

THE YEAR IN MUSIC



JON
LOBA
THE INTERVIEW



COUNTRY AIRCHECK



DECEMBER
2025



LABEL OF THE YEAR 2025
THANK YOU COUNTRY RADIO

Peace Love & Cowboys

(HOLIDAY EDITION)

AVAILABLE NOW



FEATURING
"PEACE, LOVE, AND COWBOYS (HOLIDAY EDITION)"
"LET IT SNOW! LET IT SNOW! LET IT SNOW!"
"CHRISTMAS COOKIES"

**TO OUR FRIENDS
AND PARTNERS**

**THANK YOU
FOR A YEAR OF CONNECTION,
MOMENTUM, AND CHAMPIONING
OUR ARTISTS.**

**HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM YOUR
BBR MUSIC GROUP/
BMG NASHVILLE FAMILY!**



TOP STORIES OF 2025

A Year Like No Other



GRAND OLE OPRY

OPRY 100



A century ago, "Uncle Jimmy" Thompson (inset) played the first musical notes on what became the *Grand Ole Opry*. Thompson could not have imagined that the moment would be commemorated by a man named Ricky Skaggs playing the exact same fiddle on a worldwide broadcast 100 years later. Nor could he or any of the people working in and around the *Opry* in the years that followed have anticipated the institution's influence in the development of a vast and immensely profitable country music industry. Perhaps they would have been especially surprised at the sense of community permeating such a far-flung business.

Every person reading this has benefited from the growth of Nashville as a music center and the proliferation of broadcast, satellite and internet platforms that reach millions. Like those who came before, today's country professional can't possibly envision the future, but must focus on the moment.



So how did the 2025 iteration of country music perform?

"Country is hotter than ever" is a familiar refrain. Curiously, the metrics don't seem to bear that out. Radio ratings are flat at best. Likewise, awards show ratings. Consumption market share has declined. Fewer new artists

have broken through at radio. Radio corporations continued to post revenue declines and reduce staff. Similarly, Nashville's major labels cut promotion teams and reduced overall headcount. On the bright side, their coastal parents launched several new country imprints, though rosters and teams have thus far been kept small.

Perhaps most notably, sudden and shocking passings cast a pall over the year. Artists, radio and industry execs left unfathomable voids in the hearts of many. Numerous organizations offered resources and awareness around mental health and overall wellness, including CMA, ACM, MHA and MusiCares. Meanwhile, support remained

steadfast for longstanding good works including Country Cares for St. Jude Kids. Nevertheless, grief was ever present.

At the official *Opry* anniversary show (II/28), Scotty McCreery set up his performance of a George Jones classic by referencing Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl, Ernest Tubb, Bill Monroe, Jimmy Dickens, Porter Wagoner, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Charlie Daniels and more to ask, "Who's gonna fill their shoes?" McCreery's response: "No one. Ever. But George Jones also asked 'Who's gonna play the *Opry*?' Our answer on this 100th anniversary night is simple. The people on this stage are ... tonight and for years to come. And we'll welcome future generations of unbelievably talented artists to this stage such that 100 years from tonight, artists, staff members, and fans will gather together to mark 200 years of *Opry*."

McCreery could also have asked, "Who's going to carry this industry forward?" Country music lost too many and too soon in 2025, and their shoes will never be filled. But the community will carry on if its members continue to believe in a country music value proposition that transcends the bottom line.

Look For The Nashville Label

From 2024's changes at Sony to this year's leadership shifts at Universal MCA and Warner Music Records Nashville, corporate-style helicopter parenting had many in Nashville recalling an era when local branches had much less autonomy.

Far from an '80s throwback, however, Nashville's majors seem to be remaking themselves in the image of their increasingly leaner, less radio-focused coastal brethren. New or revived imprints including Lost Highway, Capitol and Atlantic Outpost offer the Big Three music companies more bites at the apple in 2026, perhaps. And whatever dust-settling is happening at the majors has seemed to create more opportunity for independents.

Speaking of, Big Loud is celebrating another win as Airplay Label of the Year on the occasion of its 10-year anniversary (see page 20). Leo33's Zach Top took CMA's New Artist crown, and Triple Tigers had a big year with Ella Langley and back-to-back chart-toppers from Russell Dickerson and Scotty McCreery. Don't look now, but country

music's longest tenured label heads are the apparently ageless Mike Curb at Curb Records and ... wait for it ... BMLG's Scott Borchetta, who launched his own upstart 20 years ago. Now folded into K-pop behemoth Hybe, BMLG staff and the rest of the business eagerly await clarity on whether Borchetta's soon-to-expire deal will be reupped, or if he'll crank up a new little machine.

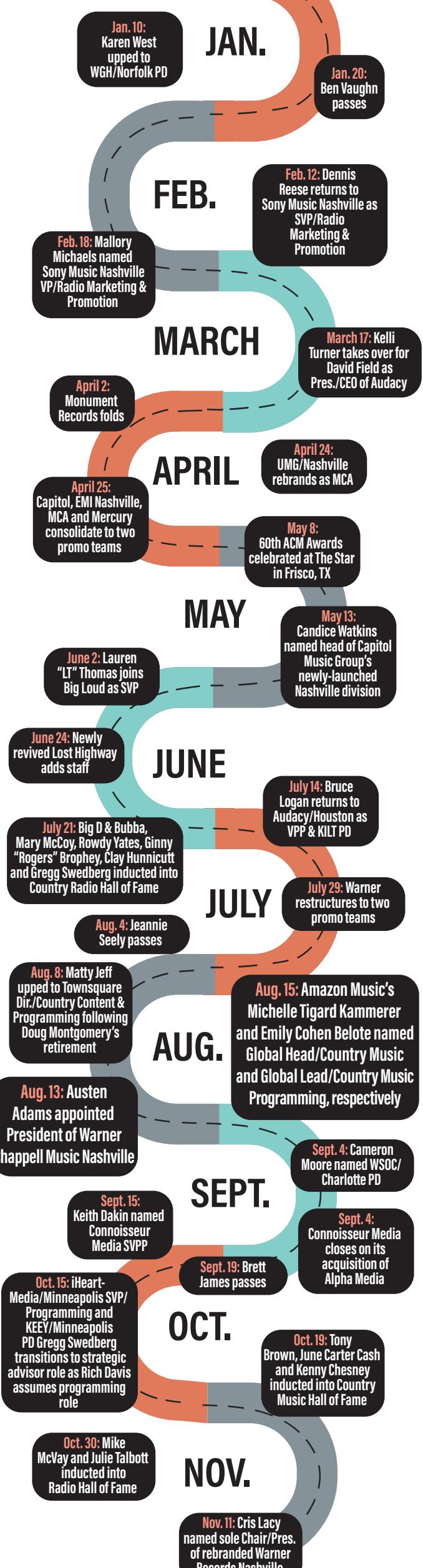
Forging ahead steadily is BMG's BBR Music Group. "We are the label with the track record," says President/Frontline Recordings for The Americas Jon Loba. "We had the experience of going through leadership transitions - myself and the BMG acquisition. And I know that you're in a fog for a year-and-a-half at best, three years normally. So I told the staff that while everyone else is getting their house in order, we should put our foot on the pedal. If we stay hungry, humble and curious, we can build the dynasty." Read more in The Interview, page 33.



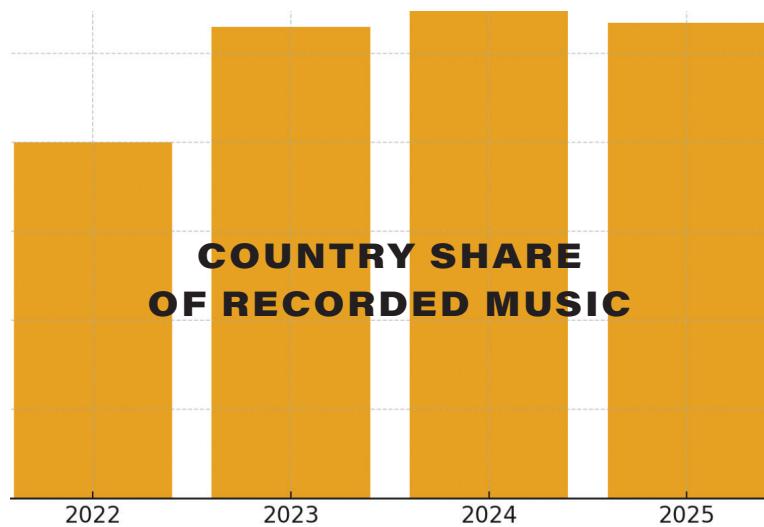
IN MEMORIAM 2025

Walt Aldridge	Ivey Griffin	Larry Rhoten
Thomas "Lynn" Baker	Jeff Hackett	Mike Ring
Larry Bastian	Robert "Rob" Hall	Rick Rockhill
William "Bill" Berg	Tony Haselden	Johnny Rodriguez
Brandon Blackstock	James Holley	Louise "Lulu" Roman
Mike Borchetta	Bill Ivey	John Wesley Ryles
David Briggs	Brett James	Gailard Sartain
Ted "Bobcat" Brown	Leonardo "Flaco" Jiménez	Jeannie Seely
Frank Bumstead	Joel Katz	Ron Shapley
Elizabeth Murphy Burns	Gary Krantz	Lesly Simon
Jim Carola	Mark Laws	Robert "Bob" Sinclair
William "Cadillac Jack" Choate	Larry Michael Lee	Randall "Randy" Sliger
William L. "Bill" Clark	David Linder	Al Snyder
Randy Clausen	Dale Lowe	Martin "Jerry" Strobel
Helen Cornelius	Steve Massie	Dan "The Man" Taylor
Patrick Crocker	Melba Montgomery	Van Tucker
Mark "McKay" Cunningham	Frank Mull	Steve Turner
Sonny Curtis	Wayne Osmond	Bruce Underwood
Joseph "Dick" Damron	Shane "Bear On The Air" Parker	Ben Vaughn
Jack Dillard	T.J. Phillips	Steve Weaver
Jim Dolan	D.K. Pierce	Buck White
Rick Fischer	James "Sandy" Pinkard	Stacy Widelitz
Kim Fowler	Barry Poss	Steve Wiley
McGavock "Mac" Gayden	Jack Pride	Ernest "Ernie" Williams III
Herbert "Herb" Graham		Gerry Wood

TIMELINE 2025

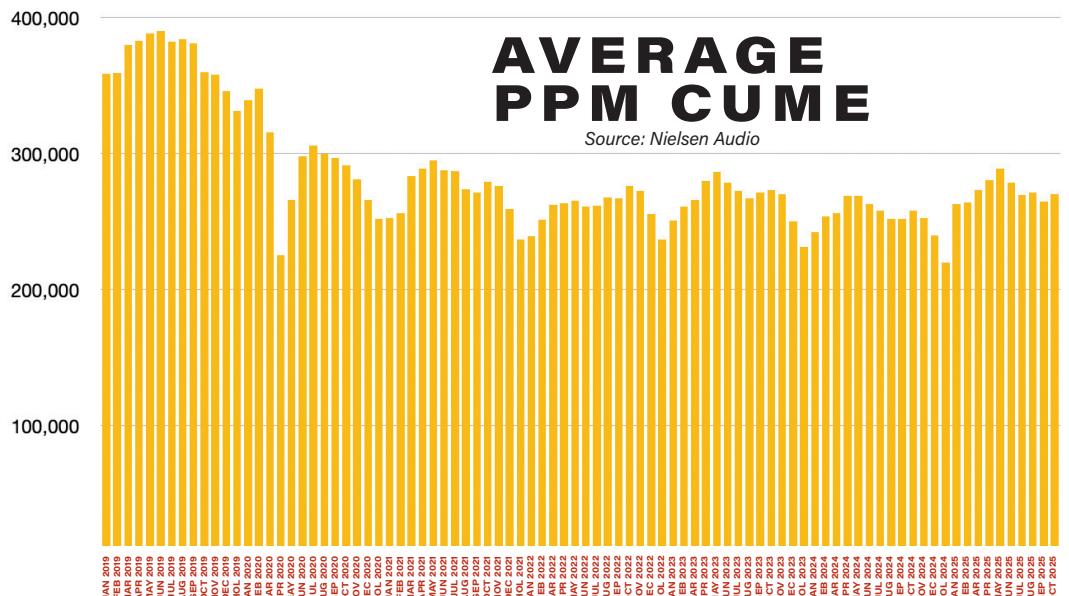


COUNTRY BY THE NUMBERS

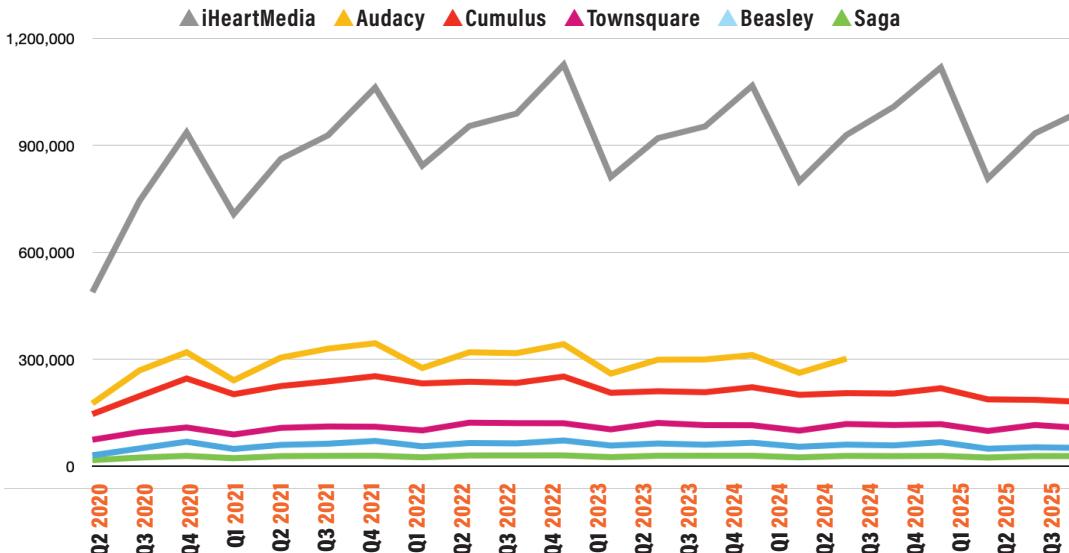


AVERAGE PPM CUME

Source: Nielsen Audio



QUARTERLY REVENUE COMPARISON



RADIO: DISRUPTION GUARANTEED

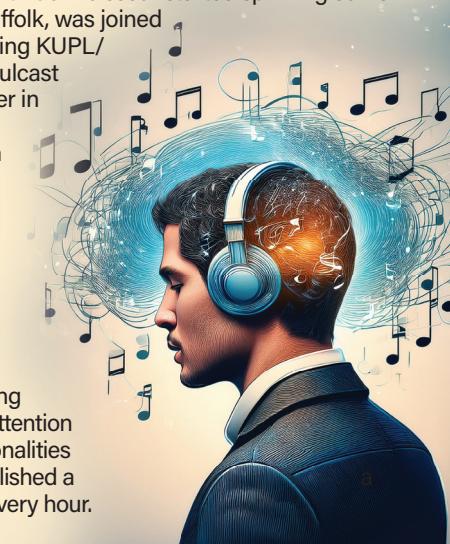
If there was a lesson to be learned from Country radio in 2025, it's "don't get comfortable." Even as the steadfast *Grand Ole Opry* celebrated its momentous anniversary, it was a year of change for the radio industry, with rounds of corporate layoffs affecting several chains and scores of broadcasters. Some of those changes started at the top, like the Audacy breakup that saw legacy Pres./CEO David

Field stepping down in late January and being replaced with board member Kelli Turner.

In May, Connoisseur Media announced plans to acquire Alpha Media, a deal that created a top 10 radio company, initially with 218 stations in 47 markets until Connoisseur started spinning some off. Connoisseur's sole Country outlet, WWWF/Nassau-Suffolk, was joined by more than two dozen more from the Alpha roster, including KUPL/Portland, OR; KBAY/San Jose and the WCCQ & WXLC simulcast in suburban Chicago, immediately making the chain a player in the Country space.

Among the year's biggest surprises was the October transition of longtime iHeartMedia/Minneapolis SVP/Programming & KEEY programmer Gregg Swedberg into a strategic advisor role with the company. Until that shift, the Country Radio Hall of Famer had been the longest-tenured active programmer for any Country station in a top 100 market.

Country radio programmers nationwide grappled with a wave of changes that affected the structure, staff, and even the names of the promotion teams they were long accustomed working with at several Nashville labels, causing some marketplace confusion. And AI continued to garner attention as a tool and a concern, whether that be generative air personalities or country songs. Such was the furor that iHeartMedia established a "guaranteed human" positioner on its stations at the top of every hour.



