLDIER**

Twelve years running, Keith performed for and visited with service men and women in some of the toughest environments in the world via USO Tours. "These are really not safe places, even though you're being watched after by the best people in the world," Kimbrell says. "Flying into Baghdad, you're basically in freefall. The approach is steep since they can't protect all the airspace. Then they rush you to a helicopter, give you talkback mics and tell you to alert them if you see tracer fire. I'm like, 'You're joking, right?' They were not."

"It's 124 degrees, we're sitting shoulder to shoulder and I'm like, 'Shut the door.' They won't, though, because it's too hot and the door isn't going to stop a bullet anyway. You're flying 100 feet off the ground, which makes the helicopter harder to hit. And the schedules they give you get thrown out immediately because they're not going to follow something that might give the enemy an idea of where you are. I was scared to death. We had the biggest star in the world flying all over the place in Black Hawk helicopters and getting shot at. Bombs going off close to you. It was every emotion you could imagine. From being on top of the world to going, 'Oh shit. I've got a daughter. I shouldn't be here. I'm too old for this.' But Toby never flinched."

Perhaps his most popular song on those tours was originally titled "The Angry American." "The first time I heard it, he said he didn't think he'd record it," Kimbrell says. "He said it was just a statement about how his dad would feel — something to play on the USO Tours. But he played it a few places and it was getting the biggest reaction. People urged him to record it, and when the commandant of the Marine Corps heard it, he told Toby it would be a morale builder for service members. The second DreamWorks heard it, they asked him to add 'Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue' to the title. Toby told the label, 'If we put this out, don't expect me to back down from it. Ever. I'm never apologizing. I'm full steam ahead.'"

**NOT SO ANGRY AMERICAN**

For some, the song painted Keith as something less than a multi-dimensional recording artist and performer. "In the press, he went from being an unbelievable songwriter with all these great songs and hits to being just the 'boot in your ass' guy," Kimbrell says. "A lot of the media never got past that. The controversy kept growing, but he really captured a moment. Alan Jackson also captured a moment, but in a different way. Toby knew what he was in for, but true to his word, he never backed down."

Despite unfounded characterizations, Keith is actually not an angry American. "He is the most even-keeled person you could ever meet," Kimbrell says. "I've been with him going on 30 years and I've only seen him upset maybe twice. One was when a record company tried to screw him out of some royalties. The other was a security breach at a show. That's it. And it's one of his biggest attributes."

Remaining steadfast and calm likely benefited Keith as he fought through his recent cancer diagnosis, though Kimbrell admits it's been a trying time. "This is John Wayne," he says. "He's supposed to be invincible. He's never really been sick — doesn't even take an aspirin, and now he's got cancer? It doesn't run in his family, but he went to so many burn sites — Ground Zero. Really tough watching him go through that. But we're looking at getting back to work very soon."



**COWBOY UP:** At BMI celebrating the 25-year anniversary of his debut single. Pictured (l-r) are BMI's David Preston, TKO Artist Management's TK Kimbrell, Keith and BMI's Jody Williams.



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# TOBY KEITH

on 30 incredible years of music and inspiration



# I LOVE THIS PART TOBY TALKS MUSIC

On songwriting: "I don't think I could rewrite 'Should've Been A Cowboy' and make it better. That's not really the direction you grow. Where you grow is learning to weed out the dead ends. And the fewer dead ends you have, the more open road you've got. I had to write 500 songs before I wrote a great one. It didn't take me 500 songs to write the next one. So you start closing that window down. Then I'm hanging out with two or three other great songwriters and you start to feel like you're only a great idea away from a great song."

**"HOW DO YOU LIKE ME NOW?!"** Written with **Chuck Cannon**: "I had rhymed 'perfect one' and 'valedictorian' – had a little flow going there, and some of the chorus. About a third of it was written when I met Chuck for the first time. This was the first song we started on, but didn't quite finish. We wrote some other things, had some other hits, then went back and finished it. There was a lot of big-time resistance to this song [but I] absolutely loved it. This album and this song got me dropped from Mercury. Of course it was exactly where I wanted to go [and] proved to be a great defining moment in my career."

