

Michael Ray

Michael Ray loves a good story. So, it's only natural that when it came time to tell his own, he gravitated to country music.

"I feel like in music in general, but especially in country music, the story lines have always been the foundation," he says. "No matter what changes may happen with the sound, I feel like when you listen to a song, no matter what walk of life you come from, you can really lose yourself in that song and put your own story to it."

Get to You

The small-town Florida native began to tell his tale on his 2015 self-titled debut album and scored two number one hits with "Kiss You in the Morning" and "Think a Little Less." His dynamic sophomore album, "Amos," named for his grandfather and produced by the legendary Scott Hendricks (Alan Jackson, Faith Hill, Blake Shelton) picks up where that record left off, combining the vintage sounds he absorbed growing up with a contemporary polish that puts him at the forefront of a class of fresh young voices.

Ray runs the emotional gamut on "Amos," from vulnerable ballads to boot-stomping rockers, showcasing a musical and vocal dexterity he has long admired in heroes like Tim McGraw and Keith Urban.

First single "Get to You" is a heartfelt plea for making a relationship work that utilizes Ray's impressive vocal range, moving from a ruminative baritone to a tender falsetto croon. "Her World or Mine," the album's emotional centerpiece, breaks down the universal emotions of a break-up in heartbreaking and incisive detail. He turns up the tempo and the temperature with the pithy rocker "You're On" and offers a slinky slice of wordplay with the whimsical "Fan Girl," giving "Amos" a diverse feel that retains a cohesive whole.

Her World or Mine

Ray can't remember a time without music.

Growing up in Eustis, he was surrounded by several generations of his extended family singing and playing songs. "My grandfather would sit around and teach me and my cousins how to play and sing harmony," Ray recalls with a smile. "He wanted to put a guitar in everybody's hand."

Amos eventually formed a family band with Ray's dad called the Country Cousins who played festivals and parties all through central Florida. Which is how Ray found himself steeped in the likes of Ray Price, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Jeanie Seely and onstage "when I was literally old enough to just be able to stand."

At age 10, after beginning to learn guitar, Ray says, "I started playing every Thursday through Sunday with my grandfather in groups he was in. I learned a lot that I didn't know would help me where I'm at now."

As he practiced, he began to take in the influence of a disparate group of contemporary artists, including everyone from Garth Brooks to Green Day. He was hooked and knew what he needed to do. "I switched my high school schedule so I could play bars and stuff on the weekends," he says, and his grandfather backed him every step of the way. "He knew that I wanted to take it further than just playing bars and stuff in the hometown."

And he did, beginning a several year stretch of paying his dues playing all around Florida and eventually expanding out to Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama and the Carolinas while picking up work teaching guitar lessons and installing phones. In between covers, from Keith Whitley to Snoop Dogg, Ray would slip in originals, building a name for himself as both a songwriter and performer.

Fortunately, Amos was able to enjoy some of his grandson's success. "Florida radio was playing some of our stuff, so it was really cool for him to be able to hear that," he says. "He sadly passed away two months before my Opry debut, but the Opry was kind enough to let me play 'Green, Green Grass of Home,' a Porter Wagoner song I used to play with him and I used the guitar that he played for sixty years."

"I feel like this album is a big reflection of the last two years," says Michael of the time between his debut and "Amos," as he's toured, recorded and enjoyed a taste of success. "I feel like I found my voice. And when I'm asked what made me get to this point, if you peel back all the layers it goes back to my grandfather."

Fan Girl

Ultimately for Ray, every song on "Amos" was processed through a filter of what it means for his live show, the place where he connects with his fans. Everything he learned from years of playing solo acoustic shows, bar band gigs and packed arenas opening for other acts has been poured into the time that he spends on stage—"That was my college," he says. He takes a meticulous approach to crafting the night to maximize the connection between himself and the fans.

"A live show is a give and take from both ends. There's just this big tornado that takes everybody away from whatever's going on in their life, and just puts them in that moment. I believe when you're an artist of any sort, it's your job to make sure that tornado keeps its wind going all the way up to the very end of the show, so everybody goes, 'What the hell happened? What a great night! We gotta go back and bring more people.' I say it every night, 'Tonight's about making memories. We'll take this night with us for the rest of our lives. Let's keep it going and make it something unforgettable. "

With the songs from "Amos" added to his arsenal, he is in a strong position to make good on that promise.