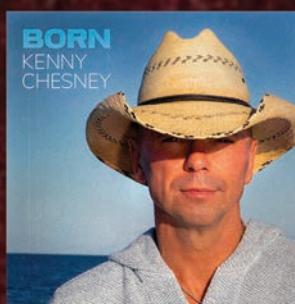
THANK YOU TO OUR SONGWRITERS FOR THESE TOP 100 SONGS OF 2025



UNIVERSAL
MUSIC
PUBLISHING GROUP



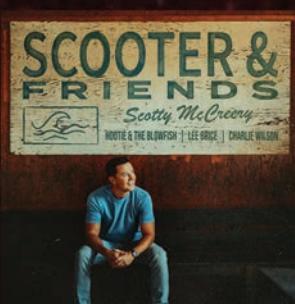
“Back In The Saddle”
LUKE COMBS



“Just To Say We Did”
KENNY CHESNEY



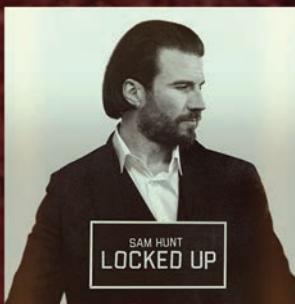
“I Got Better”
CHASE MCGILL



“Bottle Rockets”
SCOTTY MCCREERY



“Coming Home”
BRAD TURSI



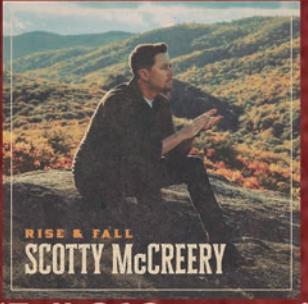
“Country House”
SAM HUNT



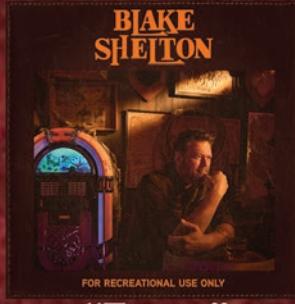
“Ends Of The Earth”
TY MYERS



“Guy For That”
LUKE COMBS
POST MALONE
LOUIS BELL



“Fall Of Summer”
SCOTTY MCCREERY



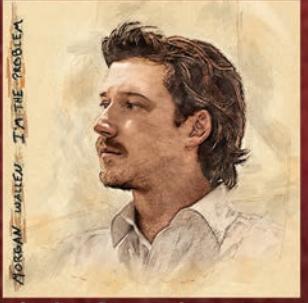
“Texas”
KYLE STURROCK



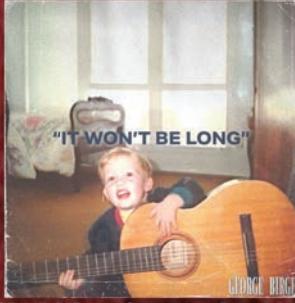
“Straight Line”
KEITH URBAN
CHASE MCGILL



“Happen To Me”
CHASE MCGILL



“I Ain’t Coming Back”
POST MALONE
LOUIS BELL



“It Won’t Be Long”
CHASE MCGILL



“Bad For Me”
“Everything I Need”
JOHN PIERCE



“Same Moon”
PAUL DIGIOVANNI
DERRICK SOUTHERLAND



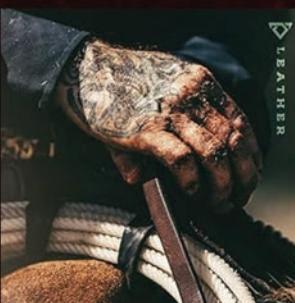
“She Hates Me”
CHASE MCGILL



“Better Than You”
JOHN PIERCE



“Good News”
NEVIN SASTRY



“The Fall”
RAY FULCHER



“Tough People”
LUKE COMBS



“Truck On Fire”
JUSTIN EBACH



“Forever To Me”
GREYLAN JAMES



“Just In Case”
ALEX BAK

BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP



#1
2X PLATINUM
"THE WORST WAY"
RILEY GREEN

#1
**"AFTER ALL THE
BARS ARE CLOSED"**
THOMAS RHETT

#1
"HEAVENS TO BETSY"
JACKSON DEAN

**CMA IRVING WAUGH
AWARD OF EXCELLENCE**
SCOTT BORCHETTA

DIAMOND
"DIE A HAPPY MAN"
THOMAS RHETT

DIAMOND
"IF I DIE YOUNG"
THE BAND PERRY

PLATINUM
"DIFFERENT 'ROUND HERE"
RILEY GREEN

PLATINUM
"DON'T MIND IF I DO"
RILEY GREEN FT. ELLA LANGLEY



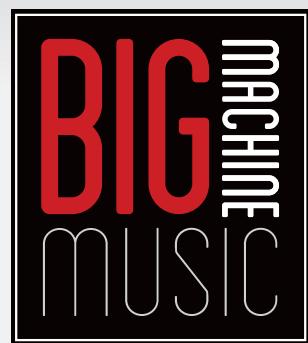
THANK YOU FOR





20 INCREDIBLE YEARS!





Big Machine Music salutes our songs and songwriters on

COUNTRY AIRCHECK'S TOP 100 SONGS OF 2025

#1

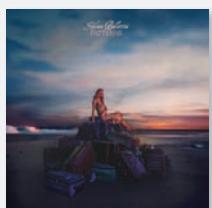


HIGH ROAD

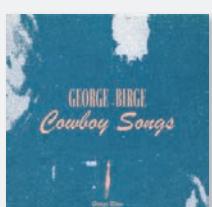
Performed by Koe Wetzel
and Jessie Murph
Co-written by **LAURA VELTZ**



"AM I OKAY?"
Megan Moroney
Co-written by **JESSIE JO DILLON**



"BAGGAGE"
Kelsea Ballerini
Co-written by **JESSIE JO DILLON**



"COWBOY SONGS"
George Birge
Co-written by **GEORGE BIRGE**



**"FRIDAY NIGHT
HEARTBREAKER"**
Jon Pardi
Co-written by **DANIEL ROSS**
RYAN HURD & JESSIE JO DILLON



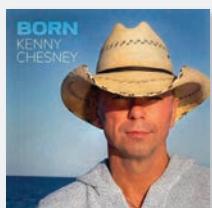
"IT WON'T BE LONG"
George Birge
Co-written by **GEORGE BIRGE**



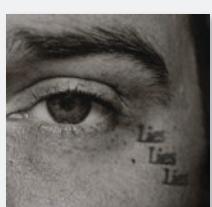
"HAPPEN TO ME"
Russell Dickerson
Co-written by **JESSIE JO DILLON**



"HEAVENS TO BETSY"
Jackson Dean
Co-written by **BENJY DAVIS**



"JUST TO SAY WE DID"
Kenny Chesney
Co-written by **MATT DRAGSTREM**



"LIES LIES LIES"
Morgan Wallen
Co-written by **DANIEL ROSS**
& **JESSIE JO DILLON**



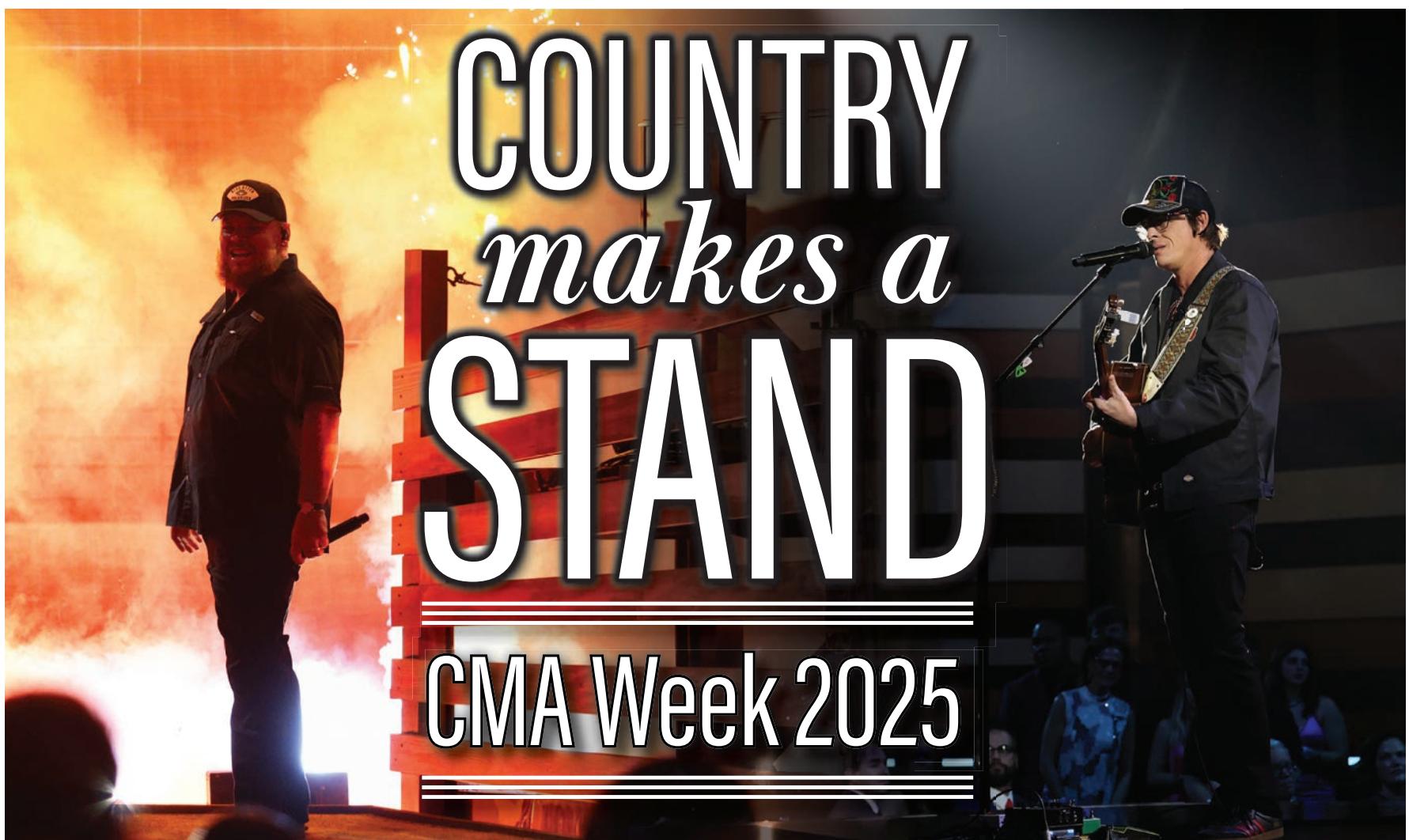
"TIME'S TICKING"
Justin Moore
Co-written by **JUSTIN MOORE**



"WISH YOU WELL"
Vincent Mason
Co-written by **GEOFF WARBURTON**
& **JESSIE JO DILLON**



"WRONG HEARTS"
LOCASH
Co-written by **MATT DRAGSTREM**



Luke Combs and Stephen Wilson, Jr. (above) offer the breadth and depth of the 59th Annual CMA Awards viewing experience, one mightily enjoyed by this year's Broadcast Awards winners ... who share highlights from the week below.



Yes To The Address: Host Lainey Wilson (r) and comedian Leanne Morgan compare notes.



Beautiful Things: Country Music Hall of Famer Kenny Chesney with Megan Moroney.



Paper Tale: Wilson and manager Mandelyn Monchick with a haul.

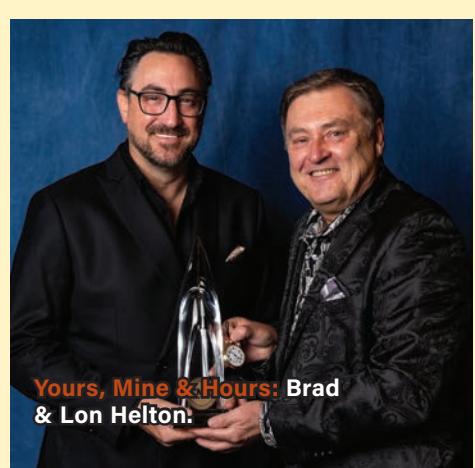
WATCH ME NOW

*Weekly National Personality
Country Countdown USA with Lon Helton*

"We constantly fought for control of the car radio. My Dad grew up in southern Illinois and his station of choice was Country WJJD/Chicago," Helton says. "My preset buttons were WLS and WCFL. They didn't get a lot of use – at least not until I got my driver's license. My Dad passed in 1975, a few months after I went on the air at WMAQ/Chicago, which had switched to Country early that year. I can only imagine how thrilled – and surprised – he would have been to witness my 50-plus years playing and writing about the music he loved."

"Flash forward to this year's CMA Awards, where I was blessed with my 13th National Personality of the Year honor. These nights are even more special when you can share them with family. This year, we were joined by our son Brad and his fiancée Megan. (Daughter Amanda and family were at our granddaughter Sam's high school for her Senior Art Show.)

"Shortly before going onstage, Brad pulled from his jacket the 80-year-old Hamilton pocket watch my Dad wore daily in his job as a switchman for the Illinois Central Railroad. I found it in an old box of stuff I had forgotten about, had it refurbished and gave it to Brad last Christmas. As he handed it to me, Brad said, 'Your Dad would be so proud; this is so he can be with you tonight.' Truly a full-circle moment in the career and life of a kid from the South Side of Chicago who just wouldn't let his Dad listen to Country radio in peace."



Yours, Mine & Hours: Brad & Lon Helton.

GOING BANANAS

*Daily National Personality
Rob Stone, Holly Hutton, Mark Hlavin, The Rob And Holly Show, Audacy*

HH: The highlight of remotes was surprising Old Dominion in a banana costume.

RS: A few years back Holly had a phone shaped like a banana and because those guys are fun, we had the banana phone call them during remotes. That became an ongoing bit with them. This year, we needed to step it up.

HH: Clearly the solution was a banana costume.

RS: They all started laughing when they saw her. We made a bunch of banana puns. Trevor Rosen grabbed an actual banana and started talking into it. Good times.

HH: Picking up the trophies before the show – it finally felt real.

RS: Holly has a hard time accepting compliments and recognition.

HH: It's our first CMA Award!

RS: And it was close to 20 years in the making, so really nice to be recognized for all the hard work.

MH: Stepping onstage was an amazing experience. Then talking to Lon Helton – comparing notes on different ideas and brainstorming bits – oh my God, absolutely incredible. The after-parties were fun, but the icing on the cake was getting a burger at Cookout at 2:30am.

HH: There was a girl who threw up on a table. She was like, "I'm so sorry!" and her friend was so kind telling her, "It's okay, I love you." And right next to her table was Garrett Nichols from Restless Road and some other guys. They just kept on eating.

MH: Then the manager kicked everyone out.

HH: We can only handle so much fanciness in one night. Good to get back to our roots.

RS: That's Nashville at 2:30 in the morning for you.



Back To Our Fruits: Stone, Hutton and Hlavin accepting onstage and (inset) Hutton and Stone with Old Dominion.



Con Vincing: Willie Nelson Lifetime Achievement Award honoree Vince Gill, with George Strait, Brandi Carlile and Patty Loveless.



Excellence Adventure: CMA Irving Waugh Award of Excellence recipient Scott Borchetta (c) with Nashville Harbor's Riley Green and the CMA's Sarah Trahern on the CMA red carpet.



Sounds Like The Radio Team: CMA New Artist of the Year Zach Top with his Leo33 team (Daniel Lee, Joseph Manzo, Chris Fabiani, Meg Goggins, Natalie Osborne, Katie Dean, Tracy Gibson, Dusty Cantrell and Ana Shabeer, l-r) at WME's after party.



Dancin' In The Country Music Awards: MCA's Rob Femia, Jessie Jo Dillon, Jordan Davis, Karen Fairchild, Tucker Wetmore, Carter Faith, Priscilla Block, Kassi Ashton, Kimberly Schlapman, Tyler Hubbard, Katie McCartney, TJ Osborne, Dalton Davis and John Osborne (l-r) at the label's CMA after party.

A BRUSH WITH MUSK

Major Market Station

KKBQ/Houston

For Radio-One Houston Dir./Operations Travis Moon, getting the CMA trophy home presented a challenge. The oversized wooden box it came in was much too large to fit in his computer bag for the flight home. So, Moon fittingly purchased a pricey Dolly Parton tote at the airport to stash it in for the flight.

Holding the trophy itself, he says, was a pinch-me moment that "doesn't seem real. It's a hard award to win, represents a year of work and makes you proud of the people you work with and the community you serve."

At the official after party, while enjoying a "big pretzel," Moon was mistaken for Elon Musk by an over-served party-goer, something he says is happening more often as he ages. "I may have to look at myself in the mirror and see if I need any work done," he quips. Moon never corrected the drunk Musk fan as they engaged in conversation, and the man offered up his business card. Overall, however, Moon's CMA week experience was a great one. "It was well put together, and there's not one thing I could look at and go, 'I'd do this differently,'" he says. "It was fantastic."



Moon Shine: KKBQ/Houston's Katelyn Maida, Travis Moon and Lo Sessions-Barker (l-r) accept the Major Market Station of the Year trophy.

MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED

Large Market Station

WUBE/Cincinnati

The trip to Nashville was a 40-hour whirlwind for PD Grover Collins who came to collect WUBE's eighth CMA trophy since 1998. Stops included the Warner Records Nashville luncheon, where he hung out with "man crush" Lou Ramirez, and BBR/BMG's party at Brooklyn Bowl, where a Brantley Gilbert performance and catch-ups with Parmelee and WKHX/Atlanta's Mike Moore were highlights. Collins says every trip to Nashville, whether for CMAs or CRS, is "like a class reunion. We all work very hard. The industry is changing immensely, so you just look for any levity where you can find it."

"There's not a lot of people in the world who do what we do for a living," he continues. "Between radio, records and artists, we have a kindred spirit. It's a small world and, unfortunately, only getting smaller. So, when we're around people that do what we do, and we're able to talk shop and be silly about stuff that normal people won't have any clue about, it's refreshing. Most people aren't like us in our fun, weird way."

Echoing a comment Kix Brooks made during the show, Collins says of winning, "Hell no, it never gets old. It's not easy to win, and it's a huge honor, so it comes with a lot of humbleness that we were able to bring home our eighth."



He Went To Olan Mills: WUBE/Cincinnati's Grover Collins understood the assignment when the CMA photographer told him, "Just have fun with it."



Baby Grand: WUBE/Cincinnati's Grover Collins and wife Holly Morgan welcome the arrival of Large Market Station of the Year trophy No. 8.



The View, The Proud: Wagner and Owens with their trophy and (inset) their awards night view.

