

TOBY KEITH

"Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue"
Country Column

By Tamela Meredith Partridge

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The Wednesday, November 6, live broadcast of the 36th annual CMA Awards show may have dominated the November Sweeps Week Nielsen ratings for the evening, but country artist, Alan Jackson, was the shining star of the event by winning five awards out of ten nominations he received. Only two other artists in CMA history have won in five categories in a single year -- Johnny Cash (in 1969) and Vince Gill (in 1993).

Jackson earned the five-award win with stellar songwriting and vocals in current album, "Drive," title track, "Drive (For Daddy Gene)" and the Sept. 11 tribute single, "Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning).

An interesting outcome of Jackson's CMA clean sweep is that Toby Keith (six nominations), Kenny Chesney (three nominations) and George Strait (three nominations) were left grinning in the wind....and awardless.

Granted, all three had phenomenal tours and record sales in 2002, but it was exceptionally disturbing to watch Keith walk away from the event with nothing but his dignity and cowboy hat in hand.

Case in point - Keith's latest album, "Unleashed," recently debuted at No. 1 in the Nielsen SoundScan charts and has already sold nearly one million copies.

A standout single on the "Unleashed" album is the 2002 CMA Single and Song of the Year nominated tune, "Courtesy Of The Red, White & Blue (The Angry American)." Written by Keith, the bold lyrics state his outraged reaction to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Keith was invited to perform the patriotic song on ABC's "In Search of America - A July 4th Musical Celebration" tv special, but was booted off the schedule due to the harsh lyrics.

"The song includes the phrase, 'We'll put a boot in your ass,'" says ABC spokesperson, Cathy Levine, in a June 14th, 2002 AP Wire report.

"He required that he be the opening act of the show, because he had concerts in Utah to get to," Levine continues. "This show is meant to be a celebration of American strength and diversity. By his own definition it's an angry song, and that's not what our producers wanted to open the celebration."

The song reached No.1 on the Billboard country singles charts in spite of the surrounding controversy, catapulting Keith's popularity to even greater heights.

Keith has stated that ABC anchorman Peter Jennings, who hosted the show, wouldn't admit that he personally cut him from the lineup.

"I don't care," says Keith in a June, 13th interview with music journalist, Lisa Zito. "He's Canadian, ain't he? It's our Fourth of July, not his."

Country music fans responded to Keith's ousting from the show by going postal, sending Jennings thousands of old, used boots through the mail as their stamp of disapproval.

Vince Gill, who hosted the 2002 CMA Awards show for the 11th year in a row, commented on the Peter Jennings/Toby Keith incident during Keith's "Who's Your Daddy" CMA live performance introduction.

"I love the fact that this guy (Keith) is just little bit controversial," Gill says. "I love that he says what he means. I like that in a man. When he asks the musical question, 'Who's Your Daddy,' I personally called ABC and said, 'Hey, Pete Jennings! You wanna come down and introduce my pal, Toby?' He didn't show. He didn't come. He's afraid he's gonna get one of those boots up his ass, is what happened."

Even though the song is no longer on the charts, the issue still remains up-front and personal when Country Weekly magazine quoted Dixie Chicks lead singer, Natalie Maines as saying, "The song is ignorant and it makes country music sound ignorant. I figure Toby should be calling me and thanking me, because his big beef with ABC was that they wouldn't buck up and say they didn't like the song. I came right out and said I don't like the song. So, I just assume he's going to send some flowers over."

Which is a bit hypocritical in my book. Why is it considered ignorant for Keith to write a No. 1 song about Americans being angry in regards to the 9-11 terrorist attacks, but it's not ignorant for the Dixie Chicks to hit the charts in 2000 with their No.13 single, "Goodbye Earl," which tells a gruesome tale of plotting, murdering and disposing of an abusive husband's dead body?

"I'm not going to comment on that," says Keith in a recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution article. "You've got to be in my league as a songwriter before I'll even respond to you. If (Natalie Maines) was a songwriter that had written some songs like me, then we'd talk about the inside of the song. But if somebody's not in my league on a songwriting level, then I can't comment on lesser stuff like that. It doesn't even phase me."

Granted, the song belts out such in-your-face lyrics as :

*"Uncle Sam put your name at the top of his list,
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist,
And the eagle will fly, And there's gonna be hell,
When you hear Mother Freedom, Start ringin' her bell."*

But the song doesn't even come close to being as offensive as the terrorist act that killed thousands of innocent victims and caused the rest of America to buckle at the knees in shock and despair.

Keith cranks the lens of creative songwriting into sharper focus during a 2000 phone interview he granted me.

"I like songs that go No.1 as well as anybody else," Keith says. "But I really like songs that make an impact and leave a mark. There are so many of those middle of the road type of songs that are out there, the ones that I call safe songs. And I hate safe songs. When I am done, when I am through some day, I will want people to look back and say, 'Man, listen to this string of hits, right here.' And everybody will remember them."

