

When Sara Evans released *Real Fine Place* in 2005, she had no inkling that it would be her last studio album for six years. If she'd known, she now admits, she might have panicked. After all, that's more typically the space between new product releases measured in dog years. But sometimes life tosses you a curveball and plans can wash away. Just ask Evans.

"When they told me it had been six years since my last studio album, I said, 'It has *not!* There's no way!' The intention was always to continue forward as normal. But then a bunch of stuff happened. I got remarried, I moved to Birmingham and my kids and I had to completely start over: a new city, a new house, new friends, new school, new church, new stores, new everything. It delayed me working like I normally do on a record. Then in the middle of everything, I switched managers. Time gets away from you and you don't realize how much has gone by."

Relaunching an artist after an extended break isn't easy. Formats change, demographics shift, new artists emerge — and there's only so much room on radio playlists. The key to a successful return would clearly be the music.

Clarence Spalding, President of Spalding Entertainment and Evans' manager since 2009, framed it this way: "When I was asked to take a meeting with Sara, I asked myself, 'What's relevant about this artist?' I knew she had gone through a bad time in her life, and I knew she had taken time away to be with her family. So I decided just to go back and listen to her music. And when I listened, it wasn't a question of 'Is she relevant?' Hell, it was *way more* relevant! I found myself thinking, 'As a format, we need this voice.' Sara Evans is a great singer. It was just a question of picking the right material to make this work."

During her self-imposed professional hiatus, Evans continued writing regularly with producer Nathan Chapman, who would drive from Nashville to her Alabama home on a weekly basis to work with her while her kids were in school. They cut several tracks, but the artist found herself frustrated at their long-distance recording process. "I'm so hands-on," she explained. "I like to be in the studio for everything, and I couldn't be this time. It felt like the record was getting made without me. It wasn't anybody's fault, it was just the circumstances."

When Chapman eventually moved on to other commitments, Evans started looking for a second producer. Marti Frederiksen came onboard to produce one track, "Wildfire" (written by Evans, Kara DioGuardi, Matt

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by KIP KIRBY

Evans and Frederiksen). But for the balance of the album, Tony Brown fit the bill perfectly. "I chose Tony because I'd always wanted to make a record with him," she said. "He's just phenomenal. Not only has he produced some of my favorite artists, he's just such a great person. He has strong opinions, but he lets you as the artist do what you feel is right."

"My thought going into the studio was, 'What can I do to make it sound like I took Sara to another place but didn't change her music?'" Brown recalled. "Because why on earth would you want to change what Sara's body of work encompasses? I told her, 'We can hire great musicians and we can get a great engineer, but I want to capture your voice better than anyone has done it before.' I want people to listen to this record and say, 'Wow, I've never heard Sara's voice sound better,' instead of, 'Oh, what a great production.'"

With management and producer in place, the priority shifted to finding the right material. In the can were four songs Evans had already co-produced with Chapman: "Anywhere" (written by Matt Evans and Jaren Johnston), and three Evans co-writes, "Desperately" (with Marcus Hummon), "Ticket to Ride" (Leslie Satcher) and "What That Drink Cost Me" (Chapman and Matt Evans). But the quest for six more songs began to feel like "The Hunt for Red October." Several times, Evans thought the album was finished, only to realize something was still missing. The release date of March 2010 for its first single came and went with no product on the shelf.

"I started to panic," she said. "I thought, 'It's been too long. I'm taking too long to make this record.' And living in Birmingham, I felt like I was out-of-sight, out-of-mind and people were going to forget about me. But Clarence told me not to stress about it. He told me there's no reason to release any music unless the music is perfect and you have the songs. He kept saying the songs will be all that matter."

Her response to his assurances impressed Spalding nearly as much as her music. "I don't know if I've ever been prouder of a record by one of my artists than I am of Sara's," he said. "This was a record that everyone thought was

ready to come out, and *she* put the brakes on it because she knew it wasn't ready. That's really hard to do. You've got a label that's ready to go and a booking agency that wants to get you out there, and it's very hard for an artist to take a deep breath and go, 'But it's just not there yet.'"

The tide turned when Renee Bell, Executive VP, A&R, Sony Music Nashville at that time, sent Evans a demo containing two tunes: "A Little Bit Stronger" (Luke Laird, Hillary Lindsey and Hillary Scott) and "Alone" (Brian Henningsen and Aaron Henningsen). Evans knew immediately that she had found her hits. "I literally had to pull my car over because I was so excited," she remembered. "It felt like everything was starting to come together."

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Stronger contains six Evans co-writes, including a bluegrass version of "Born to Fly," her 2001 chart-topper which she wrote with Hummon and Darrell Scott. But it's the gravel-voiced rocker Rod Stewart who inspired one of the album's standouts: Evans' remake of his "My Heart Can't Tell You No." Written by Simon Climie and Nashville-based Dennis W. Morgan, the song has been an Evans favorite since she was a teenager. When she brought it to Brown, he flipped. "I said, 'Man, this is as good an idea as 'My Maria' was for Brooks & Dunn, or 'The First Cut Is the Deepest' for Sheryl Crow,'" the producer said enthusiastically. "I thought it was

awesome."

With the album in place, management and record label prepared to meet the challenge of re-introducing Evans to her long-standing fan and radio base, as well as to new potential fans. "There's really no gap when you have a great singer and great songs," said Keith Gale, VP, Promotion, RCA Nashville, who has worked every one of Evans' singles since she signed with the label. "Our goal was to acquaint Sara with Country radio, with the friends that she already has in Country radio and the new friends she would make. We kept Sara very busy visiting radio stations and talking with programmers and music directors. But first and foremost, we led with the music. We let the music speak for itself."

The impact date for "A Little Bit Stronger" was Sept. 27. Reaction out of the box was swift. "This is the most reactive single I have ever seen in Sara Evans' career and one of the most reactive singles I've seen in my 16-plus years of working here," said Gale. "Digital sales were 12,000, 15,000, 18,000 singles a week when it was only a Top 30 song. The consumer response and the listener reaction to this song have been unbelievable."

Having her single included on the "Country Strong" soundtrack provided Evans with an added boost, as did the announcement that she would tour 30 dates with Rascal Flatts. But what especially impressed Gary Overton, Chairman/CEO, Sony Music Nashville, was Evans' level of commitment since resuming her recording career. For the label chief, this richly rewarded the company's decision to wait until she was ready to return at full power.

"Sara looks great, she sounds great and she has happily done everything we have asked her to do," he emphasized. "I can't tell you how many fans, as well as people at radio and in the industry, tell us, 'We missed Sara. We missed her voice.' The success of Sara's single and the warm welcome she is receiving from radio and fans reinforce that when you have a great performance on the right song by an incredible singer like Sara, trends and time spent away don't matter."

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