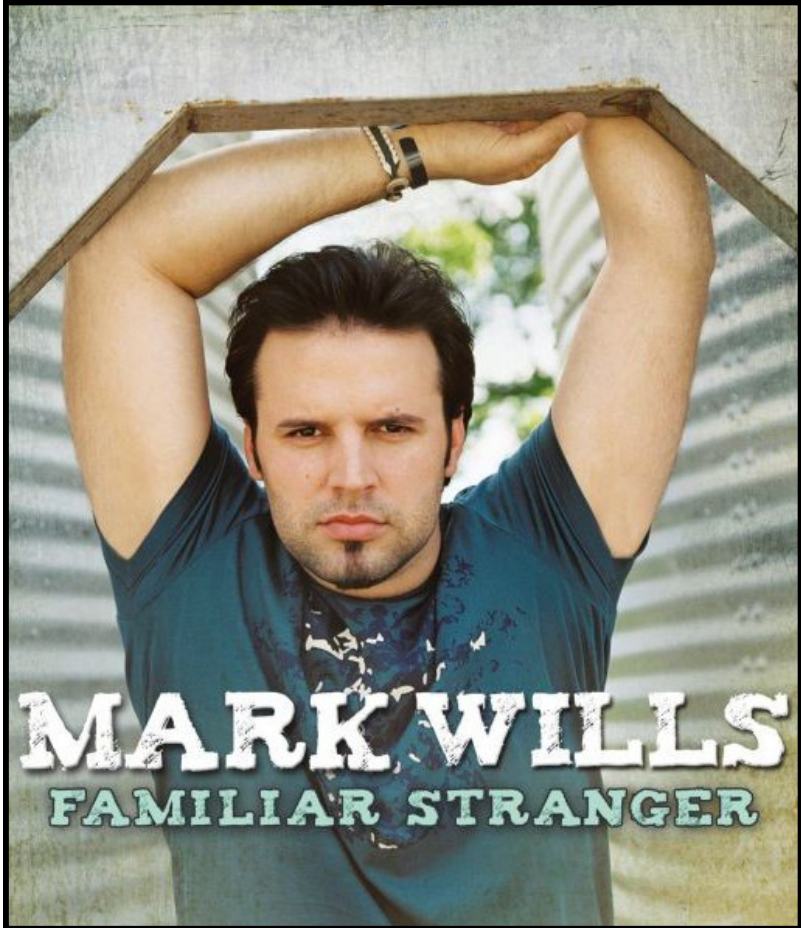


## MARK WILLS

by Tamela Meredith Partridge  
"Herald-Review" newspaper  
Decatur, IL.  
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Even though country artist, Mark Wills, has a new Equity Music recording contract, single, and album—the veteran entertainer still knows what it's like to be a familiar stranger.

"My upcoming album, Familiar Stranger, is due to hit the stores this fall," Wills says. "Familiar Stranger isn't a title track, it's actually a lyric in one of the songs that really hit a chord with me. After years of touring and charting hit singles, familiar stranger kind of defines how my music career has been. People would come up to me after a show and say things like, 'I didn't know you sang that song.' I've become a familiar voice that's been around since my '96 debut single, Jacob's Ladder, was released. But to some new country music fans, I'm still a stranger they're yet to be introduced to."



Wills, 33, is scheduled to perform at the McLean County Fair in Bloomington on Friday.

"We always have a great time whenever we play in the Bloomington area," Wills says. "Illinois has a lot of country music fans, which automatically makes it a fun crowd to perform our past hits to, as well as some songs from the new album."

Wills current single, "Days of Thunder," is an uptempo anthem co-written by songwriters Brett James and Aimee Mayo.

"Days of Thunder is the first release from the new album," Wills says. "It's a great summertime-ride-down-memory-lane song that reflects on the youthful innocence, wonder, and excitement of life and love."

Some of Wills favorite cuts on the new album include "Closer," "Entertaining Angels," and "Crazy White Boy."

"I didn't write any songs for this album, but it's still a very personal, autobiographical, and fun project for me," Wills says.