HAT'S ALL, FOLKS

Medium Market Personality

Melissa "Mo" Wagner and Greg "StyckMan" Owens, Mo & StyckMan, WUSY/Chattanooga

MW: Let's just say sitting next to StyckMan at a live event is ... not for the faint of heart. We're coming back from commercial, the director is counting down in the speakers, and suddenly StyckMan yells "Happy New Year!"

GO: In fairness, nobody told me not to. **MW:** After the show, I bumped into some friends from high school.

GO: "Bumped into" is adorable. We were walking out and from behind us we hear "MELISSSSAAAA!!" It sounded like somebody spotted Lainey Wilson. I thought Mo was about to get mobbed.

MW: I hadn't seen them in a while, and we were excited about a much needed reunion.

GO: The next day, we also had a little fun on social media, *very respectfully*, at the expense of Large Market Personality winners Mike [Wheless] and Amanda [Daughtry] from WQDR in Raleigh. Their cowboy hats deserved a moment. We saw the show, but buddy, *we saw cowboy hats too*. To be fair, I made it worse in the pictures than it really was.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR BMI FAMILY

WITH 79 SONGS IN COUNTRY AIRCHECK'S
TOP 100 SONGS OF 2025

JASON ALDEAN | AVERY ANNA | DREW BALDRIDGE
SAM BARBER | CHAYCE BECKHAM | KANE BROWN
LUKE BRYAN | KENNY CHESNEY | ERIC CHURCH
LUKE COMBS | DAN + SHAY | DASHA | JACKSON DEAN
RUSSELL DICKERSON | ERNEST | RILEY GREEN | HARDY
KELSEY HART | TYLER HUBBARD | CHRIS JANSON | JELLY ROLL
CODY JOHNSON | JONAS BROTHERS | COREY KENT
MIRANDA LAMBERT | ELLA LANGLEY | LOCASH
DYLAN MARLOWE | VINCENT MASON | CHASE MATTHEW
PARKER MCCOLLUM | SCOTTY MCCREERY | TIM McGRAW
MAX MCNOWN | JUSTIN MOORE | JOHN MORGAN | TY MYERS
JON PARDI | PARMALEE | THOMAS RHETT | JOSH ROSS
BLAKE SHELTON | COLE SWINDELL | MITCHELL TENPENNY
ZACH TOP | CARRIE UNDERWOOD | KEITH URBAN
MORGAN WALLEN | HUDSON WESTBROOK | TUCKER WETMORE
KOE WETZEL | LAINEY WILSON | CHRIS YOUNG
WARREN ZEIDERS | BAILEY ZIMMERMAN





Year Leader: Megan Moroney is presented SESAC's Song of the Year for "Am I Okay?" by songwriter Jessie Jo Dillon during the company's annual Nashville Music Awards.



10/10: Sony Music Nashville's Ian Harrison, Emily Ann Roberts, McCoy Moore, Krista Slaubaugh and Kendra Olson (Tigirlily Gold), Taylor Lindsey, Ken Robold, Kat Luna, Kameron Marlowe, Kayley Green, Benny G, Zach John King and Graham Barham (l-r) cap the night at Luke Combs' Category 10.



On-Air Stream: The Warner Records Nashville team (The Creekers, Cris Lacy, Aaron Bay-Schuck, Tom Corson, Hudson Westbrook, The Band Loula, Braxton Keith and Gavin Adcock, l-r) at the label's pre-CMA luncheon.



With A Little Help From My Friends: The team behind BMI's Country Song of the Year, Post Malone and Morgan Wallen's "I Had Some Help," at the 2025 BMI Country Awards. Pictured (l-r) are BMI's Shannon Sanders, Warner Chappell's Austen Adams, songwriter Charlie Handsome, Sony Music Publishing's Katie Welle, songwriters Ernest and Chandler Walters, Big Loud's Seth England and BMI's Clay Bradley.

THE TOUGHEST TEST

Small Market Station

WXBQ/Johnson City, TN

The WXBQ crew represented well during awards week in Nashville, even if it wasn't at the scheduled events. "We went to some of the after-parties, as well as Alan Jackson's karaoke bar, which wasn't an official CMA thing," says PD Nikki Thomas. "Just a bunch of randoms having a good time. I did not sing, so it was [morning co-host] Steve Stroud singing Bad Company. Lots of Bad Company."

Thomas has high praise for the care shown by CMA – "Brenden Oliver and the whole staff" – and for the show itself. One win stood out: "Cody Johnson. I was there in Knoxville the night Warner's Cris Lacy and Scott Hendricks chartered a bus to drive over and try to sign him at Cotton Eyed Joe. Seeing him win Male Vocalist of the Year – we lost our minds. Nothing against the others in the category, but super happy for Cody."

The emotions around being recognized as Small Market Station were more complex. "We've never had an entry like the one we put in this year," Thomas says. "It stands on its own because it tells the story about what happened during Hurricane Helene. We felt like no one saw us, heard us or knew we existed. Everyone was talking about Western North Carolina, but we had 40 people dead in our listening audience. I think there's still a lady missing. Listeners were calling, pleading because their mom or their cousin was missing. I had a lot of trouble putting that aircheck together because it was so emotional. Very different from anything we've ever done as an entry, but it tells our story and I've never been as proud of my staff as I was during that time."

RICH CRAFT

Medium Market

WIVK/Knoxville

"There were a lot of situations, a lot of devastation in East Tennessee over the past year, and our team stepping up and helping the community rally was the biggest contribution to our success," says PD Rich Bailey. "Without that, you're just another radio station. Embracing the community and really showing them how much we care and appreciate them and how much we want to be a part of what's going on, that's what really did it for us. And we've got a super team from the morning show with Joey [Tack] and Nancy [Barger], Heather Harrington and myself in middays to Mac in the afternoons, this whole team really embraced the community. While WIVK has won in the past, this is the first year this new team won a CMA award, and it comes on the heels of winning an ACM, so that's like a double bonus this year."

"I also went to the parties the night before, starting with Triple Tigers, where we hung out with Russell Dickerson, then went to Big Loud to see Kelley Bradshaw and that team, and ended the night at BMG's pre-party with Scotty O'Brien and his group. And CMA [Dir./Awards Stewardship] Brenden Oliver and his team did a phenomenal job. You can tell they really, really care with the way they recognize radio there. My team especially enjoyed the after party. They went to all of the different vendors and started loading up bags. It was just so nice from the time we got there. It was my very first time, and my team and I had such a memorable night."

WHEN I CALL YOUR NAME

Major Market Personality

Chris Carr, Sam Sansevere, Michael "Dubs" Wilczynski, Chris Carr & Company, KEEY/Minneapolis

CC: I've had a firsthand and best friend view of Sam's pregnancy journey, from her struggles with infertility to having a due date the day before the CMAs. Then to get the call that we won was beyond heartwarming. We talked about all of this openly on the air this past year and the audience is just as happy as we are. I saw Dubs start to heave cry on that call, too, and I felt for him.

MW: I was overjoyed and emotional when we got to be on that stage to accept. Having lost both of my parents before the age of 30, I was so proud to hold that award high towards them.

CC: I got nervous when I thought the guy from ABC wouldn't let me hold the pic of Sam next to me for the TV shot. I may have made a slight, yet not too specific inference that this was a posthumous deal. In the end, he was totally cool and we're all so happy she made the shot!

MW: They had free tattoos at the after party and, being the tattooed one on the show, I did try to get Chris to get his first-ever tattoo. I was hoping for an outline of the CMA Award, which I plan to get myself, but he settled for a drink instead.

CC: I was overjoyed for Vince Gill. Every interview, event and conversation with him over the years went through my mind while he was being honored. He's such a class guy. It was also a real awakening as to how long I've been doing this and how fulfilling this ride has been. We are all so invested in one another. It's a cool family.



Rock 'N' Roll Fantasy: Steve Stroud, Nikki Thomas, Rhonda Adams and Hayley Extine.



All The Tux Given: WIVK's Rich Bailey and wife Carol.



Pregnant Pause: Chris, Sam & Dubs.



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DAN SMYERS • DAVID LEE MURPHY • DEAN FELBER • DEREK GEORGE
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SCOTT STEPANOFF • SEAN COOK • SHABOOZEY • STEVE MASTROIANNI
THOMAS RIDLEY TREVOR ROSEN • WES SCANTLIN • WHIT SELLERS
WILL BUNDY • YAAKOV “YASH” GRUZMAN • ZACH CROWELL



Play Per View: CAA hosts its annual CMA Awards viewing party at Nashville's Blanco.



Good News: ASCAP writer/artists Shaboozey, Ashley Gorley and Brandon Lake (l-r) at the ASCAP Nashville Songwriters Celebration. Shaboozey was honored as Country Songwriter/Artist of the Year, Gorley as Writer and Lake as Christian Songwriter.



Eat Stray Love: WME's Kanan Vitolo, The Red Clay Strays' Drew Nix and Brandon Coleman, All For One's Cody Payne, WME's Alex Collignon and Jay Williams and The Red Clay Strays' Zach Rishel and Sevans Henderson (l-r) at WME's CMA Awards after party.



After Glow: Team BMLG hosts its annual CMA Awards after party. Pictured (back, l-r) are Preston Cooper, Chase McDaniel, Greylan James, Brett Young, Riley Green, Lady A's Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood, The Band Perry's Johnny Costello, The Jack Wharff Band's Garrett Howell, Cole Goodwin, Lillian Hepler and Noah Hicks; (front, l-r) Shaylen, RaeLynn, Scott Borchetta, Sandi Borchetta, The Band Perry's Kimberly Perry, Mackenzie Carpenter and Mae Estes (standing).

CIRCLE UNBROKEN

Large Market Personality
Mike Wheless, Amanda Daughtry, *The Q Morning Crew with Mike & Amanda*, WQDR/Raleigh

MW: This was Amanda's first win and my third. It was special, because when I won my first CMA in 2013, Amanda was working as a singer in Nashville and gave me a ride to the CMA office to pick up my trophy. When we were in the office together picking up this one, it was a full circle moment. For our acceptance speech she was like a kid, so excited to get on that stage, and I enjoyed her reactions more than anything. I spoke first and then let her close, because she's who everybody wants to hear from. I'm just the old dad.

AD: I didn't cry until we were backstage about to come out and give our little speech. Then it just kind of hit me, "Wow, this is insane!" I didn't make it to this stage for music I created, but here I am on the other end. I'm lucky enough to work in a job that I absolutely love, the hardest but most rewarding job I've ever had. The whole experience made me realize how important radio is. Now I have the [winning] bug. I can't wait to do it all again!

MW: I've been going to Nashville for 33 years, and it just never gets old. It's exciting and exhausting at the same time because it's nonstop. We're doing 30 interviews a day at the remotes. But I'm honored that 'QDR' is still participating. Among all these conglomerates, we're a local radio station that is allowed to be part of this wonderful pageantry of artists and share them with our listeners at home.



Looking Up: WQDR's Mike Wheless and Amanda Daughtry on CMA Awards night.

BOYS WHO MAKE THE NOISE

Small Market Personality
Ben Butler, Arnie Andrews, *Ben & Arnie*, WCOW/La Crosse, WI

AA: We've been nominated three or four times, but this was the first win, and it just shocked us.

BB: It was getting down to the end of our show when we were getting ready to unplug and leave the room when Tucker Wetmore called with the news. We had already resigned ourselves to the fact that the [notification] time had passed when the phone lit up.

AA: I had a pocket full of confetti just in case, that Ben didn't know about, and I was getting ready to put it back in my desk quietly had we not won. When we did, the confetti went all over the room. We flipped out completely.

AA: When we picked up the trophies at the CMA office on Music Row, all I could think about was that Lacy J. Dalton song with the lyrics, "For a while they'll go in style / On 16th Avenue." We're looking out the car windows pointing at the Curb building and RCA Studios like little kids rolling up to a Christmas tree.



Tuxedo Cats: WCOW/LaCrosse, WI's Ben Butler (l) and Arnie Andrews make their CMA acceptance speech.

BB: During a commercial break in the show, the legendary Lon Helton made it a point to come over and say that he was happy we had finally won. He was familiar with our show and very complimentary. I was envisioning my younger self with my dad in our old 1976 Jeep listening to Lon's countdown. My dad's been gone a decade now, but having Lon compliment our show was an unreal, out-of-body experience. It meant as much to me as winning. **CAC**



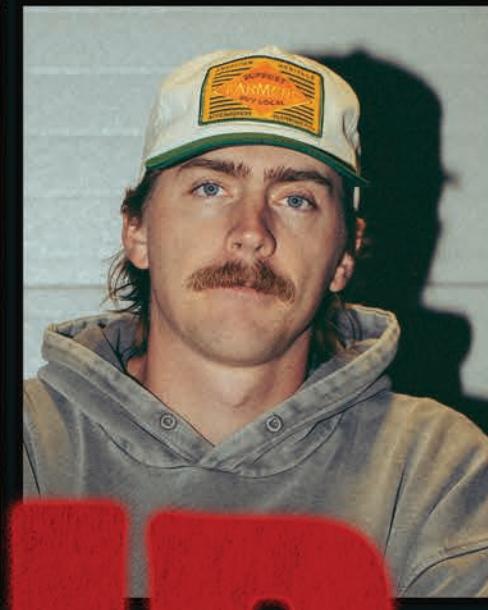


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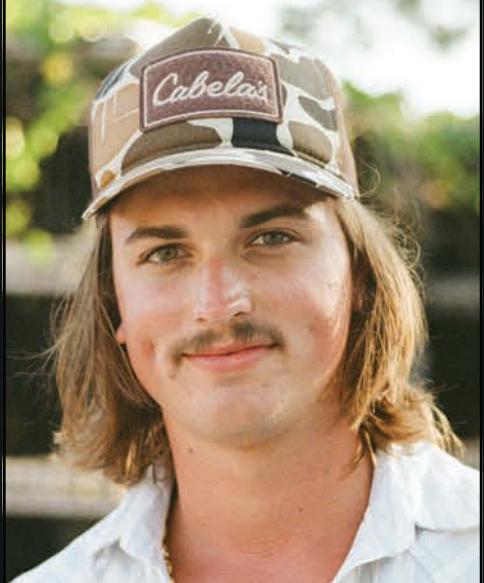
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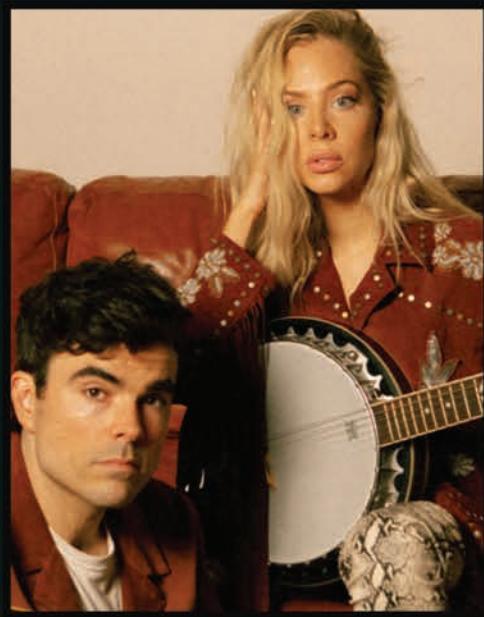


BIG THUNDER





2025



LABEL OF THE YEAR
THANK YOU
COUNTRY
RADIO
FOR AN
INCREDIBLE
10 YEARS!



As anniversary presents go, a third consecutive Label of the Year designation is a pretty decent one. Landing that trifecta within the first 10 years of operation? That's big ... and loud. Looking back over the decade, Big Loud's founding and growth fueled and mirrored a transformational period in country music. Hard work, aggressive decision making and an emphasis on culture are the throughlines.

"We had a good business plan and self-invested enough to run for four years with no revenue streams," says Partner/CEO Seth England. "We knew we'd find revenue somewhere, but at what level? Which artists could we connect with? Who would believe in us? We had a long enough runway to take chances and be bold. As I look back, the only crime is under-dreaming." England points to Motown as a label he sought to emulate. "We'd have been happy being a boutique. In the end, it became much bigger."

Ten years ago, now-EVP/Promotion Stacy Blythe was at Republic Nashville and working closely with England, who was managing the label's Florida Georgia Line. "We would talk often about renegade ideas around promotion and the business in general ... and we really clicked," she recalls. "Seth called and said, 'Really crazy idea, but would you be

willing to come run this promo team? We only have one artist – Chris Lane.' And I had gotten to know Chris quite a bit just on the road with FGL and to know Chris is to love him. Then I heard a batch of songs, one of them being 'Fix,' which pushed genre lines. I thought it was bold and an opportunity to do things differently. So it was an easy yes on my part, but a big leap of faith."

"Fix" went to No. 1, and more success followed. "Being able to keep trucking past that four year mark was big, but being label of the year was the loftiest goal we set as far as the promotion team," Blythe says. "Still, reaching it within the first 10 years blew our minds. Morgan Wallen's 'Whiskey Glasses' being our first multi-week No. 1 was the moment it felt like we were really rocking."

"I've said before that we're a pissed off startup," England says. "But we have that balance of working hard, feeling accomplished but also enjoying what we do and the people we're around. We all know



Keg Party: Celebrating "One Beer" are Hardy, Devin Dawson, John D'Amico and Lauren Alaina.

Violence Of The Lamb: After losing a "what are the odds bet" to Stacy Blythe, then-Big Loud exec Austen Adams is pictured during ACM Awards week in Frisco, TX with the chop he was forced to carry around for an entire evening. "Yeah, that thing ended up in my purse at the end of the night and I didn't find it until much later," Blythe says.



Kitchen Cabinet:
Ashley Cooke with her promo brain trust –
Tyler Waugh, Lauren Thomas, Stacy Blythe and intern Frankie.



Patch Culbertson

LABEL OF THE YEAR

BIG LOUD

TURNS 10!

people whose jobs are solely a function of earning a living. That's normal, actually, and not necessarily a bad thing. But we wanted to create an environment where people enjoy being around each other. In that, they'll work later together. They'll work longer and happily. That's not to say we don't have issues every now and then, but it was important to build it that way."