**"I WANNA TALK ABOUT ME"** Written by **Bobby Braddock**: "I don't cut many outside songs, but Bobby brought this to my producer James Stroud, and told him he'd heard me do a song that was a really unique attempt at being different but still being good and staying within the parameters of the industry. 'Getcha Some.' Inspired by that song, he sat down and wrote this. Blake Shelton sang the demo, which could have been a hit on its own, but Bobby thought nobody in Nashville but me could propel this song up the charts and, basically, get away with it. They were hoping I'd love it, and I did. Against all odds and a lot of resistance, it became a three-week No. 1. The biggest kick I got out of it was the hardcore country critics bashing me. I'd let them bash all they wanted, then when they asked if I wrote the song I'd say, 'No, Bobby Braddock did.' You should've seen them have to eat their pipes."

**"COURTESY OF THE RED, WHITE AND BLUE (THE ANGRY AMERICAN)"** "Right after 9/11 it seemed like talking heads on the news kept saying sarcastically, 'I guess we could go bomb them if they don't turn Osama Bin Laden over. That would be so the American way.' First of all, if you don't want to defend our country, you don't have to join the military. But to stand back and belittle ... Sometime that morning a father got up and kissed his kids goodbye and a couple hours later he's standing on top of the World Trade Center burning to death and jumping 120 stories. It's not 'so the American way' to go bomb people. That is so the terrorist way. We went to the U.N. and told everybody exactly what we were doing. We wanted Osama and the people responsible for this or we were going to go in and get them. They had lots of warning. When 3,000 people die, the Pentagon is struck and two World Trade Centers are brought to a pile of ashes, and people say bombing them in response is 'so the American way,' I got angry enough to put it in a song. We'll put a boot in your ass. It is the American way. If that's the way you want it, so be it. I lashed out."

**"BEER FOR MY HORSES"** Written with **Scotty Emerick**: "When I was a kid I worked for a rodeo company. The old timers who worked in the back would carry a pint of whiskey in their pocket. They were just old cowboys. They would pull it out and say some little toast. One was to hold up the bottle for a drink and say, 'Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses.' I kept that in my head a long time thinking I'd write it some day. We did finally, trying to say that maybe it's time that justice gets back into the judicial system. The big posse goes out and catches the bad guys and everybody comes back to lick their wounds, remember the ones they lost and celebrate with the ones that made it back. Soon as we got done writing it I thought, man, it'd be cool if we could talk Willie Nelson into singing the Texas verse on that. Obviously he went for it and I think it's the biggest multi-week No. 1 either of us ever had."

**"GET OUT OF MY CAR"** Written with **Scotty Emerick**: "I've had people review albums who you could tell didn't even listen all the way through. They just looked at the titles and hated on me in print. You can tell because they don't get that twist at the end. In this song, he gets out of his clothes and she gets out of his car. You've got to make that turn where it isn't just a landslide. You have to be able to laugh at yourself as much as anybody else."

**"DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN"** "Clint Eastwood had me at his golf tournament in Carmel (CA), and he was telling me about this movie he was doing, *The Mule*. I asked him how he is still doing it after all this time and he gave me the line, 'I just don't let the old man in.' I knew I was going to write it, but to have him call me back within 30 minutes of sending it to him? I didn't ask him to put it in the movie, but they did. At that point, it's jumping jacks. It's an homage to someone I idolized and might be the best song I've written."

**"WEED WITH WILLIE"** "I had the night off in Vegas and Charles Barkley, who's a friend of mine, was having a birthday party at the Rum Jungle at midnight. I promised him I'd be there. About 4pm, someone told us Willie was playing the Hacienda. We went to the show and Willie brought me up to do a couple songs. As I was walking off he said don't go anywhere, he wanted to holler at me on the bus. He played me a song or two and asked to hear one I'd written with Scotty ... then he broke out a joint. "Now, I'll smoke it, but it's never been my high. I'm never in smoking shape and really can't handle my high very good. And when you're dealing with Willie's stuff, you've got probably the best available to anybody. So I didn't smoke very much, but boy, I got shut in. I got off that bus and had everything wrong with me you can get. I just told my folks, 'Take me straight to my room.' So on Saturday night in Vegas I laid down on my bed, alone in my room and missed everything. Got up the next morning and I had about 30 message on my phone. 'Charles wanted to know where you were. What happened? What's going on?' Scotty called and I told him the story. 'Well, I got on Willie's bus and I'll tell you what, I'll never smoke weed with Willie again.' 'By the way,' I said. 'We ought to write that.'"