Before signing in 2006 with Clint Black's independent label, Equity Music, Wills five Mercury label albums resulted in such hit country singles as "Jacob's Ladder," "Places I've Never Been," "I Do (Cherish You)," "Don't Laugh At Me," "Wish You Were Here," "She's In Love," "Back At One," and "19 Somethin'."

"Music is emotion," Wills said. "All I ever wanted to do was be a singer and have songs that people can relate to or would touch them. If I can make people smile with one song, cry with another song, or think with another song - that's what music is all about to me."

No stranger to the recording studio, Wills is also the host of Great American Country's (GAC) new series, The Year. Premiering in January, 2007, the weekly show takes viewers on a musical journey through the past with a clever blend of historical fact in conjunction to that year's top country music videos.

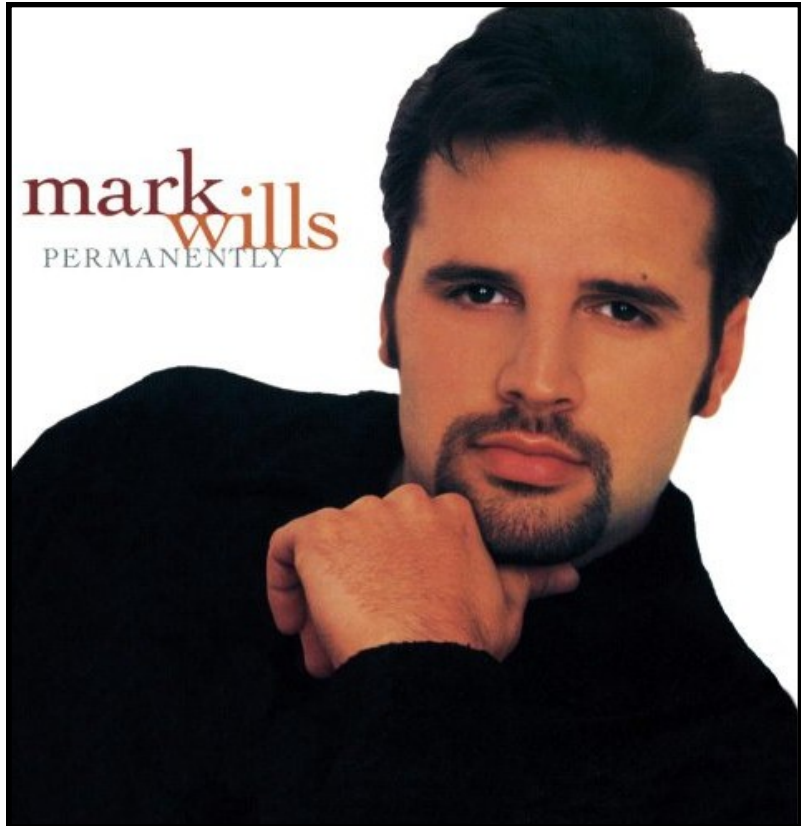
"The show came about as a result of my No.1 song, 19 Somethin', and its theme of revisiting one's youth," Wills says. "It's been a learning process, but at the same time, I've been able to make the show my own. They allowed me the format opportunity to just be myself, which makes it fun, because I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not."

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by Tamela Meredith Partridge  
"Our Brown County" magazine  
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© 2001

For country singer & songwriter, Mark Wills, music has always been a permanent influence in his life.

"I love to sing." Wills said during a recent phone interview. "It's such an honor to have songs out on the radio and then be able to go on the road and do a show, stand on stage, look out into the crowd and see the people singing every word back to you. That is very rewarding."



Following the path of country music has also rewarded the 26-year-old singer, songwriter and guitarist with a '96 gold debut album, "Mark Wills", platinum sophomore project, "Wish You Were Here," and the January, 2000 released third album, "Permanently."

"I wanted this third album to show how much I have grown as an artist and as a man," the ACM Top New Male Vocalist said. "It was important to me that this album was more diverse than the first two, and I think we accomplished that. I want my fans to know who I am. I'm a sensitive guy, but I also like to have fun. My first album was a good start. I think the songs "Jacob's Ladder" and "Places I've Never Been" gave everyone a taste of my personality. My second album took that a bit further, and it's a tough album to follow up because it had songs ("I Do (Cherish You)," "Don't Laugh At Me," "Wish You Were Here," and "She's In Love") that really spoke to people's hearts. But I think the songs on this album will take my music to a new level."

