

FROM OL'
BLUE EYES
TO THE OPRY
**DARIUS
RUCKER**
DOES IT ALL

by KIP KIRBY

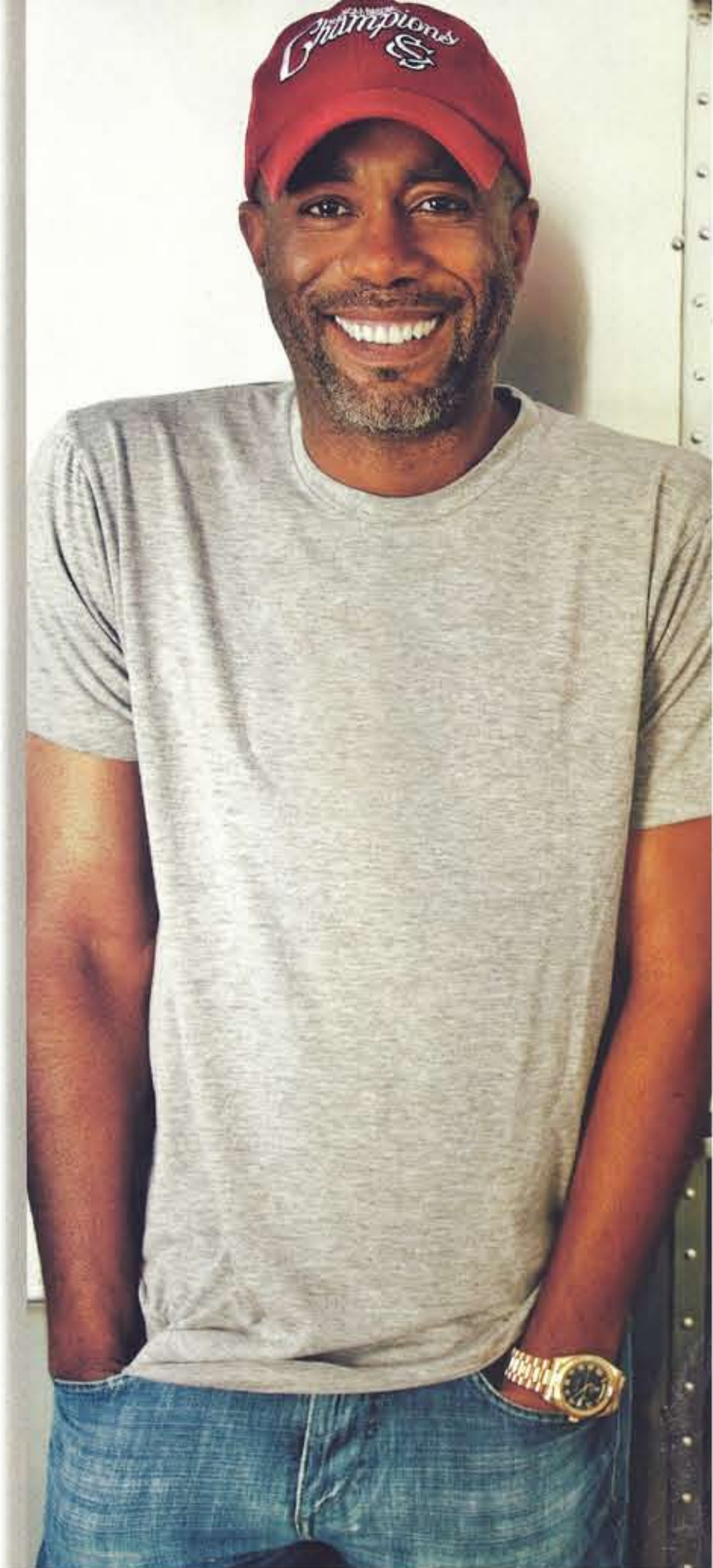
Darius Rucker wasn't expecting interruptions during his Grand Ole Opry set on the night of Oct. 2.

He was nearly through with his performance, playing songs from his upcoming third album *True Believers* and enjoying the response from the sellout house. Then suddenly, Opry VP/GM Pete Fisher stood up in the audience, stopping the show and inviting Rucker to answer questions from fans. When the final audience member took the microphone, there was an audible gasp as Rucker realized it was none other than Brad Paisley. Nothing could have prepared him for what came next: Paisley's invitation for his good friend to become the newest member of the Grand Ole Opry.

That moment, and the audience's joyous reaction, underscored the Country community's embrace of Rucker as one of its own. His journey toward this achievement began years ago back in his home state of South Carolina, long before the singer had become a household name as front man for Hootie & The Blowfish. Growing up, Rucker listened to all kinds of music: "Hee Haw" with his mother on Saturday nights, church music on Sunday mornings, big band swing standards, beach music, R&B, rock 'n' roll. Rucker's musical explorations took him into all kinds of genres, and he sang along enthusiastically to them all. It never occurred to him to limit himself to one particular style or format.

"Ever since I was a kid, I was always baffled by the different labels for music because it seemed to be the same notes and the same words," said Rucker. "I sang everything I heard and let the music take me wherever I wanted to go. I just thought all singers could sing everything. Later on, I realized they can't."

While Rucker's meteoric rise in Country Music might seem improbable after his mega-successful run with Hootie & The Blowfish, his vocal versatility extends even beyond the range of pop, rock and Nashville. In 1995, he



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received a personal invitation to sing at Frank Sinatra's celebrity-studded 80th birthday gala in Los Angeles, where he delivered a Sinatra-like performance of "The Lady Is a Tramp."