**"SHOULD'VE BEEN A COWBOY"** "Me and some friends wandered into a bar in Dodge City, KS, where the old TV show *Gunslinger* was set, and watched a buddy get shot down by the pretty girl he asked to dance. Young guy in a hat walked up and she went right off to the floor with him. Someone turned to our friend and said, 'You should have been a cowboy.' We got back to the hotel and I wrote it in the bathroom once everyone fell asleep. Turned it in with my whole life's work to that point once I got a record deal. "Hearing my songs played by real session guys instead of whoever I'd made the demo with was like putting on magic dust. When we did 'Cowboy' I could tell by the look on their faces we really had something. On the outside I was all business, but on the inside, I was jumping up and down. Having people believe in me not just as an artist but as a songwriter – I'd never had that. Twenty-five years later, it's still the best part."

CAC



LET THE OLD MAN IN:  
With Clint Eastwood.



BREAD BREAKING: Dining with soldiers at the USO's Wounded Warrior Center in Landstuhl, Germany in 2010.



PILLOW TALK: At the 2015 Songwriters Hall Of Fame ceremony, where Stephen Colbert (r) handled the induction, and told of the compliment Keith once gave him – commemorated in hand-stitching.

Quotes on this page pulled from prior interviews; edited for length.

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ON 30 YEARS OF SUCCESS



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MUSIC MOVES  
OUR WORLD

# TOBY KEITH



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**100+**  
MILLION  
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**40+**  
MILLION  
ALBUMS SOLD

**68**  
SINGLES

**32**  
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## JOHNNY CHIANG

RADIO  
GAGA

**In January of 2022, Cox Country Format Leader and KKBQ/Houston OM/PD Johnny Chiang joined Red Street in a promotion VP role. Six months later, he left for SiriusXM's Pandora, clocking in as Sr. Dir./Country Programming for the streaming service. Less than a year later, he added oversight of the company's satellite Country radio stations, among others. If a more dramatic series of career pivots has been accomplished, it's not in recent memory.**

**CA: How's your whiplash?**

**JC:** That's after 29 years of radio in one company, Cox. I didn't experience much change for decades, then I decided to do it all in 18 months. To this day, I miss my Cox/Houston team and I'm still in touch with those friends, but it was time for a change and a new voice in that building. Having a lot of friends in the label business, I always thought I'd like to give that a shot. I did, and found very early on that it wasn't for me. I wasn't passionate about it. I looked at my boss and friend [Red Street GM] Alex Valentine one day and said, "I look at you guys waking up every day with a spring in your step and a big smile. Can't wait to tackle the day, right? I remember what that feels like, but I don't have it here."

**Is it being a content creator at heart, rather than someone who shares the content creator's work?**

Yeah. I felt I had more to offer in the content distribution world, particularly on the digital side. Having 30-plus years of experience in traditional, linear, terrestrial programming, the Pandora offer was it. An opportunity to learn where the goals are the same, but done completely differently. I wanted that, not just for my resume but in my mental repertoire.

**Was there a ceiling in general at radio, or a ceiling specific to your need to learn something new?**

Probably a little bit of both. KKBQ was nirvana, especially under Cox family leadership. The 93Q team, as well as the other stations, did so much and had so much fun. What could top that? Where could I go next? The one thing I would've loved to tackle is Country in New York. People say it won't work there, but I don't know that I agree with that.

**You told us shortly after you took the Pandora gig that you learned a lot about record promotion and the financial model behind how labels interact with radio. Now that you're back in a radio role, has that changed the way you view the relationship?**

I like to think I have always been empathetic to what my friends on that side of the business do. It is tough, and I experienced it a little bit for myself, right? Traveling, staying out late, and trying to get phone calls returned – that's really hard. Hearing "no" every day of your life, that's tough. The difference here is I'm at a place where one of our missions is to break new music and artists. Such a refreshing change. We're more collaborative with the music production side, and even more so with management and publishers. We're not waiting for the label to feed us a single. In fact, we don't want that. We want to help you pick one.

**In your seven months on the Pandora side, were you able get in a groove within that world?**

I don't think anybody will ever be in the groove in the DSP world because things change so quickly. But yes, things absolutely slowed down a bit. And I'm still responsible for Pandora Country – fingertips to keyboard programming. Whether I'm in Nashville or the Houston office, the day is lots of meetings dominated by SiriusXM. At night, I fire up our backend system to listen to new music and actually program Pandora Country.



THE INTERVIEW

JOHNNY CHIANG



I SAW SQUAD TODAY: Chiang with SiriusXM staffers (l-r) Jonathan Burner, Nick Coulson, Trapper John Morris, Lauren Barocas, Buzz Brainard and Cody Alan.