"Permanently" has already received chart-topping acclaim for singles, "Back At One" and "Almost Doesn't Count," while third single, "I Want To Know (Everything There Is To Know About You)," is slated for a late summer release.

On the flip side of this solid professional coin is a remarkably happy private life, which Wills credits to wife Kelly, 2-year old daughter Mally Ann, parents Jerry and Shirley Williams and sister Amy.

"The people in my life have always been great about keeping me grounded and helping me to remain focused on who I am and where I came from," Wills said. "And that is so important. In this business, a lot of people can get caught up in all the back patting and end up forgetting who they are. They become the artist that they are portraying. And that's not real life. What is real are the people in your life, because in the end, when the career is gone, they are the ones who will still be there."

One of Wills favorite cuts on the new album, "In My Arms," is a tribute song he co-wrote for daughter Mally Ann with fellow songwriters, Monty Criswell and Michael White.

"Having a family changes everything, " Wills said. "The baby has made me stand up and take notice a little bit.

She's so little, yet demands so much. Kelly and Mally are everything to me. This song basically sums up the way I feel about Mally Ann. Monty and Michael heard me talking about being a dad and they said, 'Man, that would make a great song.' We sat down and started writing things down. We didn't even have to think about it. It flowed so easily because it was straight from the heart."

Wills, who first began singing in church at an early age in his hometown of Blue Ridge, Georgia, was often a musical favorite amongst his pre-school teachers.

"Being a little kid and loving to sing as much as I did, the teachers used to bring me into the kitchen when I was two or three years old and sit me up on the counter," Wills said. "I would sing to the ladies while they were cooking lunch."

Other childhood musical endeavors include becoming a master drummer.

"Being thirteen years old, there's not a whole lot of demand for a country drummer," Wills said. "I started playing drums for a couple of garage bands in the area, but I wasn't really into a lot of rock 'n' roll - I preferred country. But I had to start learning rock in order to be able to play it. From there I got interested in a lot of hair bands like Poison, the Warrants and Bon Jovi. It was actually pretty cool. I like a song to have a chord structure and I like it to have words I understand. And that music did."

Never straying far from his George Jones, Keith Whitley and Conway Twitty country influences, Wills entered and won a talent contest in '91 at the Buckboard Country Music Showcase in Marietta, Georgia, and eventually earned a five night a week feature vocal gig.

Wills big break occurred at the Buckboard when Mercury Nashville Records VP of A&R, Keith Stegal came to hear him play.

"Carson Chamberlain had played me some demos of Wills and I said, 'Let's get a couple of plane tickets and go down to Georgia to see him,' Stegal said. "I signed him after that night."

For Wills, country music is more than just a career, it has become a way of life. It all seems to revolve around being able to sing a song that means something and allowing the music to speak for itself.

"Music is emotion," Wills said. "All I ever wanted to do was be a singer and have songs that people can relate to or would touch them. If I can make people smile with one song, cry with another song, or think with another song - that is what music is all about to me."