I HAD SOME HELP

From lavish year-end parties to absurd "what are the odds?" shenanigans, Big Loud's history is peppered with good-time stories. "That's exactly how [partner] Craig Wiseman was with his publishing company," England says.

CHART SHARE

1. Big Loud	10.8
2. MCA	10.1
3. Stoney Creek	7.9
4. Columbia	7.6
5. Broken Bow	5.6
6. Records Nashville	4.7
7. EMI	4.6
7. RCA	4.6
7. Triple Tigers	4.6
10. WAR	4.2

"That legendary parking lot party he throws ... amazing Christmas parties he and his wife host at their house ... the kindness Craig showed me personally as the company grew and some of the decisions started to fall to me – I wanted to make other people feel the way he made me feel."

Odds bets have led to some interesting outcomes. "We were in Cincinnati with Hardy on the *SiriusXM The Highway Tour* and there was a tattoo parlor across the street," England recalls. "He, of course, loves tattoos, as does Stacy. Less than 30 minutes before the show he asks her the odds she'll get the song title of 'Rednecker' tattooed inside her lip. I think she gave him one in 30, which is pretty good odds for something permanent. They go 'three, two, one' and both blurt out 17. She dropped her bag and walked right out the door."

"We can have No. 1 after No. 1, but let's really make memories together," Blythe says. "So I have 'Rednecker' tattooed inside my lip." Another bet had Blythe setting up VP/A&R Mike Giangreco.

"We were on a flight to Pittsburgh for the Morgan tour and she asked him the odds he would fly to Hailey Whitters' hometown in Iowa, take a picture in front of her house and return to Nashville all in one day. He gave her one in 100 and they hit." After the Wallen show, Giangreco slept on a tour bus overnight and caught a 6am flight the next day. A connection and long Uber ride to Whitters' small hometown ensued.

"We were in a staff meeting the next morning and our phones started dinging with selfie pictures," says EVP/GM Patch Culbertson. "But Mike got it done. I've hit and had to use an Australian accent during an awards show day, which was pretty embarrassing. You'll see a Big Loud staff member walking backwards at a concert, and you know they hit odds earlier that day."

"Everybody is grinding and coming up with innovative ideas, but let's not forget we are in the music business and it's supposed to be fun," Blythe says. "I point back to Craig because he is the king of culture. He'll call an audible and we'll all head out to a bar for apps and drinks."

"We probably add a little expense to the company budget these days, hopefully within reason," England says. "Our Christmas parties have started to become pretty legendary. We've had Diplo, TLC and, this year, Nelly performing and are blessed to be in a position to do it. When I see the staff smiling and thankful to be a part of that, the effort and expense are worth it."

OVER WHEN WE'RE SOBER

England, Wiseman and fellow partner/producer Joey Moi push for new approaches and appreciation for successes. "The partners encourage us to look around

Garden Variety: Big Loud's Morgan Wallen plays Madison Square Garden. Pictured (l-r) are the label's Stacy Blythe; Townsquare's Kurt Johnson; Music Choice's Jim Murphy; the label's Nikki Wood; Audacy's John Foxx; Wallen; labelmates Ernest, Hardy and Larry Fleet; WUBE/Cincinnati's Holly Morgan, the label's Tyler Waugh and Ali Matkosky and WUBE's Grover Collins.



and take in how we're changing lives with the work we're doing," Culbertson says. "Whether that's partnerships and friendships we've made with each other and within the industry, audiences that have discovered music that moves them, or artists whose careers and lives have been elevated. I'm grateful for that element of our culture."

Elevation aside, the company has gone through its share of changes and departures. Original label head Clay Hunnicutt left, founding partner Chief Zaruck (now at The Core) also moved on and the management division was shuttered. And sometimes songs don't hit, despite belief in the building. "Larry Fleet's 'Where I Find God' still bothers me," Blythe says. "I watched him play it on the Morgan tour and saw the reactions in that size room and also at radio shows. The listener stories

are phenomenal. The fact it wasn't a chart-topper will stay with me forever."

For his part, England never intended to be a manager. "We can thank [FGL's] Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley for that," he says. "Before the label, our goal was to be an artist development company. Sign an artist to publishing and production deals, fund recordings and some of the upstart costs, blow them up and then find a partnership. By the time we met Chris Lane, we had learned the pros and cons of doing it that way, which is why we expanded to the full service label."

"My goal was to be Joe Galante," England continues. "I was the young kid who moved to town while his reign at Sony was still happening. But I'm roughly the same age as Tyler and Brian and we were all hanging out – even

beyond the music company connection. I was helping them get on shows and doing other tasks to help them develop. They kept saying, 'You're the manager.' We didn't want to take on too much, but it was all in the family. Artists on other labels would inquire, but we never managed someone we didn't develop."

Having children changed things for England. "The minute I met Theo, our oldest, I knew [management] was going to come to an end pretty quickly. And all the artists knew that about me. I'm happy I did it, but I was never a lifer as a manager. I have tremendous relationships with the managers we work with, perhaps because I'm able to put myself in their shoes. The label and publishing are still very busy, but I've been able to get some time back in my life."

Three of Big Loud's longest-tenured promotion pros recall their label origin stories, and the big moments since. "My wife had gotten pregnant in May of 2015 and I got a call in July about Big Loud," says West Coast rep **Dave Kirth**. "Talking with my wife, I wasn't sure if making a job change was the best idea. But they called again and I was really upfront about who I was and where I was at in my life. Seth England was on the call and spoke with such calmness and resolve about their vision. Looking back, it was the best, greatest jump-in-with-both-feet decision I've ever made."

Northeast regional **Nikki Wood** was working in Memphis. "I came straight from being a radio promotions director, and probably didn't pay much attention to how small we were compared to a lot of the competition," she says. "We were all so fired up – so much energy, passion and belief. If you'd asked me then about what

10 years might look like, I'd probably have hoped to be doing the same thing in the same way."

Starting in the Southeast in 2016, now-SVP/Promotion **Tyler Waugh** was part of the label's first No. 1 – "Fix" by Chris Lane. "There was history there," he says. "I worked Rock promotion at Roadrunner with Nickelback and Theory Of A Deadman, so I knew Joey Moi. [Then-partner] Chief Zaruk was Nickelback's tour manager. I knew Seth England a little bit, and Stacy [Blythe] talked very highly of him. I'd known Nikki for a long time, too. And then hearing how cool and different the music was with Chris, it made sense."

Waugh noticed a difference from prior jobs immediately. "It didn't matter if you were Seth England or running the front desk, everyone was in staff meetings and able to give an idea. And everyone hung out together – not just the promotion staff. There were no cliques. We'd all be at Craig Wiseman's house for Christmas or have people to our house to watch the CMAs. I quickly realized it really does feel like family."

The emphasis on family hit home for Wood at a trying time. "Early on the plan was to move to Nashville, but my husband got orders from the military to serve in another part of the country," she says. "I thought I'd have to move alone with my daughter, but Stacy was adamant: 'I really encourage you to stay with your family.'

Road Side Attraction

We'll figure everything else out."

Morgan Wallen's rapid ascent wasn't difficult to ascertain. "He went onstage with FGL in Gulf Shores to shoot the 'Up Down' music video and it just felt special," Waugh says. "I remember telling radio, 'This guy's about to explode.' They would say, 'You're supposed to say that. It's your job.' I got that, but this was different. He was getting swarmed by fans. I remember him going to a radio event in a parking lot and it got dangerous. People were knocking over

barricades and security had to get involved. That's when we realized things had changed in less than a month."

The No. 1 battle for "Up Down" has become legend. "I lived a lifetime in that week," Kirth says. "We were up against Warner with a Blake Shelton song, so you knew they were committed. I think Espo [Warner Music Nashville Chair John Esposito] even went on the road to help secure the No. 1. I remember having to call [a programmer] from the shower because he'd taken out some spins he promised. [Warner] actually got within 12 points of us, but I was sitting at my kitchen counter with a glass of Crown Royal texting with everyone as the chart was closing. I'll never experience anything like that again."

"My favorite stories are the radio tours," Wood says. "I was with Ashley Cooke the first time she ever ate a whole Maine lobster. I took Morgan Wallen to New York City for the first time in his life. Those are really cool adventures with artists who are so incredibly genuine. When I look at any of them, I still see the kid in the back of the minivan rolling around different parts of the country."

"Being the No. 1 airplay label is a dream come true," Waugh says. "Also, the milestone of getting every reporting station on Post Malone and Morgan's 'I Had Some Help' first week – I don't know how anything will top that. What we've done might look like an easy trajectory, but it took a lot of dedication. We worked our asses off ... and still do."



Dave Kirth



Tyler Waugh



Nikki Wood



LABEL OF THE YEAR

WEIGHT IN THE TRUCK

Ask a Big Loud exec what they remember about the first decade and the answers cascade quickly. "The first time you hear a song in the building and just know someone's career is about to change," Culbertson says. "Standing in the back at show and knowing this is the smallest room you'll ever see this artist in again. I have memories like that for every act on the roster."

"Morgan doing Fenway or Madison Square Garden," he continues. "Last year at Stagecoach when Big Loud was 16% of the billing. From having a few acts on the bill to it being



Stay In Our Lane: Big Loud's first label trade shot in Country Aircheck, published in August, 2015. Pictured (l-r) are iHeart's Jeff Davis, WESC's John Landrum, Big Loud's Seth England, Chris Lane, WSSL's Kix Layton, Big Loud's Clay Hunnicutt and WSSL's Aaron Michael.

I Can't Believe It's Not Hailey: Big Loud's Hailey Whitters (butter) celebrates the release of Corn Queen with the label's Tyler Waugh, Lauren "LT" Thomas and Stacy Blythe (l-r).



Lauren Watkins, Hailey Whitters, Stephen Wilson Jr., Ernest, Miranda Lambert, Morgan and Post – pretty insane."

Blythe points to airplay success, of course. "I'm proud of the fact that Jake Owen and Miranda Lambert had the biggest impact dates of their careers here," she says. "Being partners on the Post Malone project, which was historic in so many ways – one of only two records to close the panel on impact date. The fastest artist to three No. 1s in Country Aircheck/Mediabase history. Morgan and Ernest's 'Cowgirls' has the most one week plays in history. The big one is Morgan having five No. 1s in the 2024 calendar year."

"This year, adding LT [SVP Lauren Thomas] was exciting," she continues. "We also expanded our team in the Americana space and had our first No. 1 with Kashus Culpepper. Watching Stephen Wilson, Jr. go from 400-cap venues to 2,000, get a CMA nomination and land that performance has been awesome. We're about to start our first radio campaign for him. He doesn't sound like anything else on Country radio, but the lyric on this single is the country audience."

FLOWER SHOP

While Big Loud sold a minority position in its catalog and rumors of England being wooed to run major labels have swirled, the company remains proudly independent. "We've had lots of opportunities thrown our way," England says. "Anytime you're in a creative business and seem to be cracking the code at times, others are going to want you to help them do that. Very honored that folks would think about that."

"The thing that keeps replaying in my mind is I'm in the middle of living my dream right now," he continues. "We're creating a brand – not for vanity but for purpose and community. There are probably some other neat things out there that young me would have thought I'm crazy for not looking at, but it doesn't have that exact special sauce I'm living right now. All I know is I'm locked in with Craig and Joey. The autonomy is unique and the pros outweigh the cons in still being an independent company."

Looking at 2026 and beyond, the buzzword in the company's four buildings is Big Loud 2.0. "We can't let the times change in front of us; we have to amend and adjust," England says. "When we look back on 10 years, our most special moments were when we were all in one building, so we purchased one in Metro North to get the whole company back together. By the middle of next year, we will be cutting a ribbon, celebrating a new chapter of Big Loud and looking forward to another 10 years of incredible stories." **CAC**

Rip & Radio

Three airplay crowns in the first 10 years is ample proof of radio's esteem for Big Loud, and vice versa. Longtime broadcast partners **Tim Roberts** (Audacy), **Mike Moore** (Cumulus) and **Brent Michaels** (KUZZ/Bakersfield) remember several inflection points.

"When I heard Big Loud Records was being formed by Seth England and his partners, I figured they were taking their 'Cruise' money to do a little startup," Roberts says. "When I heard they were adding Stacy Blythe and later Candice Watkins, I thought, 'These people are serious.' They weren't just backing one artist they liked."

"One of the ways I can tell they really care about radio is how they vet everything," Michaels says. "They were the first company I remember really leaning into streaming data and, for the most part, everything they send to radio has a streaming story." Moore agrees, adding, "They sort of opened my eyes to which analytics matter more than others and have been pretty transparent about how and why they've chosen singles."



Tim Roberts

Promotionally, Big Loud has earned a reputation for going the extra mile. Michaels recalls a listener flyaway to see Morgan Wallen at Boston's Fenway Park that went awry. "Our winner had a personal issue and wasn't going to be able to make it on the scheduled day. Dave Kirth and the label redid all of the logistics

in about a 24-hour period and got her there.

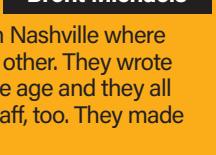
"Another time we had an artist bow out of our secret lunch at the last minute," Michaels continues. "Morgan had an off day on the Luke Combs tour and helped us out in a pinch. They and he were great to our listeners, and I've always respected both of them for that."

Moore says that kind of commitment remains. "Obviously as he's blown up it's gotten more difficult, but for the last album launch we became 'Morgan 101-5' for an entire weekend and they got us a whole bunch of audio from him to support that."

"They went about it the right way and created a family atmosphere within the label," Roberts says. "Seth and his team were smart enough to capture a moment in Nashville where a lot of these artists knew each other. They wrote together, were roughly the same age and they all grew and got great together. Staff, too. They made each other better."



Mike Moore



Brent Michaels

**CONGRATS TO
BIG LOUD
FOR 10 YEARS &
LABEL OF THE YEAR**

**- HARDY, JAKE WORTHINGTON,
DALLAS SMITH & YOUR TEAMMATES AT**

TRACK mgmt

CONGRATULATIONS

TO ALL OUR WRITERS



25

WEREN'T FOR THE WIND — ELLA Langley

ELLA Langley, JoyBeth Taylor, Johnny Clawson



27

COUNTRY SONG CAME ON — LUKE BRYAN

Dan Alley, Neil Medley, Ryan Beaver



30

TEXAS — BLAKE SHELTON

Kyle Sturrock, Lalo Guzman, Johnny Clawson, Josh Dorr



41

COWBOY SONGS — GEORGE BIRGE

George Birge, Michael Tyler, Matt McGinn, Lalo Guzman



58

COMING HOME — OLD DOMINION

Matthew Ramsey, Trevor Rosen, Brad Tursi, Geoff Sprung, Whit Sellers, Shane McAnally



72

LIFE WITH YOU — KELSEY HART

Kelsey Hart, Kyle Schlienger, Scott Stepakoff



73

SHE HATES ME — DIERKS BENTLEY

Dierks Bentley, Ashley Gorley, Chase McGill, Ross Copperman

7 SONGS IN THE TOP 100

SMACK

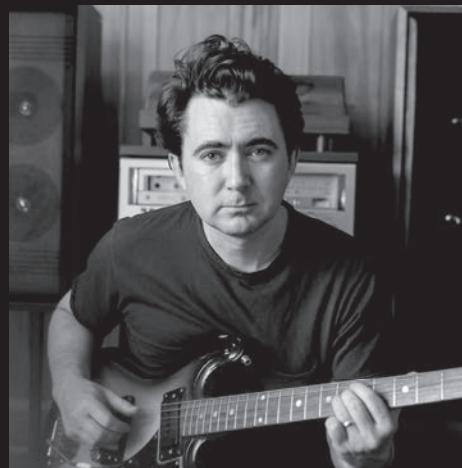


CONGRATULATIONS TO THE SPIRIT MUSIC WRITERS WITH SONGS IN THE TOP 100

#33

SCOTTY MCCREERY
BOTTLE ROCKETS
(FEAT. HOOTIE & THE BLOWFISH)

BOBBY HAMRICK
BRENT ANDERSON
DEREK GEORGE
FRANK ROGERS (WRITER + PRODUCER)
JEREMY BUSSEY
MONTY CRISWELL



BOBBY HAMRICK

BRENT ANDERSON

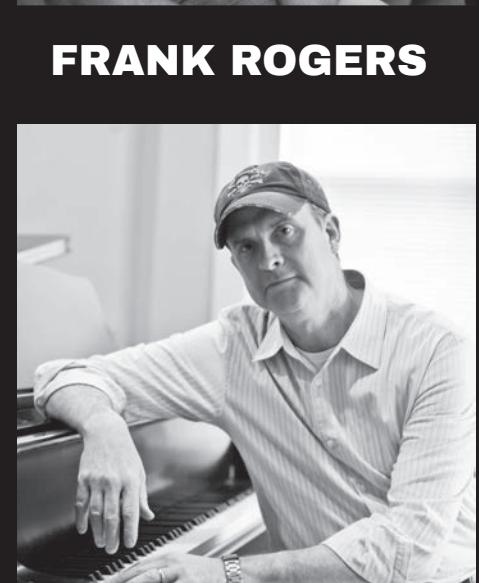
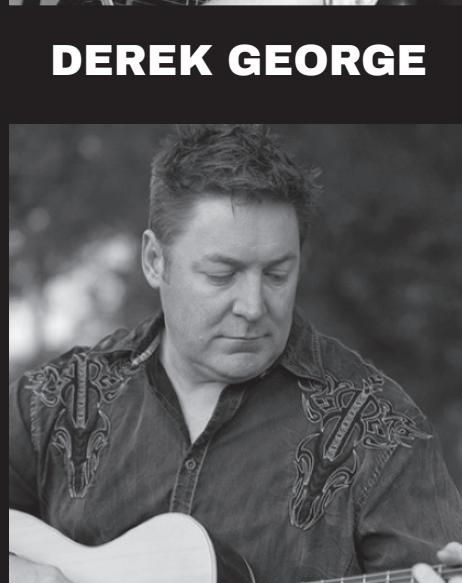
#45