"That was one of the great days of my life! They sent us this great arrangement of 'The Lady Is a Tramp' that sounded exactly like 'I Only Want to Be with You,'" Rucker said, referring to the hit single by Hootie & The Blowfish. "So we started in, but then I said, 'I don't want to play it like that. I want to do it exactly like Sinatra did it live at The Sands in '64. I want Quincy Jones' arrangement of it. Can we get it?' They said, 'Sure.' So we get there that night, we're all in zoot suits and we do the Quincy Jones arrangement — and we just killed it. When we got finished playing, Mr. Sinatra stood up and made me come over and shake his hand. It was really a great, great moment."

Rucker continues to appear as a regular featured guest with the Peter Graves Orchestra, performing big band standards at charity events around the country. Graves admits that in the beginning he was hesitant about bringing in the lead singer for Hootie & The Blowfish to sing American songbook classics. But prior to their first show together, Rucker flew in several days early to rehearse. It didn't take long for the orchestra leader to change his mind.

"Like everyone else, my jaw hit the floor," Graves said, whose orchestra was Sinatra's hand-picked ensemble for 20 years on shows throughout the Southeast. "He doesn't try to mimic Frank (Sinatra). He's still Darius, but he does the music justice. He did his homework and he came prepared. I see people all the time trying to work outside their genre and it doesn't work. Darius is one of the rare ones who can make the programming switch inside his own head. For me, one of the biggest things is his smoothness and the way he phrases. It's such a distinctive voice. It brings a lot of uniqueness to what he does."

Frank Rogers has been Rucker's producer and frequent co-writer since the singer signed with Capitol Records in 2008. "I've worked with him on rock tracks for commercials," he said. "And I've seen him do his Sinatra thing. The other day, we did an R&B thing for a rap artist who wanted Darius to do the hook to the song. He's just a great storyteller and conveyor of emotion in music."

Rogers is quick to add that in his opinion, few artists should expect to pull off what Rucker does. The producer's phone rings constantly with calls from what he refers to as "other-genre'd artists" who want to make the jump into Country Music. "I tell them all 'no,' because it doesn't make any sense," he said. "With Darius, the honesty is there. Yes, he was a big rock star, but he comes across as a country boy from South Carolina because that's who he is at heart. He grew up with Country Music at the same time he grew up with beach music and R&B and rock. He's had a lot of influences, but when he sings a Country song, it's honest. He doesn't have to pretend that he's got a twang. He sings in his natural voice. You put a rock band behind it, it's still Darius singing. You listen to an early Hootie record, it doesn't sound any different than what we're doing now in terms of his singing or pronunciation. He always sounds like him — and it works."

Rucker's love of Country Music runs deep. It also skews toward the unpredictable, the unexpected and

sometimes even under the radar. "Don't get me wrong," he insisted. "I love Dwight (Yoakam). And Lyle Lovett is somebody I never give enough credit to. But I'll never forget flipping channels before work at the record store one day and seeing the video for 'Crazy Over You' by Foster & Lloyd for the first time. I'll never forget how blown away I was. And when I heard 'Mary and Omie' by Nanci Griffith, from *Once in a Very Blue Moon*, it began another avalanche of music for me. I thought these guys were big stars. I didn't know they weren't."

It's no secret that while on tour with Hootie & The Blowfish, Rucker loved to slip Foster & Lloyd and New Grass Revival CDs onto the bus sound system. He also told his bandmates on more than one occasion, "Someday I'm going to make a Country album." So when Hootie decided to take a break, Rucker decided to do what he had long hoped to do. His plan was to simply lay down some tracks at a studio in his hometown of Charleston. Never did he anticipate being offered a major label Country deal, figuring that his rock reputation might make acceptance from fans and Country radio an uphill climb.

"But I was never afraid of hard work," Rucker explained. "Mike Dungan, who signed me to Capitol, told me he called the 13 most important people he thought were tastemakers in Nashville and told them he was signing me. Twelve of them told him he was crazy. But Capitol let me make the record I wanted to make, and then they asked me to go to work. All of a sudden, 'Don't Think I Don't Think About It' (written by Clay Mills and Rucker) comes in and it's on Country radio. I'm on the radio again — only it's Country!"

Ask Rucker if he makes any concessions when singing Country Music, or if he changes his approach at all when shifting to Sinatra standards or Hootie hits, and he shakes his head. "Are there any differences stylistically? I'm sure there are," he acknowledged. "But it's not something I can really say because it's here inside. The thing for me is, I love it all and I can do it all. When you know you can do it, you just go out and sing it."

As for artists in other genres who might be interested in following Rucker's footsteps into the Country spotlight, his advice is blunt: "If you're not a Country fan, don't come here to make a buck, because they're gonna see right through you."

Rucker's third album, *True Believers*, is due in June. He wrote or co-wrote all but two of its songs, including the title cut, which is also the first single. Additionally, he'll be headlining his own tour for the first time in 2013. With a string of No. 1 singles, award nominations and soaring album sales, Rucker has undoubtedly brought a new range of fans into the Country format — which is where Rucker intends to stay.

"There's no offer in rock that could financially, spiritually or emotionally make me happy or put me where I am right now," he said. "It takes years and years to get to the point where you feel you're actually getting it. I don't want to be a big pop star. I just want to sing Country Music."

DariusRucker.com

Kip Kirby served as Country Editor and Nashville Bureau Chief at Billboard before joining TNN's "Crook & Chase" and NPT's "Tennessee Crossroads" as an on-air reporter.

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