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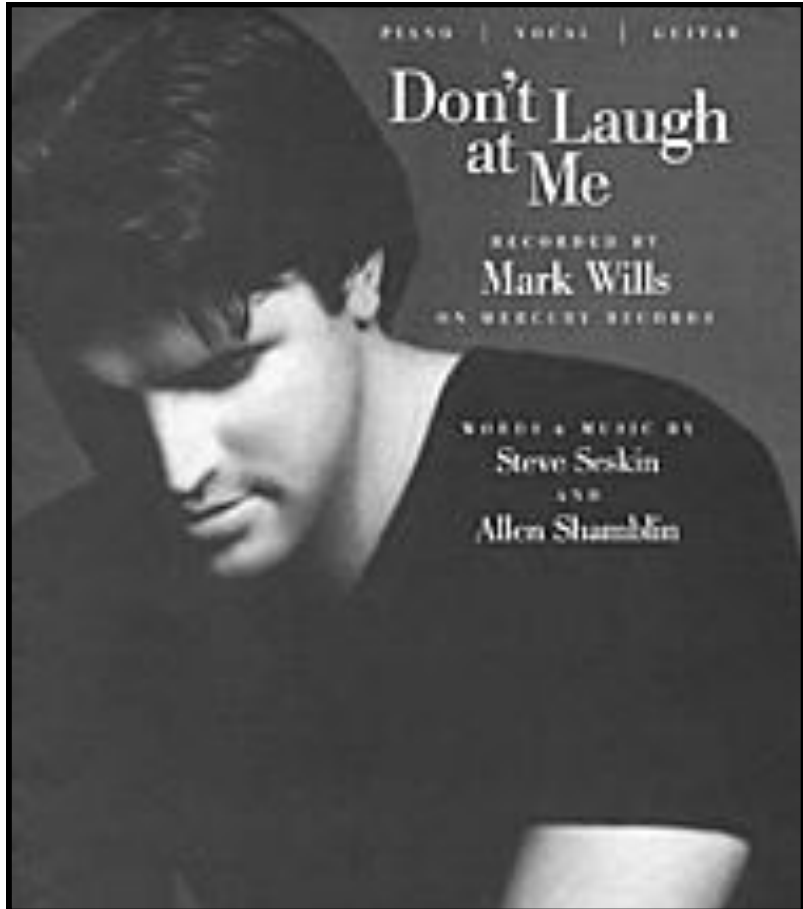
Mark Wills has become one of the most popular up-and-coming country music artists since his debut in 1996. Over the past 2 years, the Mercury recording artist has charted 4 Top Five singles, and has recently watched his sophomore album, ***Wish You Were Here***, obtain certified gold status for selling over 500,000 copies.

Wills' vocal richness, interpretative clarity, and innate ability to paint emotional, lyrical, and melodic pictures into the souls of his audience have all contributed to his widespread appeal throughout the country music industry.

Wills is best known for such hits as, *Don't Laugh At Me*, and *I Do (Cherish You)*, from his 1998 ***Wish You Were Here*** album, as well as *Places I've Never Been*, and *Jacob's Ladder* from his 1996 debut album, ***Mark Wills***. His next single, title track *Wish You Were*, is due to be released in January.

His current single, *Don't Laugh At Me*, was created by songwriters Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin. It reached No.2 on Billboard's country charts, but went to number one in the hearts of many country music fans due to its message of treating others with respect, compassion, and humanity.

"*Don't Laugh At Me* is about how people treat each other, about judging people. You judge people by the way you are, and I judge people by the way I am. And just because you think of somebody in one way, does not mean that everybody else does. That is the problem that people have in this day and time. That we look at somebody and judge them by what we consider normal. Or by what we consider wealthy. That song is just about judging people, and about understanding that life circumstances are different for each and everyone of us," Wills related in a recent phone interview.



One of the most touching things about *Don't Laugh At Me* is the hundreds of e-mail letters that Wills has received through his website, [www.markwills.com](http://www.markwills.com)

"To me, music has the ability to give people a voice. *Don't Laugh At Me* has turned out to be a song that people have written letters to me about. I received a letter about a little boy who was killed, he got hit by a car. He was a little boy that had been overweight. His mother was not a country music listener, but the little boy's brother was. They played *Don't Laugh At Me* at the little boy's funeral, because he had been picked on and made fun of most of his life. If that doesn't touch you, or make you have some emotion, then something is wrong." Wills stated.

