



Roots & Wings

Georgia-born Luke Bryan knows where he comes from, and he damn sure knows where he's going

by lisa lee

Don't let Luke Bryan's country boy drawl fool you for a second. Behind that lazy grin and frat-boy sense of humor is a guy who knows the music business. Since his debut release in 2007 hit pay dirt, Bryan has known where he's going and he's pretty sure of how to get there: Good songs—whether he's singing them or just writing them. He has penned chart-topping songs for other artists (Billy Currington's "Good Directions") and charted three back-to-back hits from his sophomore album *Doin' My Thing*. Now, he's staring down the barrel of superstardom with his third Capitol Records album, *Tailgates & Tanlines*.

"It makes you more confident on all levels of life and performing and the business," Bryan told *ACM Tempo* of his chart successes. "But you don't want to get consumed with getting number ones. My thing is to put together records that mean something."

Tailgates & Tanlines is a solid effort that continues Bryan's climb to the top. The album, which debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Country Albums chart, mines the singer's memories of growing up the son of a peanut farmer in Leesburg, Ga., riding around the back roads and doing what true country boys do. It's that authenticity and great song selection that has been a hit at country radio.

"He comes across as 'real,' just like he really is," says Mike Culotta, operations manager and program director for WQYK in Tampa Bay, Fla. "Country listeners have a very sensitive BS detector, and they know he's the real deal."

The lead single, "Country Girl (Shake It for Me)," has given new fuel to an already enviable track record. It's the second hit song Bryan has written with his longtime buddy Dallas Davidson, who has also had a hot streak on his own penning hits for Keith Urban, Lady Antebellum, Blake Shelton and Justin Moore.

"Dallas and I met around 1995, and we wound up going to college together," Bryan said. "He's a great friend, and for him to have the success he's having and for us to be having success together, we just chuckle about it. It's been a fun ride with him to share all this."



Bryan's high octane, dancer-filled performance of "Country Girl" on the 2011 *CMT Music Awards* turned heads and helped solidify his headlining gig on this year's CMT on Tour, which has been a springboard for other acts including Sugarland, Jason Aldean, Miranda Lambert, Brad Paisley, Rascal Flatts, and Keith Urban.

"I think everybody in Nashville felt Luke was poised to go to the next level, I just don't think anyone anticipated what he'd do on our show," said CMT President Brian Philips. "I was in the truck watching, and if you go back and watch that performance again there's this transformative moment in that performance. At first he's slightly tentative and then a build begins and then there's a really charming moment. He takes a quick glance over his shoulder, and he sees it's all working and that he's in the middle of it, and all of a sudden he transcends that moment and explodes. And everyone in the truck goes, 'Whoa! What was that?' It's seismic. I think he just turned a corner, and that's the hardest thing in the world to do."

Bryan got his first shot in the national spotlight when he won ACM New Artist of the Year on the 2010 *Academy of Country Music Awards*. He says the win "validated" his career at that stage, and he knew his CMT appearance was another rare opportunity to show what he could do in front of a national audience.

"I had to get up there and give it all I've got and let people know I deserved to be there," Bryan said. "I remember when Garth Brooks did it, and I remember with other stars before me did it, so it was my time to shine and make the most out of that moment."

The CMT Tour with openers Lee Brice and Josh Thompson has been playing to sell-out crowds, and on his days off Bryan has been playing dates dubbed the "Farm Tour." It's the third year in a row that Bryan has played small farming towns and donated the proceeds to scholarship funds for students from local farming families. Whether on a big stage or not, Bryan is enjoying his new headlining status and his ability to draw a crowd on his own name.

"I think it's time, and I love how it's set up," Bryan said. "I wouldn't want to do a 60 to 80 date tour right now. This is just kind of getting our feet wet, and if the crowds are huge every night that just let's know we're not really far from being able to do a really, really big tour."

When he's not on the bus or shooting "LBTV" webisodes (LBTV is, of course, Luke Bryan TV), Bryan is juggling the demands of being a red-hot country star and a husband and father of two. When he's home, he says he tries to "really be home" to spend time with wife Caroline and their two sons, Bo and Tate. Sometimes he takes a separate tour bus out on the road for just him and the family. Other times, he tries to let his sons experience the same things he did growing up. He admits he has learned some lessons from the first kid to the second.

"With Bo, I'd go load up the boat and drive two hours to some fishing hole," he recalled. "You'd get in there and he was good for about 15 minutes. Now, I've learned to just go get some worms and run right down the street to a little place

that I know and not spend \$200 in gas. But I was thinking that I want to do that with Tate anyway because I don't want him to miss out just because I have that knowledge now, you know what I mean?"

There won't be much time for fishing in the foreseeable future unless the fishing hole is close to



a venue. After the CMT Tour wraps up in November, Bryan will hit the road in 2012 with country rocker Jason Aldean.

"That's my main thing, to take every opportunity to let people know we're not just messing around with this stuff," Bryan said with a laugh. "I want to be selling out shows and selling lots of records. A lot of wise people have told me, 'Don't aim to be George Strait or [Tim] McGraw or [Kenny] Chesney. Just aim high and make that your mark.'"