TOBY KEITH

By Tamela Meredith Partridge
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It seems like only yesterday that Toby Keith set country music tipping back on its heels with '93 debut self-titled album and No. 1 single, "Should've Been a Cowboy."

And today, with close to twenty country single hits, a string of platinum and gold albums and a new DreamWorks record deal under his belt, the singer and songwriter is at the peak of his career with sixth album and title track, "How Do You Like Me Now?"

"I am like the Cinderella dream story - the fairy tale," Keith said. "I have quietly gone about my business the past nine years and I have not ruffled anybody's feathers. The ACM nominations I just received for Top Male Vocalist and Top Video of the Year are the first true nominations I have ever had."

Even though music industry recognition and acclaim have been a long time coming, Keith was still able to savor the sweet taste of chart-topping success when "How Do You Like Me Now" became Billboard's No.1 country single for five consecutive weeks. The song and its accompanying video also achieved multi-week number one status across the board on Radio & Record, Gavin and CMT charts.

"It was a clean sweep," the Oklahoma native said. "I have had songs go No. 1 across the charts. And I have had videos be No. 1 on CMT. But I have never had them be No. 1 all at once before."

Although many interpretations have been placed upon the rollicking title track, "How Do You Like Me Now?" Keith and co-writer Chuck Cannon intended the tune to be an in-your-face reflection on the self-confidence that lives deep down inside everyone.

"Initially, I said, 'Here's my title : "You Never Loved Me Before, So How Do You Like Me Now?'" Keith said. "It is one of my catch-phrases. A lot of people become successful after they have been told they won't ever be, so people can relate to this. It can be about an old flame, a boss, a teacher - whatever it means to each individual. It was a fun song to write."



Music has been an integral part of Keith's life since early childhood. Born in Clinton, Oklahoma, Toby Keith Covel was one of three children of parents H.K. and Joan Covel. The Oklahoma farm boy began playing guitar by age eight and grew up listening to the musical influences of Merle Haggard and Jimmy Buffet.

"When I was a kid, Merle Haggard was the epitome of the perfect singer/songwriter," Keith said. "He had the look, the name, the sound and the songs. He was just... 'Hag.' He wrote the best songs and had the best voice. Merle was a pioneer of a new sound and was always just a step ahead. I remember listening to his records at the youngest age, and a young Merle Haggard was as good, to me, as a young Elvis."

Prior to his music career, the 6'4" muscular athlete held down the various jobs of oil rigging, testing broncos and bulls for summer rodeos and playing defensive end for the now de-funct United States Football League. Keith chose music over football in '88 and began touring the Oklahoma/Texas dance hall circuit as the leader of Toby Keith and the Easy Money Band. He eventually moved to Nashville, approached numerous record labels with a tape of original songs and eventually obtained a recording contract in '93.

Keith, who writes 90% of his recordings, follows a certain songwriting regime when creating original material.

"As a songwriter, you have the poetic license to say anything you want to say," Keith said. "I think the key ingredient to writing love songs, from a guy's point of view, is to say something that a female has never heard before and that a guy would never dare say. A very sensitive guy might say it, but a very strong-minded, strong-willed, masculine type guy would never say these things. But, being a songwriter, the poetic license allows you to do this. You can be a big, strong, macho guy and still show that little sensitive side and say things to a woman that nobody would ever say in real life. You can use these same guidelines when writing any kind of song. If you are writing a macho song, it is OK to say, 'Hey, I'm a good ol' boy and I ain't going to do anything wrong, but I am going to step right up here to the edge.' Pushing the musical envelope, in every aspect of the creative process, is what I believe sets you apart."

This ability to remain true to himself and his music helped Keith carve his own distinctive niche within the country music industry.

"I like songs that go No. 1 as well as anybody else," Keith said. "But I really like songs that make an impact and leave a mark. There are so many of those middle of the road type of songs that are out there, the ones that I call safe songs. And I hate safe songs. You know, I put the song "Tired" out and it didn't do anything. I put "Double-Wide Paradise" out and it didn't do anything. I put the Sting duet out, "I'm So Happy I Can't Stop Cryin'," and it went to No. 2 for three weeks. I put "Dream Walkin'" out and it went to No. 1. I put "We Were In Love" out and it went No. 1. I put "If A Man Answers" out and it died at No. 37. I put "Love Fades" out and it died at 33. I came right back with "How Do You Like Me Now?" and wham! You see, I am not afraid. I will take

two bad falls for one tremendous huge No. 1 that people will remember. And there are other artists that will take those three top five records, safe records, in a row. Two years from now you won't hardly be able to remember them. You will have to be reminded of what they were about. They are just forgettable songs. I like to leave a mark. When I am done, when I am through some day, I will want people to look back and say, 'Man, listen to this string of hits, right here.' And everybody will remember them. I don't want it to be, 'Remember this string of hits, "Upstairs, Downtown," "A Woman's Touch" and people say, "What?" Those are songs that I learned lessons on. They went Top Ten but they will be forgettable. And everybody has those kind of songs. The guys who try to make their living with those kind of songs are the same guys who don't have much creative prowess. And they go away."