MORGAN WALLEN
I GOT BETTER
MICHAEL HARDY



#65

HARDY
FAVORITE COUNTRY SONG
MICHAEL HARDY



DEREK GEORGE

FRANK ROGERS

#79

SCOTTY MCCREERY
FALL OF SUMMER

BRENT ANDERSON
DEREK GEORGE
FRANK ROGERS (WRITER + PRODUCER)
MONTY CRISWELL



#85

TIM McGRAW
PAPER UMBRELLAS
(FEAT. PARKER MCCOLLUM)
MONTY CRISWELL

JEREMY BUSSEY

MONTY CRISWELL

#94

JOE NICHOLS & ANNIE BOSKO
BETTER THAN YOU

DEREK GEORGE (WRITER + PRODUCER)



MICHAEL HARDY

MEDIABASE

Top 100 of 2025

the **YEAR**
in **MUSIC**

1	KOE WETZEL & JESSIE MURPH (Songwriters: Ropyr Wetzel, Amy Allen, Gabe Simon, Carrie Karpinen, Jessie Murph, Josh Serrato, Laura Veltz)	High Road	Col. NY/Records Nashville	51	LUKE COMBS	Back In The Saddle	Columbia
2	JELLY ROLL	Liar	BMG/Republic/Stoney Creek	52	MORGAN WALLEN	Lies Lies Lies	Big Loud
3	MORGAN WALLEN	Love Somebody	Big Loud	53	PARMALEE	Cowgirl	Stoney Creek
4	LOCASH	Hometown Home	Galaxy	54	HUDSON WESTBROOK	House Again	Warner/WAR
5	MORGAN WALLEN	I'm The Problem	Big Loud	55	PARMALEE	Gonna Love You	Stoney Creek
6	JASON ALDEAN	Whiskey Drink	Macon Music/Broken Bow	56	GEORGE BIRGE	It Won't Be Long	Records Nashville
7	SHABOOZIEY	Good News	American Dogwood/Empire/Magnolia	57	CARLY PEARCE	Truck On Fire	Big Machine
8	COREY KENT	This Heart	Combustion/RCA	58	OLD DOMINION	Coming Home	Columbia
9	THOMAS RHETT	After All The Bars Are Closed	Valory	59	DAN + SHAY	Bigger Houses	Warner/WAR
10	TYLER HUBBARD	Park	EMI Nashville	60	KENNY CHESNEY	Just To Say We Did	Blue Chair/Warner/WEA
11	JORDAN DAVIS	I Ain't Sayin'	MCA	61	ELLA LANGLEY & RILEY GREEN	You Look Like You Love Me	Sawgod/Col. NY/Nashville Harbor
12	MORGAN WALLEN	Just In Case	Big Loud	62	MEGHAN PATRICK	Golden Child	Riser House
13	SAM HUNT	Country House	MCA	63	JUSTIN MOORE	Time's Ticking	Valory
14	JOHN MORGAN f/JASON ALDEAN	Friends Like That	Night Train/Broken Bow	64	ERNEST	Would If I Could	Big Loud
15	RUSSELL DICKERSON	Happen To Me	Triple Tigers	65	HARDY	Favorite Country Song	Big Loud
16	DYLAN MARLOWE & DYLAN SCOTT	Boys Back Home	Columbia/Curb	66	ZACH TOP	Good Times & Tan Lines	Leo33
17	JACKSON DEAN	Heavens To Betsy	Big Machine	67	CHRIS STAPLETON	Think I'm In Love With You	Mercury
18	NATE SMITH	Fix What You Didn't Break	RCA	68	BLAKE SHELTON	Stay Country Or Die Tryin'	Wheelhouse
19	ZACH TOP	I Never Lie	Leo33	69	RILEY GREEN	Damn Good Day To Leave	Nashville Harbor
20	KANE BROWN	Backseat Driver	RCA	70	MAX MCNOWN	Better Me For You	Columbia
21	DYLAN SCOTT	This Town's Been Too Good To Us	Curb	71	RILEY GREEN f/ELLA LANGLEY	Don't Mind If I Do	Nashville Harbor/Col. NY
22	JOSH ROSS	Single Again	Core/Mercury	72	KELSEY HART	Life With You	Curb
23	JELLY ROLL	I Am Not Okay	Stoney Creek	73	DIERKS BENTLEY	She Hates Me	MCA
24	MEGAN MORONEY	Am I Okay	Columbia	74	DYLAN SCOTT	What He'll Never Have	Curb
25	ELLA LANGLEY	Weren't For The Wind	Sawgod/Col. NY/Triple Tigers	75	KELSEA BALLERINI w/NOAH KAHAN	Cowboys Cry Too	Black River
26	COLE SWINDELL	Forever To Me	Warner/WAR	76	MEGAN MORONEY	6 Months Later	Columbia
27	LUKE BRYAN	Country Song Came On	MCA	77	CHRIS YOUNG	Til The Last One Dies	Black River
28	RILEY GREEN	Worst Way	Nashville Harbor	78	MEGAN MORONEY & KENNY CHESNEY	You Had To Be There	Blue Chair/Columbia
29	JELLY ROLL	Heart Of Stone	Stoney Creek	79	SCOTTY MCCREERY	Fall Of Summer	Triple Tigers
30	BLAKE SHELTON	Texas	Wheelhouse	80	TY MYERS	Ends Of The Earth	Records Nashville
31	JON PARDI	Friday Night Heartbreaker	MCA	81	VINCENT MASON	Wish You Well	MusicSoup/MCA
32	JORDAN DAVIS	Bar None	MCA	82	PRESTON COOPER	Weak	Valory
33	S. MCCREERY f/HOOTIE & THE BLOWFISH	Bottle Rockets	Triple Tigers	83	CHRIS JANSON	Me & A Beer	Warner/Harper 60
34	PARKER MCCOLLUM	What Kinda Man	MCA	84	BRANDON LAKE w/JELLY ROLL	Hard Fought Hallelujah	Essential/PLG/Lyric Ridge/Stoney Creek
35	CHASE MATTHEW	Darlin'	Warner/WAR	85	TIM McGRAW f/PARKER MCCOLLUM	Paper Umbrellas	Big Machine/MCA
36	C. JOHNSON W/C. UNDERWOOD	I'm Gonna Love You	Cojo/Warner/WMN/Capitol	86	CODY JOHNSON	The Fall	CoJo Music/Warner/WMN
37	POST MALONE f/LUKE COMBS	Guy For That	Big Loud	87	MIRANDA LAMBERT & CHRIS STAPLETON	A Song To Sing	Republic/Big Loud/Mercury
38	BAILEY ZIMMERMAN f/LUKE COMBS	Backup Plan	Atlantic/Warner/WEA/Columbia	88	THOMAS RHETT	Beautiful As You	Valory
39	TUCKER WETMORE	Wind Up Missin' You	Back Blocks/EMI Nashville	89	MORGAN WALLEN f/POST MALONE	I Ain't Coming Back	Big Loud
40	DREW BALDRIDGE	Tough People	Lyric Ridge/Stoney Creek	90	MATT STELL	Breakin' In Boots	Records Nashville
41	GEORGE BIRGE	Cowboy Songs	Records Nashville	91	WARREN ZEIDERS	Relapse	Warner/WEA
42	LAINEY WILSON	4X4XU	Broken Bow	92	CHAYCE BECKHAM	Everything I Need	BMG/Wheelhouse
43	ERIC CHURCH	Hands Of Time	EMI Nashville	93	MITCHELL TENPENNY	Same Moon	Riser House/Columbia
44	BAILEY ZIMMERMAN	Holy Smokes	Elektra/Warner/WEA	94	JOE NICHOLS & ANNIE BOSKO	Better Than You	Quartz Hill
45	MORGAN WALLEN	I Got Better	Big Loud	95	DASHA	Not At This Party	Warner/WMN
46	DASHA	Austin	Warner/WMN	96	KELSEA BALLERINI	Baggage	Black River
47	KEITH URBAN	Straight Line	MCA	97	JASON ALDEAN	How Far Does A Goodbye Go	Macon Music/Broken Bow
48	TUCKER WETMORE	3, 2, 1	Back Blocks/EMI Nashville	98	CHRIS JANSON	Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get	Nashville Harbor
49	LAINEY WILSON	Somewhere Over Laredo	Broken Bow	99	LOCASH	Wrong Hearts	Galaxy
50	RASCAL FLATTS w/JONAS BROTHERS	I Dare You	Republic/Big Machine	100	SAM BARBER f/AVERY ANNA	Indigo	LockelandSprings/Atlantic/Magnolia

THANK YOU FOR OUR BIGGEST YEAR EVER

*2025's **#1** MOST PLAYED DUO/GROUP

*2025's **#4** MOST PLAYED SINGLE "HOMETOWN HOME"

*ACHIEVED THE **1 BILLION STREAMS**
BENCHMARK

* 2 WEEK **#1** SMASH

"HOMETOWN HOME"

*MULTIPLE **BACK TO BACK** SOLD OUT
HEADLINING TOUR DATES



AND... IN 2026...
THE GALAXY IS
EXPANDING!!

2025

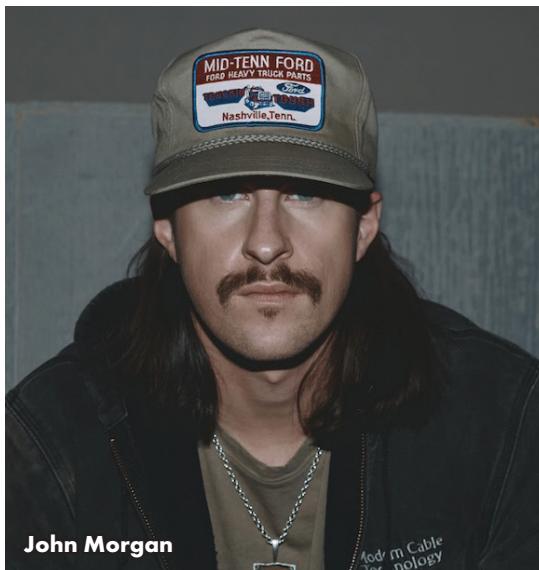
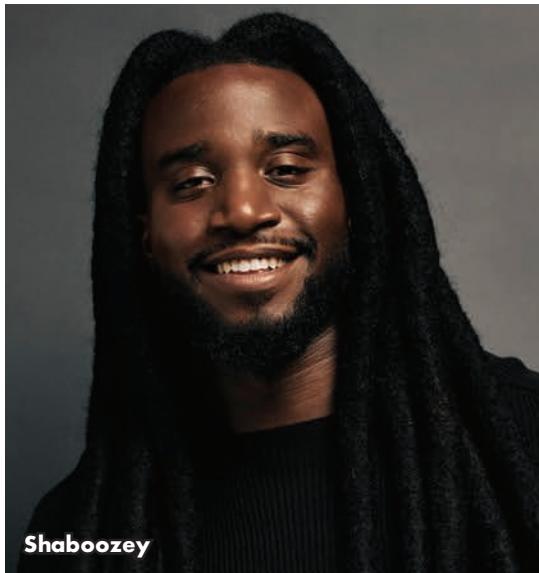
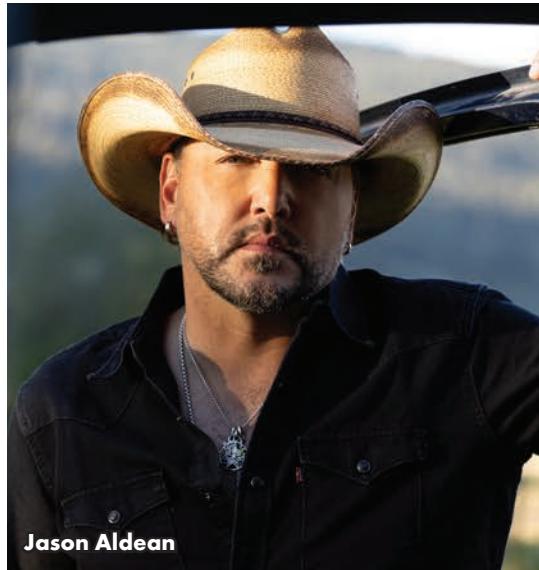


TOP 15s

of

2025

the YEAR
in MUSIC



Artist	Title	Label	Peak Position (wks. at No.1)	Peak Date	Wks. on Chart	2025 Rank
A JASON ALDEAN	Whiskey Drink	Macon Music/Broken Bow	1	6/2/25	31	6
	How Far Does A Goodbye Go	Macon Music/Broken Bow	15	11/10/25	9	97
B DREW BALDRIDGE	Tough People	Lyric Ridge/Stoney Creek	10	5/12/25	30	40
	GEORGE BIRGE	Records Nashville	1	12/16/24	8	41
	GEORGE BIRGE	Records Nashville	14	11/10/25	38	56
	KANE BROWN	RCA	1	6/23/25	34	20
	LUKE BRYAN	MCA	1	8/18/25	40	27
C KENNY CHESNEY	Just To Say We Did	Blue Chair/Warner/WEA	12	3/31/25	23	60
	ERIC CHURCH	EMI Nashville	9	10/13/25	31	43
	LUKE COMBS	Columbia	1(2)	11/3/25	16	51
D DAN + SHAY	Bigger Houses	Warner/WAR	1	1/21/25	12	59
	DASHA	Warner/WMN	22	11/18/24	1	46
	JORDAN DAVIS	MCA	1	3/3/25	18	11
	JORDAN DAVIS	MCA	1	10/13/25	30	32
	JACKSON DEAN	Big Machine	1	11/10/25	52	17
E RUSSELL DICKERSON	Heavens To Betsy	Triple Tigers	1(2)	9/22/25	29	15
	Happen To Me	Triple Tigers	1(2)	9/22/25	29	15
F RILEY GREEN	Damn Good Day To Leave	Nashville Harbor	7	1/27/25	13	69
	RILEY GREEN	Nashville Harbor	1	6/16/25	21	28
	R. GREEN F/E. LANGLEY	Nashville Harbor/Col. NY	6	11/10/25	16	71
G HARDY	Favorite Country Song	Big Loud	12	11/10/25	30	65
	TYLER HUBBARD	EMI Nashville	1	8/4/25	40	10
	SAM HUNT	MCA	1	7/28/25	39	13
H JELLY ROLL	I Am Not Okay	Stoney Creek	3	11/18/24	1	23
	JELLY ROLL	Stoney Creek	1	3/10/25	19	2
	JELLY ROLL	Stoney Creek	1	10/6/25	28	29
	C. JOHNSON w/C. UNDERWOOD	Cojo/Warner/WMN/Capitol	1(2)	3/24/25	21	36
K COREY KENT	This Heart	Combustion/RCA	1	6/30/25	33	8
L E. LANGLEY & R. GREEN	You Look Like You Love Me	Sawgod/Col. NY/Nash Harbor	1	12/9/24	8	61
	ELLA LANGLEY	Sawgod/Col. NY/Triple Tigers	1	7/7/25	27	25
	LOCASH	Galaxy	1(2)	4/14/25	24	4
M P. MALONE F/L. COMBS	Guy For That	Big Loud	1	2/24/25	17	37
	D. MARLOWE & D. SCOTT	Columbia/Curb	1	1/13/25	11	16
	CHASE MATTHEW	Warner/WAR	2	11/10/25	39	35
	PARKER MCCOLLUM	MCA	6	10/27/25	50	34
	S. MCCREERY F/H. & THE BLOWFISH	Triple Tigers	1	9/29/25	22	33
	TIM McGRAW	Big Machine	1	11/18/24	3	--
	J. MORGAN F/J. ALDEAN	Night Train/Broken Bow	1	4/21/25	25	14
	MEGAN MORONEY	Columbia	1	6/9/25	32	24
	MEGAN MORONEY	Columbia	9	11/10/25	15	76
O OLD DOMINION	Coming Home	Columbia	12	4/28/25	25	58
P JON PARDI	Friday Night Heartbreaker	MCA	8	9/29/25	48	31
	PARMALEE	Stoney Creek	1	12/2/24	8	55
	PARMALEE	Stoney Creek	5	11/10/25	42	53
R THOMAS RHETT	Beautiful As You	Valory	1	11/25/24	4	88
	THOMAS RHETT	Valory	1	8/25/25	29	9
	JOSH ROSS	Core/Mercury	1	7/21/25	38	22
S DYLAN SCOTT	This Town's Been Too Good To Us	Curb	1	3/31/25	22	21
	SHABOOZNEY	American Dogwood/Empire/Magnolia	1	9/8/25	33	7
	BLAKE SHELTON	Wheelhouse	1	5/5/25	27	30
	BLAKE SHELTON	Wheelhouse	10	11/10/25	23	68
	NATE SMITH	RCA	1	8/11/25	38	18
	CHRIS STAPLETON	Mercury	9	1/21/25	14	67
	COLE SWINDELL	Warner/WAR	1	4/28/25	26	26
T ZACH TOP	Sounds Like The Radio	Leo33	14	11/18/24	2	112
	ZACH TOP	Leo33	1	5/12/25	27	19
	ZACH TOP	Leo33	11	10/27/25	21	66
U KEITH URBAN	Messed Up As Me	MCA	9	12/9/24	6	--
V MORGAN WALLEN	Love Somebody	Big Loud	1(3)	2/10/25	15	3
	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud	1(2)	5/27/25	19	5
	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud	1	7/14/25	16	12
	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud	1	10/20/25	19	45
	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud	2	11/18/24	2	52
W HUDSON WESTBROOK	House Again	Warner/WAR	10	10/27/25	30	54
	TUCKER WETMORE	Back Blocks/EMI Nashville	1	1/6/25	10	39
	TUCKER WETMORE	Back Blocks/EMI Nashville	8	11/10/25	35	48
	K. WETZEL & J. MURPH	Col. NY/Records Nashville	1(2)	12/30/24	9	1
	LAINEY WILSON	Broken Bow	1	2/18/25	16	42
	LAINEY WILSON	Broken Bow	3	11/10/25	25	49
	B. ZIMMERMAN F/L. COMBS	Backup Plan	1	9/2/25	20	38
Z BAILEY ZIMMERMAN	Holy Smokes	Elektra/Warner/WEA	9	4/14/25	26	44

JOHN MORGAN

COUNTRY AIRCHECK'S
#1 NEW AIRPLAY ARTIST OF 2025!

