

## JEFF BATES

by Tamela Meredith Partridge  
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Even though a rainbow of fireworks will light up the Fourth of July sky at The Red, White and Blue Days in Charleston, rising country star, Jeff Bates, will outshine them all when he performs at the patriotic event on Friday.

"It makes me extremely happy to be a part of The Red, White and Blue Days," Bates says. "I'm very proud of our men and women, in the past, as well as those who recently went overseas and fought to liberate Iraq. I believe the cause of independence and freedom is a worthy one. And it means so much to be able to celebrate it with the people in Charleston."



Bates certainly has a lot to celebrate these days. The country newcomer was named "The Next Big Thing," by USA TODAY in January, joined the Brooks & Dunn Neon Circus and Wild West summer concert tour in April and has a steadily-climbing Top Ten country debut single, "The Love Song," from the May released debut CD, "Rainbow Man."

"The Love Song has been awesome for me," Bates says. "I can't believe the incredible response its gotten. The inspiration for the song came from my friend and co-producer, Kenny Beard, who has two daughters. I just feel completely blessed to get to sing it."

Bates co-wrote all eleven songs on "Rainbow Man," and feels the album is a true representation of his life and career.

"For me, Rainbow Man is about a rainbow of life experiences," Bates says. "The entire album is about redemption -- my loves, my losses, my trials and tribulations. I don't know how to write things that I haven't lived. And I lived all of this."

Bates, much like a rainbow itself, has quite a colorful past.

Given up for adoption as a baby, Bates was raised by rural Mississippi sharecropper Ed Bates and his wife Barbara. His father supported eight more children, plus two cousins, by becoming a bulldozer operator in the Columbia, Ms., area.

"I didn't know I was adopted," Bates says. "All my brothers and sisters were blond haired and blue eyed. When I was about nine years old, I was on the school bus and somebody said, 'You know, you're not their real son. They adopted you.' It freaked me out. I went home and asked my Mama where I'd come from. She was always honest with me. She told me the whole story and then she said the coolest thing. She said, 'Out of all the kids we've got, you know what makes you special?' I said, 'No, Ma'am, I don't.' She said, 'We got to pick you. The rest of 'em, we got whatever God gave us. But we got to choose you.'"

Bates learned to sing even before he could talk. He also demonstrated a remarkable academic ability by becoming a straight-A student.

By age 14, Bates was a shy, self-described "geek" with few friends but many bullies that constantly picked on him. When he decided to fight back, he was suspended from school.

"Daddy said, 'Well, you're getting too big to go to school anyway,'" Bates says. "He was having health problems and couldn't run the bulldozer anymore. So I was to stay home and help him. I'd already run his chain saw and driven his pickup truck by then."

Determined to escape rural poverty, Bates joined the National Guard at age 17. After that, he took a job on an oil rig and also landed his first nightclub singing job at the Colonial Steak House in Columbia, Ms.

"The club owner came up to me and said, 'How would you like to work here six nights a week? I'll pay you \$50 a night,'" Bates says. "I went in the next morning and quit my oil rig job."

Wanting to pursue his music more seriously, Bates moved to Little Rock, Ar., in '93 and formed his own band, Jeff Bates and Southern Storm. The band toured 30 out of the 50 states, recorded an independent album in '95 and eventually packed their bags and moved to Nashville in '97.

"For the first time in my life, I felt like I was at home." Bates says. "I really did. Nashville challenged and inspired me."

Bates was signed by Warner-Chappell Publishing as a songwriter and started doing showcases in hopes of landing a record contract.

On the outside looking in, Bates seemed to have everything going for him, professionally and personally. But underneath it all ran a well-hidden addiction to drugs. It got to the point where he sold all his musical equipment to support his habit. When that money ran out, he hit rock bottom, and was eventually arrested for possession of stolen goods on March 14, 2001.

"I knew I'd lost it all," Bates says. "I'd wasted my life. That's when I met God and started talking to him. I prayed, 'I know I've messed up. And I'm not asking for anything except tell me what I'm supposed to do. Tell me to go back to Mississippi and I'll go.' The next day, I found out that Gene Watson had recorded two of my songs. And that Tracy Lawrence had recorded a song of mine and Kenny Beard's called What A Memory. I cried like a baby."

Bates rough road to recovery was eased somewhat by the steadfast support he received from family and friends.

"Here's how I got my life back," Bates says. "I called Kenny Beard while I was in jail. He had let me use Old Magic, his prize guitar that he'd written so many of his hits on. I phoned to tell him that I'd pawned it, to apologize and to tell him where it was. He said, 'When you get out, I want you to promise to come and see me.' When I was released, I walked out and my wife, Connie, was there. She'd stuck with me. The next morning, I went to Kenny Beard's. He met me at the door with Old Magic in his hand. He said, 'Here, take this and write songs with it. There's the case with the pawn ticket still in it. If you get to hankering to do drugs, there's the pawn ticket to remind you. I love you. Come on in and let's write.'"

Bates turned his life around by pouring concrete building foundations for houses by day and creating new music by night. He got his songwriting contract back. And on January 29, 2002, Bates was invited to sing in person for RCA label executives and was signed as a recording artist the very same day.

It's been said that what you survive in life eventually makes you stronger. And for "Rainbow Man," Jeff Bates, it's only after overcoming one of life's heaviest rainfalls that he was truly able to appreciate the phenomenal appearance of the rainbow arching its brilliant colors across the sky.

"My life has not been all sugar and syrup," Bates says. "I can honestly say that I caused all the bad things to happen to me. It wasn't somebody else's fault. It was mine. When I finally realized that, it was very empowering to the point of being able to correct the things I had done and the way I had always lived. It was like a miracle to me. God changed my life and my heart. Hopefully, my story and the things I've lived through and overcome will be able to help someone else along the way."