Throughout his career, Keith has drawn upon the strength of a higher power to get him through some of the hard times.

"My mother taught me the Serenity Prayer when I was little bitty and I have used it so many times," Keith said. "If I stop and think about it, it puts everything into perspective. It basically says that there are just a certain amount of things that you can't change. So, don't spend your time, effort and gas doing it. Save your fuel for the things that matter and hope you have enough common sense to tell the difference between the two."

When it comes to being dealt a winning hand in country music, longevity is the name of the game.

"Being able to stay around is the secret to this business," Keith said. "For example, somebody sent me a deck of country music artist cards the other day. They look like baseball cards, but they are country music cards where each artist has their own card with their picture on it. This particular deck was the '93 country music rookie artists, which I was in, called the Newcomers Collection. Included in this set is a checklist, so you can collect the cards and then check them off to make sure you have the complete collection. I sign my cards all the time, but I had never seen the checklist before. This checklist had about 40 names on it of '93 new artists. As I looked through the checklist, I found there were only 5 of us from that list still carrying on. Looking at that checklist just brings home the reality that when it comes to longevity, the last one standing wins."

TOBY KEITH
Concert Review
By Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Country came to town on Friday night as country singer and songwriter, Toby Keith, initiated the weekend double bill concert series at the LaSalle Speedway.

Darla Vetter of Norway, IL and her two daughters, Christina Rafferty, 12, and Hali Rafferty, 10, were among the throng of fans patiently waiting outside the LaSalle Speedway before the gates opened at 5 p.m. "I have been a Toby Keith fan ever since he made his first album," Vetter's said. "I have every one of his albums and like them all. This is our very first Toby Keith concert and it should be a great time."

In spite of torrential rain, high winds and ankle-deep mud incurred earlier in the day, 4500 loyal country fans rode out the storm to see Keith eventually take the stage at 9:30 p.m. with a opening rendition of current single, "Country Comes To Town."

The stage, which was located in the middle of the bowl shaped clay dirt racetrack, was slightly sunken in a surrounding pond of eight-inch mud that literally sucked the shoes right off the feet of those attempting to wade through it.

The first forty rows of seating, dubbed as the pit, were directly in front of the stage and literally became a "Country Woodstock" as audience members made the most of the situation by sliding, wrestling and running through the mud. The best no-mud zone seats for the event were located directly behind the pit in the general admission grandstand seating section.

Keith, who had wisely moved his two buses to the top parking lot above the racetrack before the rain struck, was an hour and a half late starting the show due to strategically mapping out a safe method of getting to the stage itself. The first attempt involved a 4-wheel drive truck which ended up spinning it's wheels in the mire only a short distance away from the bus.

With a fading rainbow backdrop arching in the sky over the stage, various members of Mautino Distributing acquired thirty bales of straw from a neighboring farmer and devised a pathway leading from Keith's bus door to the backstage stair entrance. Keith and his Easy Money Band members carefully navigated the straw- strewn pathway with plastic bags wrapped protectively around expensive leather boots and arrived backstage without any mishaps.

Wearing a light cowboy hat over a new short hairstyle, white shirt, tapestry vest, blue jeans and black ostrich leather boots, Keith launched into the evening's second selection, "Dream Walking" after receiving a resounding round of hoots, hollers and applause in answer to his question, "Are you ready to party now ?"

The fourteen song set featured an endless stream of hits including "Big Ol' Truck," "We Were In Love," "Blue Moon," "Getcha Some," and the five week No. 1 chart topping single, "How Do You Like Me Now ?"

The highlight of the evening occurred with the audience singing entire choruses of '93 debut hit "Should've Been A Cowboy" back to Keith completely unattended by his vocals. "Ya'll think you are a band now don't you ?" Keith said teasingly. "That was beautiful. Thank you so much."

Easy Money Band members, Joey Floyd, Carl "Chucky" Goff, Johnie Helms, Keith Mellington, Chris Troup and Rich Eckhardt, were in fine form and provided exceptional support for Keith's vocals. After properly introducing the band members to the crowd, Keith jokingly explained that bassist "Chucky," a former college professor, also functioned as the band choreographer due to having made a number of line dance videos. Since the dance videos are only available for purchase at "Chucky's All Night Last Stop Neon Bar, Grill, Video and Bait Store" in Oklahoma, Keith asked the crowd if they would like a demonstration of "Chucky's" best dance moves. "Chucky" reluctantly obliged the audience by taking center stage and performing a hand-jive enhanced series of dance moves which were quickly accompanied by the other band members in a comedic Chippendale male dancer impersonation skit.

Ending the concert with a grand finale encore of John Cougar Mellencamp's "Authority Song," Keith waved farewell to the crowd, left the stage and gingerly made his way back up the straw pathway to his bus.

Even though country came to town with Mother Nature in all her thunderous glory, Toby Keith's stellar performance made the evening shine for those who braved the elements to attend.