THANK YOU COUNTRY RADIO!



MORGAN, ELLA, LOCASH TOP 2025 AIRPLAY

Morgan Wallen makes it four-in-a-row as Country radio's Top Airplay Performer, dominating to such an extent that he posted 33% more airplay points than the year's runner-up, Jelly Roll. Wallen charted nine songs in 2025, with five of them peaking in the Top 15. Four of those hit No.1 for a total of seven weeks, including "Love Somebody" at three weeks and "I'm The Problem" for two. "Just In Case" and "I Got Better" each spent a week on the top of the charts. It should be noted that all five of Wallen's Top 15s were No. 1 hits with "Lies, Lies, Lies" hitting No. 1 on the final chart of 2024, while its peak position in 2025 was No. 2. Wallen contributed two songs inside the year's Top 10 most-heard songs and four in the Top 50.

Wallen leads a Top 10 Performers list that includes only three who made the 2024 Top 10 – Wallen, Mr. Roll and Luke Combs. New to this year's Top 10 are Dylan Scott, Jason Aldean, Jordan Davis, Riley Green, Ella Langley, Jessie Murph and Koe Wetzel – the latter two on the strength of this year's No. 1 song, "High Road."

Langley was poised for launch at the end of the 2024 chart year as her collaboration with Green, "You Look Like You Love Me," rose to No. 6 on the final chart. It hit No. 1 last December and set up her solo chart-topper "Weren't For The Wind," which is also No. 25 for the year. Those two, along with another Green collab, the Top 5 (as of this writing) "Don't Mind If I Do" propelled Langley to the top airplay spot among women.

It was a banner year for Preston Brust and Chris Lucas as LoCash tops the Duo/Group category for the first time in their careers. The guys had a two-week No. 1 and the No. 4 song of the year with "Hometown Home," while "Wrong Hearts" found a home among the year's Top 100 tunes. While no Duo/Group posted enough points to make the Overall Top 10 Performers list, an Honorable Mention goes to LoCash for posting enough points to land at No. 11.

John Morgan leads the New Artist list on the heels of two charted songs in 2025. "Friends Like That" featuring Jason Aldean hit No. 1 last April and ranks No. 14 for the year, while "Kid Myself" is currently in the Top 40.

Charted Songs, Top 15s, No. 1s

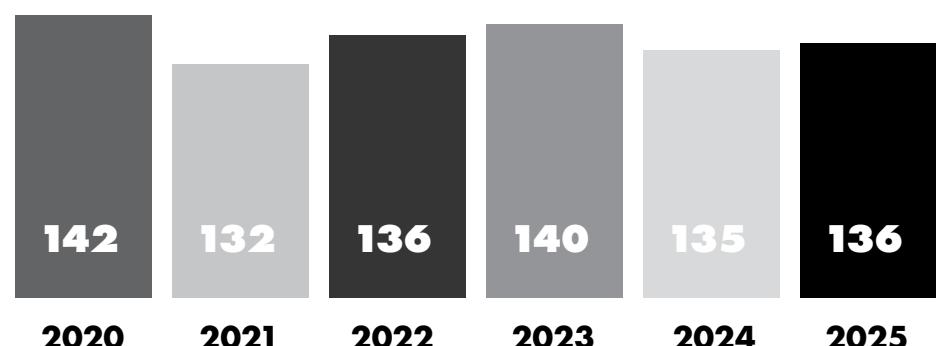
A total of 136 songs reached the Top 50 in 2025, one more than last year. Those 136 songs came from 90 different artists – 66 men, 14 women and 10 duos or groups. Last year's 135 songs came from 98 artists – 71 men, 19 women and eight duos or groups. In 2023, 140 songs charted and were represented by 96 artists – 70 men, 19 women and seven duos or groups.

Of this year's 136 charted songs, 70 reached the Top 15. They came from 42 men, six women and four duos/groups. Nine Top 15 songs featured a woman's voice; five were solo, including a pair from Megan Moroney, while the other four were collabs with men.

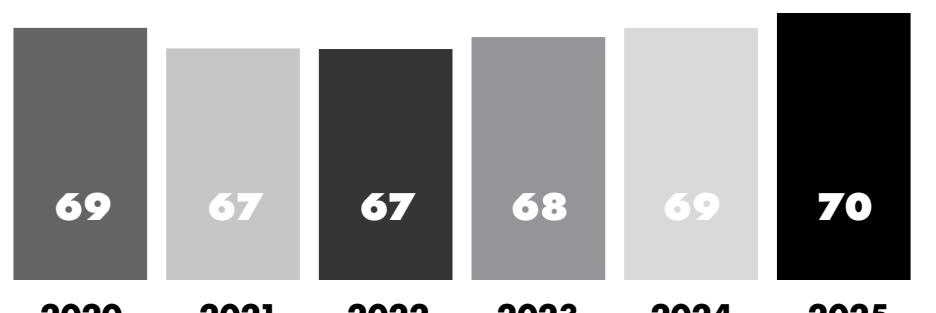
Country radio posted 44 No. 1 songs this year. Only one – Wallen's "Love Somebody" – lived in the penthouse for three weeks, while six songs enjoyed two weeks on top and 37 claimed the pinnacle for a week. In 2024, there were 42 No. 1s, coming from 34 men, two women and one from a duo. Only one, Post Malone and Morgan Wallen's "I Had Some Help" stayed on top three weeks. Six songs spent two weeks at No. 1; 35 were on top for a week.

As always, airplay information appearing anywhere in Country Aircheck comes from our friends and partners at Mediabase 24/7. Chart year statistics include singles that spent at least one week in the Top 50 between Nov. 10, 2024 and Nov. 8, 2025. Artist and song rankings are based on airplay points, which are plays multiplied by the individual Country radio station's weights. Weights are calculated using the station's Average Quarter Hour Persons.

NUMBER OF CHARTED SONGS



NUMBER OF CHARTED SONGS REACHING TOP 15



TOP 15 FIRST TIMERS

Following last year's record high of 17 artists posting a Top 15 hit for the first time, we hit a record low in 2025 with only three reaching that milestone. The silver lining is both John Morgan and Josh Ross hit No. 1 – with "Friends Like That" (with Jason Aldean) and "Single Again," respectively. Hudson Westbrook is currently in the Top 10 with his debut single, "House Again."

JOHN MORGAN

(Night Train/Broken Bow)

JOSH ROSS

(Core/Mercury)

HUDSON WESTBROOK

(Warner/WAR)

COUNTRY RADIO'S TOP 2025 PERFORMERS

OVERALL

1	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud
2	JELLY ROLL	Stoney Creek
3	DYLAN SCOTT	Curb
4	JASON ALDEAN	Macon Music/Broken Bow
5	LUKE COMBS	Columbia
6	JORDAN DAVIS	MCA
7	RILEY GREEN	Nashville Harbor
8	ELLA LANGLEY	Columbia NY
9	JESSIE MURPH	Records Nashville
10	KOE WETZEL	Columbia NY



JELLY ROLL

MALE

1	MORGAN WALLEN	Big Loud
2	JELLY ROLL	Stoney Creek
3	DYLAN SCOTT	Curb
4	JASON ALDEAN	Macon Music/Broken Bow
5	LUKE COMBS	Columbia
6	JORDAN DAVIS	MCA
7	RILEY GREEN	Nashville Harbor
8	KOE WETZEL	Columbia NY
9	ZACH TOP	Leo33
10	THOMAS RHETT	Valory



DYLAN SCOTT

FEMALE

1	ELLA LANGLEY	Columbia NY
2	JESSIE MURPH	Records Nashville
3	MEGAN MORONEY	Columbia
4	LAINEY WILSON	Broken Bow
5	DASHA	Warner/WAR
6	CARRIE UNDERWOOD	MCA
7	CARLY PEARCE	Big Machine
8	KELSEA BALLERINI	Black River
9	MEGHAN PATRICK	Riser House
10	MIRANDA LAMBERT	Big Loud



MEGAN MORONEY

DUO/GROUP

1	LOCASH	Galaxy
2	PARMALEE	Stoney Creek
3	OLD DOMINION	Columbia
4	DAN + SHAY	Warner/WAR
5	MUSCADINE	Stancaster/Big Machine
6	BLOODLINE	
6	TIGIRLILY GOLD	Sony



PARMALEE

NEW ARTISTS

1	JOHN MORGAN	Night Train/Broken Bow
2	JOSH ROSS	Core/Mercury
3	HUDSON WESTBROOK	River House/Warner/WAR
4	MEGHAN PATRICK	Riser House
5	KELSEY HART	Curb
6	MAX MCKNOWN	Columbia NY/Magnolia
7	TY MYERS	Records Nashville
8	VINCENT MASON	Music Soup/MCA
9	PRESTON COOPER	Valory
10	BRANDON LAKE	Essential/PLG/Lyric Ridge/Stoney Creek



JOSH ROSS

1st & Foremost

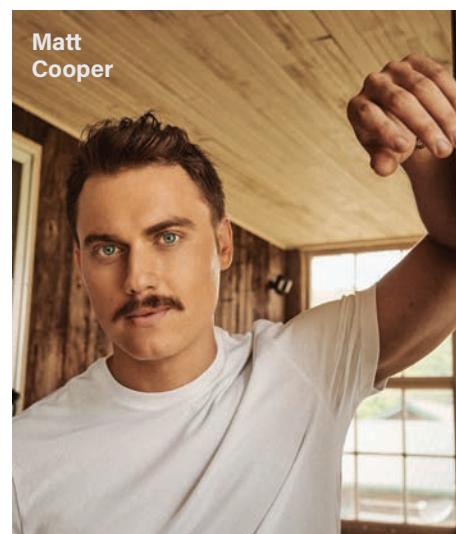
Labels Preview Q1 Priorities

AKANDO

- Turnpike Troubadours continue their *The Price of Admission* tour in major markets across the US, and add multiple *Boys From Oklahoma* dates with Cross Canadian Ragweed in 2026. “Heaven Passing Through” continues to be the focus track while the band is in the studio working on a follow up to their 2025 release.
- Tyler Nance’s “Keeps Me Sane” continues to blow the algorithms away as he’s recording his project, slated for March 2026. Touring with Ian Munsick in early 2026 and announcing other events and festival slots.

BIG LOUD

- Kashus Culpepper: “His ragged-edged baritone growl could’ve transformed the Delta blues with Howlin’ Wolf in the ‘50s, or smoked a brisket with Tom Waits in the ‘70s, just as naturally as it fits with Marcus King’s slide guitar and Sierra Ferrell’s vocals featured on next year’s *Act I*.” –Paste
- Coleman Jennings: “Coleman’s striking and unique voice mixed with his dedication to Western tradition will stand out in this current musical landscape. Produced by Dave Cobb, *The Ride On EP* (releasing Jan. 9, full album releasing later 2026) is a true statement of originality.” –Big Loud
- Morgan Wallen: Coming off the heels of his 20th No. 1 at Country radio, Wallen’s “20 Cigarettes” is Top 20 and climbing. “We are looking forward to another remarkable year at Country radio with Morgan Wallen,” says EVP/Radio Promotion Stacy Blythe. “With the new tour set to kick off in April, we look forward to seeing you out on the road!”
- Stephen Wilson Jr.: “Gary,” impacting Jan. 26. “It’s going to be a fun JanuGary as we kick off 2026 with Stephen Wilson Jr.’s debut Country single.” –VP/Multi-Format Radio Shari Roth
- Thelma & James, Timmy McKeever, Cody Lohden, Alex Lambert and more: “2026 is shaping up to be one of the most exciting years in Big Loud’s history,” says SVP/Marketing Brianne Deslippe. “This next class of artists and songwriters are bringing fresh energy and standout storytelling. We’re proud of what they’re creating and can’t wait for everyone to hear what’s coming.”



BIG MACHINE

- Tim McGraw, “TBA,” Q1: McGraw is back in the studio with new music arriving in Q1, setting up a major tour announcement for 2026.
- Rascal Flatts, “I Dare You,” Top 20 and climbing: The single is accelerating at radio and on pace for a Top 10 by EOY. The *Life Is a Highway* Tour launches Jan. 15 in Raleigh and hits 23 arenas nationwide.
- Carly Pearce, “Dream Come True,” out now: “Dream Come True” pulled 93 first-week adds, her biggest solo launch yet. More new music will roll out through the first half of 2026.
- Jackson Dean, “Make A Liar,” January: Following his second No. 1, “Heavens to Betsy,” Dean’s next single, “Make A Liar,”

impacts in January with an album following in Q2. “After a breakout 2025 touring, 2026 will level him up again,” says VP/Promo & Marketing Erik Powell.

- Chase McDaniel, “Burned Down Heaven,” out now: His debut single, “Burned Down Heaven,” continues its steady build at radio and remains a priority focus heading into 2026.
- Midland, “TBA,” Q1: New music arriving in Q1 and Q2 with a full album planned for 2026.

BLACK RIVER

- Chris Young: Working on a deluxe version of his Black River debut album, *I Didn’t Come Here To Leave*, for the first half of 2026. -
- “Almost two decades into his career, Chris Young is proving that instead of slowing down, he’s raising the bar.” –Country Now
- “This guy is always a dependable hitmaker.” –Music Row

BROKEN BOW

- Jason Aldean: “How Far Does A Goodbye Go,” out now. “Jason is following up his 30th No. 1 single, ‘Whiskey Drink,’ with another fast chart climbing hit, ‘How Far Does A Goodbye Go.’ It’s the first single off his new album *Songs About Us*, coming out in April.” –VP/Promo Lee Adams
- Lainey Wilson: “Lainey will follow up her recent chart-topping hit, ‘Somewhere Over Laredo,’ with new music in 2026. ‘Somewhere Over Laredo’ is nominated for two of Lainey’s three Grammy nominations. She’s coming off a big night at the *CMA Awards* where she took home the Entertainer, Female Vocalist and Album for *Whirlwind*.”
- Dustin Lynch: “Easy To Love,” out now. “Dustin Lynch’s ‘Easy To Love’ follows his 10th No. 1 career hit. Dustin is currently working on new music for 2026.”
- John Morgan: “Kid Myself,” out now. “Follows his debut No. 1 as an artist, ‘Friends Like That.’ John was named Country Aircheck’s No. 1 Top Performing New Artist.”

CURB

- Dylan Scott: “What He’ll Never Have.” “Country Aircheck’s No. 3 Overall Top Airplay Performer is firing on all cylinders, and boldly continues his ascent to be one of country music’s next bona fide superstars,” says SVPP RJ Meacham, who adds his current top 20 single is “already pacing to be his fastest-rising, biggest-streaming hit yet” and his team is “hitting the ground sprinting in January, building toward a late-February push to deliver Dylan his seventh No. 1. The momentum is real, and we’re riding it all the way to the top.”
- Kelsey Hart: “Fireworks.” “The follow-up to his viral smash ‘Life With You’ from Country Aircheck’s No. 5 Top Airplay New Artist of 2025 has officially taken off. ‘Fireworks’ is crackling across charts and playlists, and the sparks are only getting brighter in the new year. This is how fire works.”
- Lee Brice: “Killed The Man.” “The song is climbing now, and we’re leaning in hard as Lee puts the finishing touches on a new album coming later in 2026. Big things ahead. *Country Now* nailed it with ‘... the haunting, reflective track [proves] once again that Brice knows how to captivate listeners with his unique storytelling.’”
- Harper Grace: “Daddy Says No.” “There are a lot of voices in our industry. Some really stand out. And we couldn’t be more excited to officially introduce one of those voices to you this year with Harper Grace. Fresh off a top 20 Hot AC and top 10 AC hit with ‘Freedom,’ her highly anticipated Country debut ships Jan. 12 and impacts in early February. The launch is on, and she’s ready to shine.”

- Rodney Atkins: “Hole in One.” “With 5+ billion streams, multiple No. 1s and a truly multi-generational fanbase, Rodney’s iconic voice is back in the spotlight. New

music is locked and loaded, including a new single swinging into early Q2. Classic Rodney energy, brand-new chapter.”

FORGE ENTERTAINMENT

- Lucas Hoge: “Back on the road in 2026, filming *Hoge Wild* season eight and you can expect new singles early in the year,” says Founder/Partner Laura Lynn.



GALAXY

- “Timing is everything for The Galaxy Label Group,” says Founder Skip Bishop, who teases “significant company expansion” in January.
- “LoCash has greatly grown the music and entity brand on the strength of ‘Hometown Home,’ which has found even more success and is skyrocketing up the Hot AC chart. The duo’s ‘Wrong Hearts,’ another research monster, is continuing to unfold and will be headed toward the top 20 quickly post-break! The biggest news on the LoCash front will be a deluge of new music throughout Q1 and Q2, feeding the digital musical highways with cutting-edge new tracks and a few surprise reimaged versions of the duo’s classics.”
- “We’re also keeping the wrapping paper on our first signing; a gifted, internationally based singer/songwriter whose style and talent is as timeless as major artists three times her age! More to come on that!”

