

PHIL VASSAR

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Country singer, songwriter, and pianist, Phil Vassar, seldom takes "no" for an answer.

"My current single, 'I'll Take That As A Yes,' sounded like a smash the first time I heard it," Vassar says. "I didn't write it, but it's the first song I picked for my current (third) album, Shaken Not Stirred. And when we do it in our show, it just kills. It's such a high-energy song, so it's perfect for us."

Vassar and his five-member band, The 88's (named after the 88 keys on a piano), will perform at the Little Nashville Opry on Saturday, April 16, at 7 p.m.

"I really wanted to do some piano songs on this album," Vassar says. "In fact, it was necessary. When I first came to Nashville, I didn't think of myself as a great player, but because of certain necessities -- eating, paying the rent, stuff like that -- I was soon playing it on gigs just about every day of the week, sometimes twice a day. I'm at the point now where I feel confident about bringing the piano out a little bit more. In fact, there are several songs on this album that are just a piano, a microphone, and me; all they needed was one take and the vibe was there."

Vassar, a Lynchburg, Virginia native, arrived in Nashville in '87. He paid the rent by working as a bartender at a combination restaurant/lounge called Nathan's Italian Restaurant and Hard Day's Night Club, which he eventually bought. Indulging his love for music, Vassar spent the next ten years writing songs during the day, then kept bar, played piano, and sang at the club at night.

"The restaurant was upstairs and the night club was underneath," Vassar says. "We were also open for breakfast for awhile. I was there at 6 a.m. to cook breakfast. Then I'd take off my apron at 10 a.m. and go write songs. My songwriting buddies would always say, "Man, you smell like bacon!"



Vassar's club also served up a heaping side-order of future major label country artists, including singer/songwriter and bartender, Carolyn Dawn Johnson, and houseband, Sixwire.

"Carolyn, Sixwire and myself did a few shows together awhile back," Vassar says. "They're all dear friends and awesome talents."

Vassar first found country music success penning hits for Blackhawk ("Postmarked Birmingham"), Collin Raye ("Little Red Rodeo"), Tim McGraw ("For A Little While" and "My Next 30 Years"), Jo Dee Messina ("Bye Bye" and "I'm Alright"), and Alan Jackson ("Right On The Money").

"Kenny Chesney and I recently co-wrote a song, Island Boy, that's on his new album, Be As You Are," Vassar says. "Kenny's a great songwriter. We were on tour together awhile back, and we'd sit backstage and write songs. Island Boy evolved from one of those songwriting sessions."

Vassar finally landed a Arista Nashville recording contract in '99, resulting in three albums and such hit singles as "Carlene," "Just Another Day In Paradise," "Six-Pack Summer," "That's When I Love You," "American Child," "This Is God," and "In A Real Love."

"I write about what I know," Vassar says, "and that's usually my life. That's the fun thing about singer/songwriters. You can learn a lot about them just by listening to their songs."

Vassar co-wrote ten out of twelve tracks for current album, "Shaken Not Stirred," four of which he co-wrote with singer, songwriter, and wife, Julie Wood-Vassar.

"Julie and I write so much together," Vassar says. "She's a great singer and songwriter. She's working on her own album right now, which will be awesome."

Shaken Not Stirred showcases Vassar's piano prowess and the musical talents of "The 88's" band members, Jeff Smith, Darren Theriault, Clayton Ryder, Matt Thomas, and Jake Caldwell.

"The band and I work so hard on the road, year in and year out," Vassar says. "So it just didn't seem fair to hand them off for studio musicians when it came to making this album. They're all great musicians, we took our time, and had a lot of fun. It's the way a record project should be done."

Vassar is also instructing new country artists on how things should be done by serving as a celebrity judge on the third season of the USA Network weekly television talent show, Nashville Star. Broadcast live every Tuesday evening through April, the Nashville Star show features Vassar, Bret Michaels (Poison front man), and Anastasia Brown (TV, film, and Music Row veteran) as the three celebrity judges, country artist, LeAnn Rimes as host, and country comedian, Cledus T. Judd, as commentary correspondent.

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Nashville's leading singer/songwriter, Phil Vassar, traveled to great heights to receive inspiration for his current ground-breaking single, "This Is God."

"I was reading a newspaper on an airplane late last year when I wrote "This Is God," says Vassar, who will perform at Nashville North on Saturday.

"Some of the headlines made me shake my head and think, "What in the world is wrong with all of us?" Vassar says. "The song came to me as an after-thought that God was probably shaking his head and looking down upon us in disappointment at times."

Vassar's record label executives didn't have to think twice before deciding in January to include "This Is God" and "Working For A Livin'," (a duet with '80's rocker, Huey Lewis), on Vassar's second album, "American Child."

One small problem, though -- the "American Child" album was already released back in August.

"I think it's amazing what my label has done," says Vassar in regards to the two songs being added to new pressings of the "American Child" album. "As an artist, it really does make you feel good to know that your record label would jump through those kind of hoops for you."

Vassar co-wrote 13 of the 14 tracks on the newly-minted "American Child" album and collaborated with such songwriters as Rob Thomas of modern-rock Matchbox 20 and Miles Zuniga of pop-punk Fastball.



"I've had the opportunity to co-write with some really great artists from different genres that totally bring something different to the table," Vassar says. "You never have any idea what's going to come out or happen during a session. Sometimes, nothing can happen, but you can sure have a great lunch!"

Speaking of food, Vassar arrived in Nashville in 1987 and landed a job bartending at a combination restaurant/lounge called Nathan's Italian Restaurant and Hard Day's Night Club, which he eventually bought. For ten years he wrote songs during the day, then kept bar, played piano and sang at the club at night.

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Those thinking they've heard Vassar's music recorded by other country artists are right -- he's also the songwriting talent behind such hits as Tim McGraw's "For A Little While," Alan Jackson's "Right On The Money" and JoDee Messina's "Bye-Bye" and "I'm Alright."

"I pretty much hang onto everything I write now," Vassar says. "Although, every once in awhile, I'll write something and say, 'This would really be great for so-and-so.' When you write like I do, there are only so many songs you can record. So you just kind of have to decide where you're going to go on your next record and then let some of the other songs go."

A sampling of songs Vassar kept for himself include the hit singles, "Carlene," "Just Another Day In Paradise," "Six-Pack Summer," "That's When I Love You" and "American Child."

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