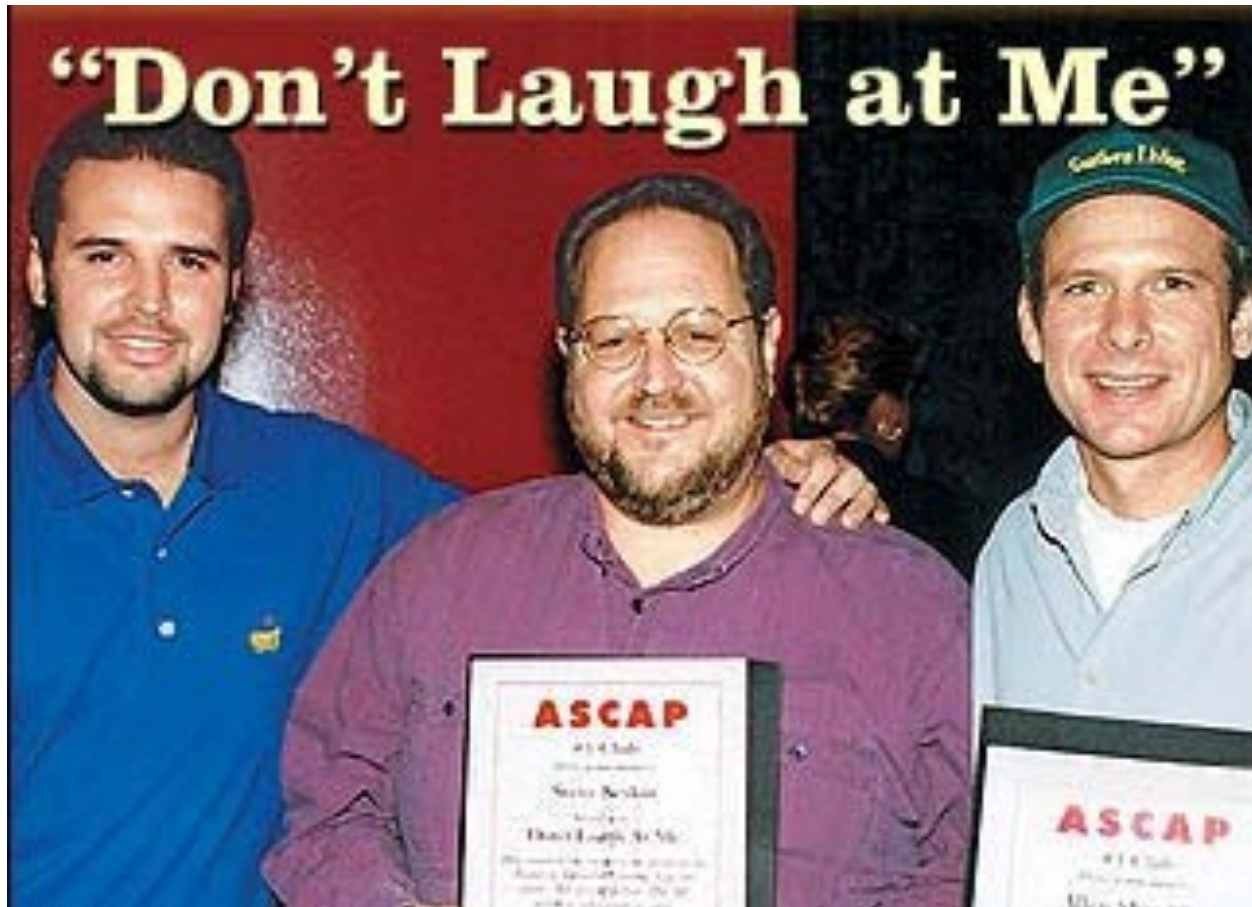
When he is not on the road touring, Wills, 25, can be found residing in Georgia with his wife Kelly and their 14 week old daughter. The romantic couple wanted their daughter's name to exemplify a unique combination of their love for each other, so they extracted the M-A from Mark and the L-L-Y from Kelly, which resulted in the name Mally.

As a first time father, Wills hopes to incorporate into Mally's upbringing some of the messages found within the context of *Don't Laugh At Me*.

"I think that every parent's wish is that their child has everything they would ever need, and that we could provide that. But, I hope that Mally always remembers that everybody has not always been as fortunate as she is, and that everybody should be treated like they are on an equal playing field." Wills says.

For Wills, country music is more than just a career, it has become a way of life. It all seems to revolve around being able to sing a song that means something, and allowing the emotion within the music to speak for itself.

"That is what I got into the music business for, was to be a singer, and to put songs out there that people can relate to and that would touch them. Music is emotion. That is what the music is about to me. If you make people smile with one song, if you make people cry with another song, if you make people think about what they are with another song.....that is what it is all about," Wills concluded.