LEO33

- Trey Pendley: “Family Man,” Q1. Dubbed as a “small-town philosopher with a reassuring warmth” by *Holler*, Pendley will be introduced to radio in Q1 with his track “Family Man.”
- Zach Top: The newly crowned CMA New Artist of The Year will be back at radio with the second single from *Ain’t In It For My Health*.

LOST HIGHWAY

- Flatland Cavalry: “After years of building a fierce and loyal fanbase, coming off a national headlining tour spanning New York to LA – including a sold-out Red Rocks Amphitheatre, Flatland Cavalry is ready to make their mark on Country radio in 2026,” says VP/Promo Luke Jensen. “With their debut radio single impacting Feb. 2, one of country music’s most loved bands is ready for their next chapter.”

MAGNOLIA

- “Great new music from Randy Houser coming your way soon! Shaboozey and Jelly Roll’s ‘Amen’ and Max McNown’s ‘Better Me For You’ are both top 20 and climbing!” –VP/Promo Heather Propper

EMI/MERCURY

- Josh Ross: Continues to climb the charts with “Hate How You Look” and readying for a busy international touring schedule.
- Tucker Wetmore: Following his two No.

Is at the start of the new year, will we see new music in ‘26? Santa (VP/Promo Jimmy Rector) says, “Likely.”

- Dalton Davis: “We are so excited to bring you two great new artists who will change the music landscape, including Dalton Davis, who is already receiving a lot of radio airplay on his DSP release, ‘Cows In The Front Yard,’ and [we] can’t wait for you to hear the rest of this album.”

- Jacob Hackworth: “We’re also excited to introduce Jacob Hackworth to the world. This accomplished songwriter and electric performer is set to shock you all.”

- Look for new music in early 2026 from artists including Eric Church, Tyler Hubbard, Brothers Osborne and Priscilla Block.

MCA

- According to VP/Promo Miranda McDonald, we’ll see new music from Luke Bryan, Jon Pardi, Parker McCollum and Carter Faith.

- Jon Pardi: “His next single is crowd favorite, ‘Boots Off,’ going for the Boot Trifecta, dropping in January!”

- Parker McCollum: “Giving the fans what they want with his next single, ‘Killin’ Me,’ going for adds Feb. 2. This one is for the ladies, but the men benefit too.”

- “We will have an EP from one of our newest signings, Florida native Madden Metcalf. Be prepared for more hooks than a fishing boat.”

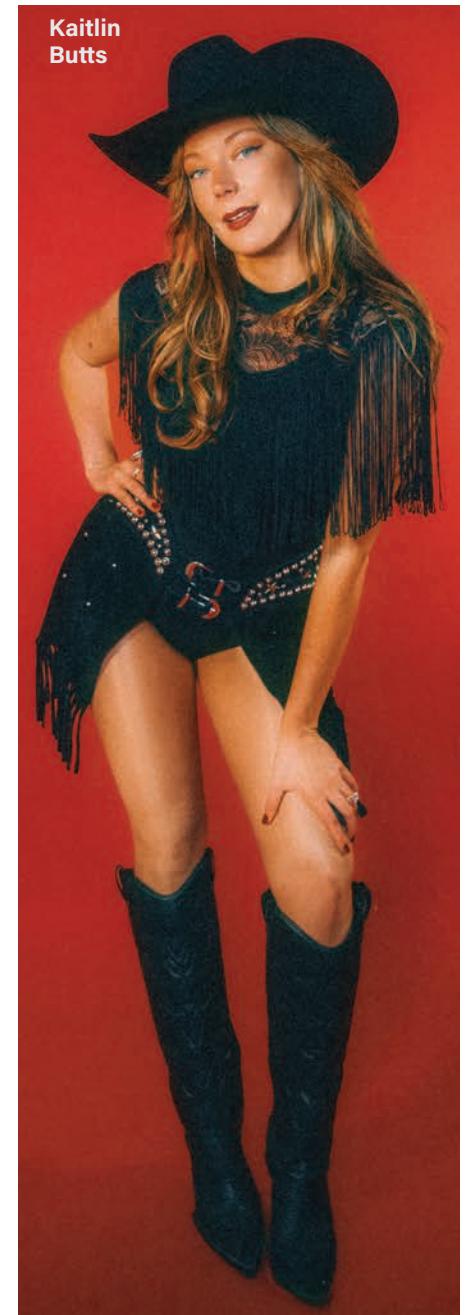
- Jordan Davis: “Turn This Truck Around,” his 11th single, is quickly climbing the charts, and follow-up music from the consistent bop dropper is coming in 2026.”

- Rumor has it Vincent Mason is working on a deluxe version of his debut album, *There I Go*, slated for release in Q1 of 2026. The new music will support his second headlining tour and his opening set for Morgan Wallen.

NASHVILLE HARBOR

- Caroline Jones: *Good Omen*, Feb. 13. New album featuring rising radio single “No Tellin.” *Taste of Country* calls it “the most emotionally and lyrically nuanced collection of songs of her career so far.” In addition to her headline tour, she’ll join Zac Brown Band at the Sphere residency in January and February.

- Riley Green: “Don’t Mind If I Do,” out now. One of the biggest winners at the *CMA Awards* – Single, Song and Music Video for “You Look Like You Love Me” with Ella Langley. Platinum “Don’t Mind If I Do” is



in the top 5 at Country radio. "Headlining *Stagecoach 2026*, hitting the road with his *Cowboy As It Gets Tour*, and more to be announced soon, Green is keeping his foot on the gas at full speed," says SVP/Promotion & Marketing **Ryan Dokke**.

- **Greylan James:** "Water At A Wedding," out now. "The viral hit launched James to a new level, landing among the most-added at Country radio that week. Even pre-release, it amped momentum with 30k+ presaves, 10m+ teaser views and massive follower growth across his social platforms. Already a hit songwriter, Greylan is quickly establishing himself as one of the hottest up-and-coming stars in country music! Radio audiences are loving his storytelling and the callout research shows it in market after market!"

- **Brett Young:** "Drink With You," out now: Brett is continuing his 2.0 chapter with rising current single "Drink With You" (top 40 at Country radio). The album was named one of "Nashville's Best Albums of 2025" by *The Tennessean*. He will kick off 2026 with an 18-date U.S. tour.

- **The Band Perry:** "TBA," Q1: Recently achieving RIAA diamond status with "If I Die Young," the Grammy, CMA and ACM Award-winning group has been in the studio working on new music slated for early 2026.

QUARTZ HILL

- **Joe Nichols:** Chart-topping and multi-platinum selling Joe Nichols returns to Country radio with the first single from his 12th studio album due mid-year 2026. "An icon in the making, Joe has never sounded better," reports VPP **Will Robinson**.

- **Matt Cooper:** "Highs & Lows," out now. "This upbeat song about the highs and lows of life debuted as the No. 1 most added and continues to build momentum. Expect this to be the first of many big hits for Matt."

- **Lakelin Lemmings:** The 19-year-old singer/songwriter heads out on radio tour in February ahead of her debut Country radio single. "A powerhouse vocalist, this relatable, girl next door has been lauded as 'one of country's most promising new voices' by *Country Evolution*."

- **2 Lane Summer:** "The infectious, pop country harmonies of 2 Lane Summer's Joe Hanson and Chris Ray are on full display on their debut album coming in mid-2026."

RECORDS NASHVILLE

- **Ty Myers:** As "Ends Of The Earth" continues to grow at radio, Myers is preparing his next project. Look for new music in Q1, and a project to follow closely after that – "perfect timing as Ty heads out on the Luke Combs stadium tour," adds EVP **Josh Easler**.

- **George Birge:** With "It Won't Be Long" now solidly in the top 10, he is working on a new track for Q1 that will have "a superstar feature. More to be revealed very soon." Birge is embarking on a headlining tour in the spring.

- **Emily Ann Roberts:** "The excitement around Emily is palpable, and she is continuing in the studio making a ton of new music." Look for a full project in 2026, accompanied by a full touring schedule.

REPUBLIC

- **Kaitlin Butts:** Cover of Jimmy Eat World's "The Middle" off her new EP, *Yeehaw Sessions*, out now. "The cover you didn't know you needed ... a slow-crawling, reassuring stunner, wringing every bit of emotion out of each note" – *Garden & Gun*

REVIVER

- **Ian Flanigan:** He has been touring to support his latest album, *The Man My Mama Raised*, and has new music set to release Jan. 2026 and throughout the year.

- **Randall Fowler:** Multiple cuts on the latest Bailey Zimmerman release, and working on new music for Q2 2026.

- **Brooke Moriber:** Look for collaborations with The Heels and Brenley Brown, as well as additional music from Moriber in Q1 of 2026.

RISER HOUSE

- **Meghan Patrick:** *Golden Child: The Final Chapter* (Deluxe), out Jan. 9. "With 'Golden Child' pushing toward the top 20 and beyond and the deluxe edition of the album dropping Jan. 9, Meghan's momentum is unstoppable heading into 2026." – VPP **Jeff Davis**

- **Dillon Carmichael:** "She Gone," impacting now. "With 80+ stations on

to date, this single is country music for Country radio! The perfect lead track from *Keepin' Country Alive*."

SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

- **Luke Combs:** "Days Like These" has more than 130 stations supporting and will be a song you hear on his sold-out stadium dates this year. The fans were very vocal about this song and their passion for it. As Luke has done many times in the past, he listened to them and features it on his new album coming early 2026." – SVPP **Dennis Reese**

- **Megan Moroney:** "6 Months Later" is ready to take the top spot while "Beautiful Things" continues to climb the chart. New album *Cloud 9* (Feb. 20) and her new tour are both hitting early next year."

- **Old Dominion:** "Back on the radio with the sound that their fans love with 'Making Good Time.' The early research has been very strong."

- **Nate Smith:** "Back with another banger, 'After Midnight,' with Tyler Hubbard. Already seeing great fan reaction and closing in on 100+ stations in the first month, Nate looks to continue his domination at radio." "After Midnight" comes on the heels of four No. 1 songs in a row, including "World On Fire," which sat at the top for 10 consecutive weeks.

- **Corey Kent:** Back again, this time with Koe Wetzel for their edgy song "Rocky Mountain Low." This is the follow-up to No. 1 "This Heart," which was one of the most-played songs in 2025. He'll be out touring to



support his new music.

- The new year will also see releases from **Kane Brown**, **McCoy Moore**, **Dylan Marlowe**, **Mitchell Tenpenny**, **Kameron Marlowe** and **Zach John King**.

STONE COUNTRY

- **Spencer Hatcher:** "When She Calls Me Cowboy," out now. "Spencer's traditional sound mixed with his modern-day production creates a nostalgic feel that's fresh, contemporary, and undeniably country." – VPP **Will Robinson**

- **Ben Gallaher:** Recently named one of country music's top guitarists by *Taste of Country*, Gallaher's new single, "I'll Take You," is a three-minute, radio-ready earworm that perfectly showcases his skills."

- **Dusty Black:** Rising newcomer whose "soulful, country melodies reflect a deep-rooted family legacy" returns with the release of his debut Stone Country Records EP in Feb. 2026.

STONEY CREEK

- **Parmalee:** "Cowgirl," out now. "After four straight No. 1s, Parmalee will start the new year targeting the top of the charts on Jan. 5 with their fun, up-tempo single 'Cowgirl,'" tips VP/Innovation & Audience **Adrian Michaels**. "Q1 will see new music from country music's most-played band."

- **Jelly Roll:** Will look to continue his streak of No. 1s with his current single, "Amen," featuring Mr. Roll and Shaboozey, in early 2026. "Fresh off of a personal performance by Jelly for the Pope, 'Hard Fought Hallelujah' by Jelly Roll and Brandon Lake also continues to have strong streams, consumption and testing. 2026 could be a breakout year for that release. In addition, Jelly is in the studio preparing new music to release next year."

- **Drew Baldridge:** "Rebel," out now. "With the whole wide world wants to dance with

the devil/I guess you can call me a rebel." "Drew continues to be country music's good guy that everyone wants to see win by releasing an impactful single about being a good person." Look for Baldridge to be out on his headlining tour in early 2026.

- **Atlas:** "Devil Ain't Done," out now. "The Stoney Creek Records team is so excited about the launch of new artist Atlas. He is totally unique with a powerful voice and an even more powerful story to tell with 'Devil Ain't Done.' Atlas will cut through all the noise."

- **Both Drake Milligan and Lanie Gardner:** have "great new music and tours" planned for 2026.

TRIPLE TIGERS

- **Russell Dickerson:** Single "Worth Your Wild," out now. "The follow-up to global smash 'Happen To Me' keeps the energy up as he embarks on a headlining spring tour which takes him to his largest venues to date." – VP/National Promo **Raffaella Braun**

- **Scotty McCreery:** Starting the year in the studio to bring new music to the airwaves in Q1.

- **Shane Proffitt:** Single "Long Live Country," out now. New music is coming throughout Q1, including "heart-wrenching" track "You Can Do Anything," which Proffitt has been playing on an extensive radio tour.

VALORY

- **Thomas Rhett:** "Coming off the heels of his 24th No. 1, 'After All The Bars Are Closed' and a hugely successful *Better In Boots* headlining tour that included a sold-out show at Fenway Park, he will start the new year continuing his fast ascension up the chart with his current single 'Ain't A Bad Life' featuring Jordan Davis." – VPP **Chris Palmer** and SVP/Promotion & Digital **Ashley Sidoti**

- **Justin Moore:** Carries the follow-up to his 13th (and sixth consecutive) No. 1 single, "Time's Ticking," into the new year. This is the second from his latest studio album, *This Is My Dirt*. He will spend 2026 recording new music and supporting Riley Green's *Cowboy As It Gets* tour.

- **Preston Cooper:** "Celebrates an incredible introduction to Country radio that included his debut single, his debut album *Toledo Talkin*,' his *Grand Ole Opry* debut and supporting Riley Green's *Damn Country Music* tour. His first single, "Weak," is currently in the top 25 and climbing!"

- **Mackenzie Carpenter:** Caps off a year "fit for a Country Queen" with the release of her debut album, *Hey, Country Queen*, her debut single and touring with acts including Jordan Davis, frequent co-writing partner Megan Moroney and more. Her debut single, "I Wish You Would," featuring Midland continues its climb as she also works on new music for 2026.

- **RaeLynn:** Returns to the Valory Music Co. with three new songs and a Christmas EP. "She also enjoyed catching up with many radio friends while supporting Jason Aldean's *Full Throttle* tour." Look for more new music in 2026.

- **Aaron Lewis:** Busy in the studio working on "great new country music" and his headlining 2026 *American Tour*.

WARNER MUSIC

- **Dasha:** New music coming in Q1. "My EP *Anna* introduced the first half of my album," she says. "The second part, *Dasha*, out next year, will give fans more insight into who I am at my core. I hope everyone's excited to know Anna Dasha."

WARNER RECORDS NASHVILLE

- **Ashley McBryde:** (January) "Known for her vivid storytelling and ability to paint characters so clearly that you think you know them, Ashley's latest, John Osborne-produced studio album, surrounds her most intimate subject yet. Coming in 2026." – VP/Radio **Anna Cage**

- **Bailey Zimmerman:** "Chevy Silverado," out now. "Bailey Zimmerman is one of the most exciting new talents in the country music genre." – *Forbes*

- **Braxton Keith:** (January) "Braxton has developed through years of touring venues and dance-halls in Texas. But his classic country sound, laced with a modern edge, isn't just for dancing. Braxton brings thoughtful lyrics rooted in real-life experiences and we're excited to

introduce him to partners everywhere." – SVP/Radio & Commercial Partnerships **Kristen Williams**

- **Chase Matthew:** (January) "It was a milestone year for Chase Matthew, including a sold-out hometown Ryman show, a worldwide headline tour along with Keith Urban dates, and a multi-week No. 1! The new year is stacked with exciting music early 2026!" – Team WAR National Dir. **Michael Chase**

- **Cody Johnson:** "The Fall," out now. The 2025 CMA Male Vocalist of the Year winner "may have one of the ... best vocal styles in music overall. When he grounds his feet and sets his mind to it, he unleashes a stunning instrument that leaves his crowd in awe." – *Tennessean*

- **Cole Swindell:** "We Can Always Move On," out now. "Following his 13th No. 1 hit, Cole released the second single from his fifth studio album *Spanish Moss*. Swindell also recently hit No. 1 on the iTunes Country chart with the heartfelt, fatherhood-inspired song, 'Make Heaven Crowded.'" – Dir./Radio **Lou Ramirez**

- **Dan + Shay:** "Long Live Christmas," out now. "Dan + Shay's holiday release, 'Long Live Christmas,' reinforces their 'more nice than naughty' status. (Pro tip: check out the official music video). Responding to Country radio's demand, the duo is set to deliver brand new music in Q1 of 2026." – VP/Radio Accounts **Tom Martens**

- **Gavin Adcock:** "Never Call Again," out now. "Gavin is inside the top 40 at Country Aircheck with 250,000 tickets sold and 435M+ album streams for *Own Worst Enemy*. On tour with Morgan Wallen. White-hot. Let's go!" – Team WRN National Dir. **Paige Elliott**

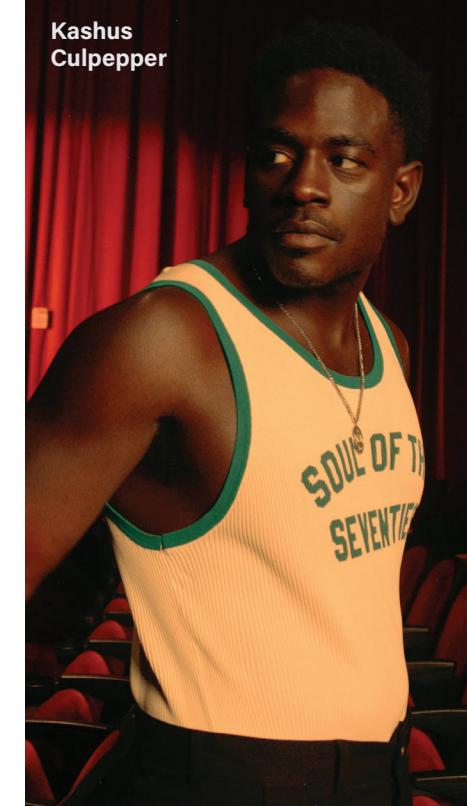
- **Hudson Westbrook:** "House Again," out now. "On the cusp of bona fide country music stardom." – *Rolling Stone*

WHEELHOUSE

- **Blake Shelton:** "Stay Country or Die Tryin'," out now. "Following his upcoming rise to the top of the chart with his current single, the superstar will release a soon-to-be determined new track to radio that will coincide with his Las Vegas residency." – VPP **Ken Tucker**

- **Alexandra Kay:** "Straight For The Heart," out now. "After selling out shows across the country for years, AK has arrived at Country radio. We look forward to expanding her fan base via her blooming relationship with radio."