**How does the Pandora side inform the SiriusXM side?**

As of right now, I am the only program director in the company doing one format on both platforms. I don't think I'll be the last, which speaks to [SVP/GM Music Programming] Steve Blatter's vision. It makes sense because no one else has the combination of what SiriusXM and a DSP can offer the business and listeners. Apple has radio and devices, Amazon has the device – we can't compete with that. But we have these complementary platforms. One of my major responsibilities is to make sure they work together, talk to each other and break new music.

**I assume Pandora has much more data. Can that be utilized on the SiriusXM side? Can data from the digital side of SiriusXM also be tapped?**

Absolutely. It would be moronic not to. I don't think I can comment beyond that.

**When the SiriusXM job came open, you famously said weren't putting yourself in the running even though you were already at Pandora. What changed?**

Two days after you wrote about me accepting the Pandora position, you wrote about a change at SiriusXM Country. The entire town called me asking if the Pandora thing was a head-fake. It absolutely was not. I wanted to learn the DSP world and still couldn't move to Nashville. Steve and I agreed that we needed a leader on the SiriusXM side because we have a pretty big team. They need someone

Tepper for Outlaw Country and Willie's Roadhouse, and Joey Black with Bluegrass and Prime Country. I'm also responsible for Christian station The Message, which AI Skop programs. Emily Fenton has Enlightened and Outsiders Radio. If I didn't have these folks, there's no chance I could do this job. My role is to rally the team, keep distractions away so they can focus on being creative and keeping the train running.

**And you get to work with personalities again, including your new addition: Cody Alan.**

Obviously, Storme Warren took his job of a lifetime, and good for him. That bastard! I come into the job and a month later he leaves. I had to tell the whole town, "No, I didn't fire him." I love everything about what I do at Pandora and will be the flag bearer for it till the day I die. I had to learn non-linear programming. I had to listen to every single song to know where to place them on Pandora stations – love songs, breakup songs, house party, stuff like that. The one thing I was missing was the team. Steve gave all that back to me. Certainly, no one wanted Storme to leave, but I understand. He had been here a long time doing the same things, and he had a great opportunity.

Cody was on a very, very, very short list, and I'm so glad he was interested. First and foremost, we wanted the best air talent. We also wanted someone who was well-known with, essentially, star power. And I can't find a single person in this town with anything bad to say about Cody, so he fits my no-sshholes-allowed rule. We also have a young, budding superstar in Macie Banks, and they're a great fit together. She can really benefit from his wealth of experience.

the things I would do – not as a mandate – but if I were overseeing 10 or 20 stations, I would have whoever's programming each station pitch one unsigned artist song every two weeks or once a month to the group. Maybe we could break something. When Steve moved me into this position, I wanted everyone to be responsible for championing a song or an artist every so often. Then I realized I didn't have to; they already do it. All I had to do is listen to them. But if I were back in terrestrial radio, I'd tell them all, "You have to champion one. Let's see if we can break it."

**How's your work-travel-life balance?**

It's going well. This is starting to feel like a commute versus a trip. I'm here every two weeks and have my travel booked for the rest of the year. I typically book a quarter at a time, flying to Nashville on the first flight out of Houston Tuesday morning. Then I take the next-to-last flight out on Thursday night. That way, I make it home by 11pm CT to program all the new releases and change out the tiles on Pandora at midnight ET. I'm so used to it now, and most of the town, the labels, kind of know my travel. We jam in as many meetings and listening sessions as we can. And I invite the entire team to those – whoever can make it, great, because I want the town to know the team. So I'm pretty good with the schedule. But if you ask my wife, I don't know what she'd say.

**What have we not touched on that is top of mind for you?**

Even though we don't impact the terrestrial radio chart, the biggest thing is the impact we make in breaking new music and artists. I'd really like to find a way to quantify that, and the team would like that as well, rather than us just talking about it.

**When you think about how you got to this point in your career, is there a moment you look at as being pivotal?**

I've been the luckiest son of a bitch. As a teenager, I was one of the lucky ones: I knew what I wanted to pursue – college, media and particularly journalism. So I did that and got a journalism degree. The first gigantic break was hearing about an Asian American journalist association conference in San Francisco while I was still in school. On my own dime, I drove up to attend, bought a ticket, went to the first dinner and I realized, yeah, this is not for me. I'm a student. This is for professionals. Then they announced a job fair was happening the next day, but they also said don't go unless you're serious. I went anyway.