**MARK WILLS**

**STEVE SESKIN**

**ALLEN SHAMBLIN**

by Tamela Meredith Partridge  
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© 1998

"Don't Laugh At Me" was written in less than 5 hours, by two of Nashville's finest songwriters, Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin.

In a recent phone interview with Steve Seskin, he revealed that "Don't Laugh At Me" was first conceived from its title, which was in Shamblin's personal book of over 100 songs.

"One day (last year) Allen and I got together for a songwriting appointment in Nashville, and I was looking through Allen's song title book that he keeps, and came across the title, "Don't Laugh At Me," Seskins recalled.

"We then started discussing how at times our kids have come home from school kind of in tears, as all kids have done at some time or the other. Because they have been called a name, or they have freckles, or they are tall, or overweight, or a multitude of reasons."



“For instance, Allen’s daughter has freckles, and my son is pretty tall for his age. And the we talked about our own experiences when we were kids. When I was growing up, I went through that myself, I was overweight. So it all started at that level, a conversation of kids and how kids can be cruel without even realizing what they are doing,” Seskin said.

The lyrics to “Don’t Laugh At Me” have a universal appeal, due to their ability to reach out and touch listeners of all ages, sizes, and social backgrounds.

“After we had the title, Well one thing led to another, and we got the idea for the song,” Seskin said. “And the first thing we wrote was the chorus:

*Don’t laugh at me,  
Don’t call me names,  
Don’t get your pleasure from my pain,  
In God’s eyes we’re all the same,  
Someday we’ll all have perfect wings,  
Don’t laugh at me.*

“it was just kind of a little gift from above how all the lines just kept coming out. I think the real breakthrough came through in the song when we figured out how to use the device of ‘universal first person.’ In other words, the song is obviously not about the person who is singing it. Such as in the lines:

*I’m a little boy with glasses,  
The one they call the geek,  
A little girl who never smiles,  
‘Cause I have braces on my teeth.*

According to Seskin, the reason most people can identify with “Don’t Laugh At Me,” is because we all, at one time or another, can recall the pain of being teased, as well as the shame of being the teaser.

“My personal experience is that I have been on both sides of that fence,” Seskin revealed. “I think that is why perhaps this song hits home to a lot of people, is because most of us have been teased—or been the teaser.”

The two songwriters have managed to write close to 30 songs together, even though one lives in California and the other in Tennessee. Among their songs is the 1992 John Michael Montgomery hit, “Life’s A Dance.” Their collaborations tend to result in songs that reflect on the important things in life.

“I tend to specialize on philosophical songs and on things that might make a little difference,” Seskin said. “Allen and I have written about 30 songs or so together, and I would say about 25 of them have a broad spectrum surrounding the issue of just what is important in life.”

“The important things are the people in your life, the love in your life, and the theory of when you are in your deathbed,” Seskin said. “Meaning that, it doesn’t really matter if you are driving a Mercedes or whatever. All that really matters is who is sitting there with you at your deathbed, and really cares that you are passing.”

Seskin recalled a vivid story of revelation that Mark Wills told him in regards to the first time Wills heard the song, “Don’t Laugh At Me.”

“Mark told me a great story about when he was first listening to the demo tape of ‘Don’t Laugh At Me’ in his car as he was driving up this street in Nashville. He looked out of his car window at the same time that the lyrics were playing ‘And don’t think that I don’t notice that our eyes never meet,’ the line about the homeless guy on the street. Mark was passing this guy on the street, that he had passed a million times before, who was holding a sign, ‘Vietnam Vet—Will Work For Food.’ Mark said he just lost it then, and he started crying. It was one of those Fate moments,” Seskin said.

“Mark said that he pulled the car over, went and gave this guy some money, and then went to the pay phone and called Mercury Records and said, ‘I’m doing the song.’ “ Seskin said. “He also told me, ‘Here I am in my brand new Ford Explorer, I had just gotten my record company advance, and my wife just had a baby. Life was going well for me. And I look over, and here is this guy on a street corner with nothing but this sign.’ He said never before had there been such a moment for him of realization in regards to the ‘have’s’ and ‘have nots.’ “