- **Brantley Gilbert:** New music soon. "We're thrilled to be partnering with Brantley and Country radio on the next chapter of his impressive career. Look for amazing new music from the Georgia native in the coming months."



OTHER/UNSIGNED

- **Drew Parker:** New music soon. "Following the release of his debut Christian/Country song, 'Blame Jesus,' in 2025, Drew is opening his heart in a whole new way with a new chapter of music to come." – Shore Fire Media

- **Jackie Lee:** New music soon. The artist behind the "breakout hit" (*USA Today*) "Getting Over You," is back with new music in 2025 after a hiatus. – Shore Fire Media **CAC**

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JON LOBA

Culture, Curation & Community

Roughly 36 hours after Lainey Wilson was crowned CMA Entertainer of the Year, Jon Loba sat with Country Aircheck in BMG's Nashville office – built in 2018 at the Music Circle South address that had once been home to the CMA. Loba was last interviewed for this piece that year. At the time, he was still navigating BMG's 2017 acquisition of BBR Music Group. Eight years later, he's risen to President/Frontline Recordings for The Americas and BMG's operation is arguably the most stable among Nashville's top label groups.

CA: Congrats on a great night and week for your artists and your team. When did you know Lainey was a unicorn?

JL: I saw a glimpse of it in our first meeting at my office. We had an amazing conversation, she played acoustic and when I heard the tone of her vocal – her control was so precise. A few weeks later she was playing on Broadway during *CMA Fest* and on a floor below her a full band was playing with the volume way up. She played with just an acoustic guitar, tuned it all out, didn't make excuses and delivered a spectacular performance for 15 or 20 people. I saw her professionalism in that moment and also spent about an hour talking to her parents. I realized what salt-of-the-earth people they were with incredible work ethics. Combine her absolute natural talent and being raised in such an amazing atmosphere – I felt she was very special.

Speaking of awards night, did you look around the room at Bridgestone and think about how almost every other label in this town has flipped its leadership or gone through a major disruption recently except BMG?

Yeah. A few years ago during another leadership change, I told the staff this was our chance to build a dynasty. We are the label with the track record. We had the experience of going through leadership transitions – myself and the BMG acquisition. And I know that you're in a fog for a year-and-a-half at best, three years normally. So I told the staff that while everyone else is getting their house in order, we should put our foot on the pedal. If we stay hungry, humble and curious, we can build the dynasty.

At the same time, your job has shifted in a significant way. What's your week like and can I get a peek at your calendar?

You won't see any breaks. I tease my executive assistant that I'm going to have to get a colostomy bag because he doesn't even leave time for a restroom break. Now that I've taken on a greater role overseeing the other genres in North America, Mondays are in Nashville, tending to this business and making sure we're set up for the rest of the week. Some weeks I'm in Nashville the whole week. Often, though, as I'm trying to remake culture in Los Angeles, I'm out there. The interesting thing is I get as much L.A. business done when I'm in the Nashville office as I do Nashville business when I am in the L.A. office. With the way the coasts have come into Nashville and with country – no secret – hotter than ever, the opportunities when I'm out there are immense.

One of my hesitations in taking the position and why I didn't for a couple of years was because I didn't want anything to distract from what we were building in Nashville. As the genre expanded, it became pretty clear to me that the larger role could actually be additive to what we were doing in country. All of the major partners are engaged across formats, so I'm communicating with them more than ever. The creative collaborations and promotional opportunities are greater than ever. Part of our elevation in Nashville over the last year-and-a-half is a direct result of that bigger role I've taken on.

When you talk about shifting the culture in L.A., what does that mean?

As BMG moved back into recorded music in a substantial way, there had not been a radio focus in our other genres. So it was educating the teams out there about the importance of radio, how that can elongate and magnify hits for the artists, how it can build ticket sales and keep them rolling longer. Radio truly helps build longer term careers.

For years in Nashville we've had executives from other genres – whether it's the partner side or the record side – say that the community and relationships we have in Nashville are very special. It always struck me as strange for that to be a magnet for people wanting to be in our genre but then didn't occur in others. When I took this job, I wanted to prove that you could have that kind of culture outside of country. A lot of my mission is asking partners and staff, "Why can't we create that community? Why can't we create that closeness?" We don't need to do it genre wide, but let's start with BMG as an incubator.

We sign artists who buy into that partnership aspect of it. What we ask from everyone is to have the patience to build what we had at BBR. Hopefully, you end up with a legitimate fourth major to choose from that has less bureaucracy, is very responsive and cares about a long-term partnership beyond a first single.

The data flares that were driving signings the last few years aren't as obvious lately. Is that an algorithm change? Are signings happening before an artist even gets to that stage? Or has there been a philosophy shift in the signings arms race?

It feels as competitive as it always has been. What you're talking about is still working itself out. There's definitely an acknowledgement that social numbers and engagement don't necessarily translate to streaming success or ticket sales. But look at all the rosters around town. They are significantly larger than they were a decade ago.

It used to be your job as an artist was to get one of maybe 10 A&R executives excited about you. We would sign an act and spend a considerable amount of money trying to get them through the gatekeepers. In any given year, there were maybe 20 legitimate new acts we were competing with. Now, the consumer is making that choice. The question is how much time, money and development you can do when the consumer is ultimately making all of those decisions?

I do think there is a regression to the mean because there is so much traffic. Labels are realizing that one viral moment doesn't make you a true "capital A" artist. As I look at whether artists are differentiating themselves, I ask, "Do they have any type of touring base?" If not, are they out in a van or truck hustling, taking the hard knocks, honing their craft, figuring out who their audience is and developing their music further?



THE INTERVIEW

Is it still a 10-year town? Maybe not 10 years to get a shot, but 10 years to develop a full-fledged career? Or have we found shortcuts?

Every situation is different, but your chance of short circuiting that is much greater now, especially in country where it once took forever to become that star, but then you stayed there for a long time. That duration has been shortened as well if you don't keep bringing hit music

THE INTERVIEW

because there is so much competition. You better keep delivering, work your ass off and stay engaged. But yes, because of the direct-to-consumer nature, it can all happen quicker. Look at Jelly Roll's ascent.

Career longevity is where doing the relationship legwork in the industry makes a difference, right? If you've skipped those steps because you took off hot, when one of your songs doesn't hit, you don't have that belief and support to lean back on.

Without a doubt. That is so critical and what I spend an immense amount of time talking to artists in all genres about. When I first sit with an artist, I point to five or six arena acts and ask what they have in common. They are all obviously talented, but it was their work ethic – continuing to put in the work and, as important, treating those that helped them at the beginning the same way when they're on top of the mountain. As careers have their inevitable ebbs and flows, that helps you navigate, elongates the career and makes the downward descent more gradual. That's the beauty of this country community. I hope the gatekeepers and partners continue to acknowledge how beneficial that is for them as well as the artists. And I hope we continue to have artists smart enough to understand and put the time in – specifically with radio and streamers. Do you want a moment or do you want a career?

Where's the balance these days between social platforms, DSPs and radio, and how hard is it to keep up with where it is on a yearly or every quarterly basis?

There's a million measurement tools and it's easy to get into paralysis by analysis. Engagement on socials is going down as there are discussions about some of the mental health issues surrounding that. It'll never go away, but younger generations always rebel against what their parents did. At some point, the kids are going to go, "I can't believe my parents put every minute of their life – including what they ate – online for the world to see." Generation Alpha is pulling back from that. Not only is vinyl having a resurgence, but CDs. I heard in CRB board meetings that for the first time, applications to broadcasting schools are way up. Younger generations want a more personal, high-touch experience.

My 15-year-old stepdaughter and her peer group are starting to listen to full albums. They're discovering true artists instead of just a track here or there. For a passionate music guy like me, that's super encouraging. And it's an exceptionally exciting time for radio when you look at the flood of artificial artists on the streaming platforms. The importance of human curation – for radio and streaming – only increases. With so much noise and as busy as our world is, having a trusted programmer or station say they saw an early showcase by an artist and amplify their passion around that is a great thing. The consumer will respond to that sort of differentiation.

You're saying the personal endorsement is making a comeback?

I am on my soapbox all the time with radio saying, "If all you are doing is amplifying streaming hits, you are extinct. Nobody needs you. So go do what made radio and music great: Listen to music, find what you're passionate about and tell your listeners about it." By the way, that's going to benefit radio even more because it's easy for artists to think radio will play their song if it's having streaming success, so they don't have to work at that relationship. If radio is taking chances and showing passion, artists will want to get to know them more and want radio to know them. Even before the AI music flood you had a million new songs uploaded to streaming services every week. Gatekeepers become even more crucial in that atmosphere.

Likewise, touring becomes more important as authenticity is hard to fake in that setting.

Artists invariably want to know how to grow their socials. What are the levers? What are the tricks? There are some things around the edges, but at the end of the day it is about a hit song and that in-person touch. So I tell artists, figure out how to get on the road and build a following there. The people at your shows have socials, too. Even if it's 50 people, multiply by that. Back to radio, acoustic shows that bring in listeners and educate them about a new artist are a critical piece in the development process.

Hard to do when you only have a small handful of full time staffers in a cluster.

Without a doubt. One addendum to that radio piece in the context of a million song uploads a week: Expecting a brand new artist to have substantial streams right out of the gate can be very unrealistic. If I could say one thing to radio, it is that you'll see those streams when

you expose music in a daypart. Much like research, you have to give it a chance. Be the one who gets credits for building those streams. If the research or streaming numbers suck after your listener has legitimately heard it, get it out of there. But you're missing an opportunity if music decisions are about looking at a spreadsheet of what is and isn't streaming.

I hear you and agree, but devil's advocate: Labels have been pounding radio for years to prioritize streaming numbers in their music decisions and now you're telling a different story.

Historically, the label community has done an incredible job educating our partners. Before monitored airplay, all we cared about was getting a weekly report with a spin number. Then monitoring started and we wanted reality. We had real numbers from SoundScan and did a great job showing that sales mattered. Same thing with streaming. We did such a good job of talking about consumption, we now need to reintroduce nuance into that conversation. Like how difficult it is for new artists to reach certain streaming levels with so much product out there.

Established artists who are already in consumers' libraries have an advantage. Viral moments may happen here or there. But on balance, what are we missing at radio and even via streaming by not leaving room for passion and giving music a legitimate chance over a period of time so an audience can connect ... instead of microwaving everything? You're right. We preached and educated around streaming numbers, and now we've got to pull back from that. And guess what? That younger generation is already doing it. Now's the time to capitalize on that in all aspects of our business.



You beat me to the punch on radio opportunities and challenges. Same question for DSPs. What are they doing well and where would you like to see improvement?

They are an incredible platform for discovery. Once upon a time, the only way you were going to sell music was to get radio airplay. Today, labels not only have another avenue of discovery, but obviously every single stream is monetized from the go. It's a great revenue source in that sense. As DSPs have come to understand and appreciate the partnership aspect more and more, the relationships get better and they're paying more attention to the narrative.

What's frustrating for us is what's frustrating for them as well: The amount of product. Sadly, one of the worst jobs you could probably have in this town is being a streaming editor or label partner rep. At least for most of radio, somebody has to jump on a plane to see you. These poor DSP people here aren't just dealing with the labels. It's the manager, the publisher and the songwriter, too. Any given night they might have five things to get to, so I have great sympathy for how much is coming at them. I don't have a lot of criticism, though there are variations between the platforms on how algorithmically driven they are, so I would like to see maybe a bit more patience. If you're putting something at position 43 on a playlist, the chance someone gets that deep isn't great.

When we did this interview seven years ago, you said, "We're not signing any solo male acts for probably two years. Our format needs more solo males like a hole in the head." For decades assumptions were made that Country radio bigotry was the roadblock

to diversity in this format. Now that radio no longer dominates, we see data driven artist signings that are overwhelmingly solo and male. Thoughts?

First, I never believed radio was consciously not playing a more diverse slate of artists. They were keeping listeners tuned in based on the data they had. I always said it was incumbent upon us as a label community to offer more choices. That's where the quote came from. I wanted to offer a bigger menu. Because of streaming, there's definitely more opportunity outside of solo male artists. That is reflected in the narrative, too. You don't hear as much that radio or streamers are biased because the opportunity is there for listeners to choose and react. With Megan Moroney, Ella Langley and Lainey, there are strong females out there and there's a massive crop coming up behind them. The access is there to build an audience and bring something unique. The icons come from the fringes. If you've got a different sound or perspective, you're halfway home.

When we did this in 2018, the One October shooting was still very fresh. This year the community has experienced a lot of loss in different ways. How are we doing with our people and how do you view your role in supporting your team and beyond?

Mentally the world is more fragile than ever. We are living in such an echo chamber. The pace of change continues to accelerate politically, economically, socially and in this business. We're all trying to make sense of it, but I'm such an optimist that I think it's a chance to draw closer to each other. The tragedies we've had are opportunities for people to talk even more deeply and honestly about where their mental health is. The CMA initiative with Belmont University was born out of a lot of that tragedy and will make a tremendous difference in being able to walk into a one-stop shop and get help.

By the way, relying on each other and personal connection are themes that offer opportunity for our genre. As people seek comfort, tradition and authenticity in a society going through monumental changes, we can continue to tell stories around life and its struggles.

At the Hollywood & Mind event, your A&R head Katie Kerkhoven said you've built in creative time blocks for your staff. What are the nuts and bolts you're applying to help people navigate life and the business?

We've always been very open and communicative. That is step one. We have one team member whose father is going through end-of-life issues who I told to go home and stay home. The beauty that came out of COVID is knowing we can all work remotely when we need to. It's one thing to talk about the importance of family, it's another thing to put it into action. Another team member heard about that and made a point to say to me, "I love you and I love this place so much." People can say, "How do you run a company like that?" Because everybody binds together, picks up the slack and when that team member makes it through a crisis and comes back, they're more committed. So I do it selfishly for the staff member and selfishly for the company. Similarly, when someone passes, I hate calling to say, "I'm here if you need anything." I tell my family and the team here, don't give them a choice. Find out from their circle what they need and do it. Enough with the platitudes.

Am I right that you just got an MBA from Stanford?
No. I was in an executive MBA program at Bertelsmann, our parent company. We started at Babson College, moved on to Harvard, had sessions in Amsterdam and Berlin, and a week in person at Stanford was the final stop. Lectures and case work in person, and a lot of virtual learning in between. In a way, it's even more beneficial than your standard MBA. These schools are some of the best in the world and you would think they are similar, but one was very different. Not in a good way. I won't say which one, but if anyone is thinking about choosing a college or graduate program, I suggest auditing a day or two of classes before you make a decision.

Were there any learnings that were immediately applicable?

At Harvard there were so many case studies of current companies and I learned a lot of technical stuff. My big takeaway was confidence that I, our team and our larger company are on the right path. What we're practicing really is proven in academia. Our first week at Babson College they brought someone in to teach storytelling. No surprise being in this industry and specifically this genre, that class was very easy for me. But I was so impressed that I brought that professor in to work with our L.A. team. There was another speaker who did a course on sleep. His schedule wouldn't allow him to come in from Amsterdam, but I have taught facsimiles of it for the Nashville and L.A. staffs, and also to the CRB board.

You're a young man with a lot of runway, I'd think, but do you contemplate how long you want to keep doing this?

Of course. You always have an end date in your head. But if I mention it, those who are close to me tell me I'm out of my mind. They think I will be doing this in one way, shape or form till I'm dead. If I get really sick and I'm down for two or three days, their perspective really hits home because I tend to go crazy when I'm not engaged. So they're probably right.

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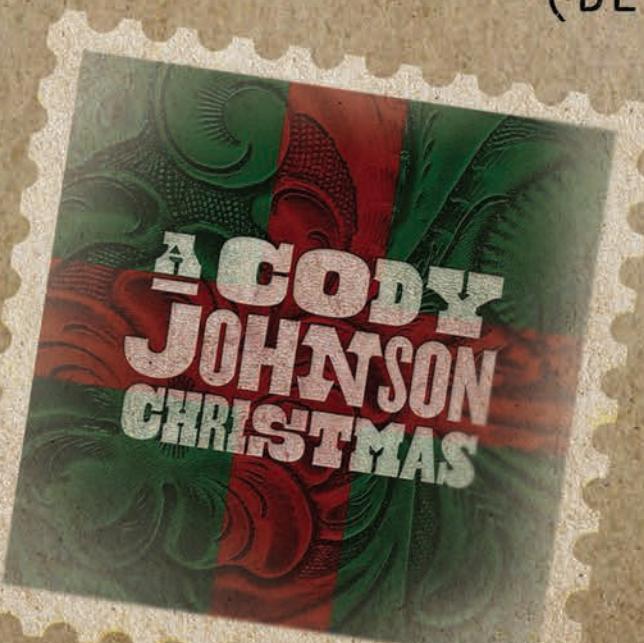
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