I saw a booth for CBS Radio. The brass ring in radio news in L.A. was KNX-AM, 24-7 News radio. I walked in and was very honest with the gentleman sitting behind the desk. "I'm a student at Cal State Northridge looking for an internship, a part-time job, but I can't quit school. If I'm wasting your time, tell me and I'll leave quietly." But he wasn't busy and asked me to sit down. I gave him my resume, which had nothing on it, and he saw that I went to Fairfax High School in L.A. He said, "Who did you have for English?" I told him I had Mrs. Inouye. He said, "Was her maiden name Evans?" I said I thought so and he asked what grade I got in the class. An A. Well, turns out they were high school or college sweethearts.

"If you can get an A in her class, you've got something," he said. The next week, I got a call at home from the KNX News Director Bob Sims. "Someone told me about you," he said. "Can you come in for a writing test?" I did, and they had typewriters. That's how old I am. So I ripped an item from the AP wire and turned into a broadcast story. Next thing I knew, I was a paid intern at K-N-X. Talk about a break.

**And the turn into Country?**

I went to Houston to launch and run an '80s Rock station and didn't know anything about Country. The cluster flagship was supposed to be KKBQ, but it was not doing well. KILT was head-and-shoulders dominant and you still had KIKK in there. We were third in a three-horse race. Cox CEO Bob Neil made a change and asked me to run it. I told him I didn't know the format, and he said that's why they wanted me to do it. And here I am.



**"The biggest thing is the impact we make in breaking new music and artists. I'd really like to find a way to quantify that."**

**What's your view of country's relative strength as a format and genre?**

Just the music, the art. Two names: Morgan Wallen – everything he does – and Zach Bryan, whose new release is fantastic. That is filtering its way to terrestrial radio. With so many different ways for the audience to speak up, they're telling us. The music leads, the audience follows. Not just us, but look at the acts we've helped break over the last few years, like Bailey Zimmerman. Absolutely huge. And we're seeing a trend with alt-country artists who years ago would never have been considered for mainstream: Warren Zeiders, Tyler Childers and others. The appetite for country is back.

The last time country had a spike in the mid-2010s it was bro-country and people hated that term. The mistake we made is it got hot and then we killed it. Burned it out. We turned every single and every act into a version of that. Now, because there are so many ways to get your audio – with

SiriusXM and Pandora alone, there are so many stations – the risk of us killing it is diminished.

**As country has widened, the ocean of music has, too. How do you manage that for yourself and the listeners?**

The first thing is admitting you can't listen to everything. You can't consider everything. It's overwhelming. But I rely on my team. We have diverse personalities, and not just among the programmers, who have such diverse tastes. I open music up to all the talent people on the floor, and they help in music selection. It can't just be one person. We were pretty progressive at KKBQ, but at the end of the day, 90% of our music decision was sort of aided by the labels feeding us singles. When I got to Pandora and met Kathleen Shea, she taught me alt-country, Americana and bluegrass. I hadn't heard of Warren Zeiders or Koe Wetzell before.

**Finish the statement: "If I were still a format leader for a terrestrial brand, I would ..."**

Eliminate all companywide initiatives. I would empower each market to make their own music decisions. Even if you don't have a programmer there, have someone local involved. Having company initiatives sounds great, looks great, but are you really serving your community? One of

to be in Nashville with them. On the Pandora side, even though I traveled to Nashville quite a bit, it was really just me and Beville Dunkerley at the time. There was still so much to learn.

Seven months later when Steve brought the subject up again, I was getting my footing with Pandora. And I'd been traveling here quite a bit, had gotten to know the team and they'd gotten to know me. We were building a good rapport. Those human results were getting back to Steve. He asked about taking on the extra responsibility, and I didn't want to give up Pandora and couldn't move, but he said, "Can you travel to Nashville a little more?" I said sure, and that was it. Literally a 10-minute conversation and it was done.

**When we interviewed you early in your Pandora tenure, you were mainly focused on the top 10 Country stations. How does your SiriusXM purview compare to that?**

On the SiriusXM side, I'm so blessed that there are so many full-blown radio stations. Each of them has a great programmer. Thank goodness I'm not knee-deep in MusicMaster every day. Trapper John is the engine, heart and soul of The Highway. Kathleen Shea is a superstar in the making. She built and launched Carrie's Country and Y'alternative. She's a musical savant. We have Jeremy



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# ANNE WILSON

WITH HER DEBUT COUNTRY SINGLE

**RAIN IN THE REARVIEW**

"UNMISTAKABLE STRENGTH AND  
UNIQUE COUNTRY FLAIR"  
— AMERICAN SONGWRITER



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