

CRS '26

DAILY BUZZ

March 20, 2026, Issue 3

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FEATURING "DEVIL AIN'T DONE"
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BBR STONEY CREEK BMC

MC-Yay At Ryman Lunch

"I'm just as surprised as you are that I'm back," joked second-year host and MCA/Nashville SVP **Miranda McDonald** at the 17th annual Live at the Ryman – the label group's first as the newly-rebranded MCA (see rejected logos next page). "What an unhinged year it has been," she said. "Not as unhinged as Parker McCollum's Instagram stories, but unhinged nonetheless." During the two-hour set, McDonald welcomed 16 MCA artists to the stage, featuring both fresh faces and seasoned vets.

49 Winchester opened the show with "Slowly" off their next album *Change Of Plans* and were followed by **Vincent Mason's** "What You Want." MCA's "very own California Cowboy" **Jon Pardi** performed "Boots Off." McDonald joked, "apparently, the only thing [he] likes more than a pair of boots is writing hits about them." This marks 10 years since "the other boots songs," Pardi objected: "Head Over Boots" and "Dirt on My Boots."

Kenny Whitmire made his Ryman debut with "I Gave Her the Moon," followed by **Jacob Hackworth's** new song "What Took You So Long." Prior to **Carter Faith** joining the stage, McDonald addressed the crowd by saying, "Last year, I feel I did you a disservice by not properly, emotionally briefing you for [Carter]'s debut performance at this event, where she earned an insane standing ovation." This year, she gave yet another emotional performance with "Six String," which was followed by **Tyler Hubbard's** unreleased song "Land." MCA Nashville's newest member, **Madden Metcalf**, took the audience to a place where he feels "most comfortable as an artist – the beach," with his song "Kind of Paradise." **Dalton Davis** hit the stage with "Blue," which will be out next month.

"Some matriarchal lines pass down things like recipes ... how to get that stain out ... pieces of jewelry... but mine is a little different," said **Kassi Ashton**. "I have to be honest, and I'm sure you know this from the title of the song, but this is not going to play on your station," she joked before



What Kinda Fan: MCA's **Parker McCollum** unveils the ACM Radio Award winners for On-Air Personality and Radio Station of the Year during CRS '26. Pictured (back, l-r) are WUBE/Cincinnati's **Jesse Tack**, WYCT/Pensacola's **Brent Lane**, the ACM's **Damon Whiteside**, McCollum, CRB's **RJ Curtis**, KSCS/Dallas' **Mike Preston** and **Al Farb** and WLFP/Memphis' **Chris Michaels**; (front, l-r) WUBE's **Anna Marie**, KFRG/Riverside's **Heather Froglear**, KEEY/Minneapolis' **Chris Carr** and WUSY/Chattanooga's **Greg "StyckMan" Owens**.

performing crowd-favorite "Bitches." "But that's alright because I'd be willing to bet this will play in your house."

Wyatt Flores' new song "Running On E" and **Parker McCollum's** "Solid Country Gold" followed. **Brothers Osborne** were joined onstage by an eight-person choir for their performance of "Watertown."

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Ashley McBryde

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CRACKER JACKED

Inspired by Cracker Barrel's infamous logo update, according to MCA's Damon Moberly, the label worked through a few iterations before landing on the final one at bottom. Pictured: Not Mike Harris.



Vince Gill played "a song I thought was appropriate" with his performance of "The Whole World." **NeedToBreathe** made their debut at an MCA event with "The Long Surrender," joking "I think we're being hazed going up after Vince Gill."

To close, **Keith Urban** performed a medley of songs off his upcoming album, which features Yacht Rock covers and one original track. He opened with the latter titled "We Go Back" and led into snippets of "On and On" [Stephen Bishop, 1976] and "Steal Away" [Robbie Dupree, 1980].
—Addie Morton

Disruption Junction

"The Disruptors: What If You Took A Risk?" made a compelling case for stepping out of the box Thursday morning (3/19). "If all radio is doing is magnifying streaming hits ... you're making yourself a dinosaur," said KYGO/Denver Dir./Operations **Brian Michel**, adding, "Radio has, in many cases, given up that [music] leadership position. That's one of the things that makes radio so special, and we've given it away. Radio [programmers were] the original tastemakers ... Take that back. That is within your power."

Cumulus VP/Country **Travis Daily** concurred, saying, "We shouldn't give a fuck what Spotify is doing." He also spoke about the chances



he's taking with WKDF/Nashville (more on that in [The Interview](#)). "Our competitors play the same 15 songs in a town where thousands are written every day," he said, touting that WKDF spins 80-100 album cuts on any given week, "and it's going really well."

iHeartMedia Strategic Advisor **Gregg Swedberg** noted that his company sometimes get a bad rap for not allowing its programmers to take risks, but said, "If you're passionate about something, you can do it," citing former WGAR/Cleveland PD Carletta Blake's successful efforts on behalf of artist George Birge. "You have to have the balls, the vision and the commitment to explain it," Swedberg said. "And it helps to be right."

Swedberg also suggested that the limited DSP data labels provide is not useful, as he wants to know how many people actually streamed the song, or skipped it. "We have no idea what [fans] really like because we

JOSH ROSS

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CURRENT TOP 25 SINGLE "HATE HOW YOU LOOK"**



don't get that information," he said. Daily, meanwhile, got a big laugh on that topic when he suggested a panel name for CRS 2027: "Playlisting algorithms and streaming fuckery."

Swedberg further lamented that there are artists from whom he can't even get liners, and expressed frustration about lag times between single releases from superstars. "The audience already has it, and we're sitting around pretending something is new a month later."

Music aside, Swedberg said stations can't win by being "bland, invisible and not community oriented." BMG Americas Pres./Frontline Recordings **Jon Loba** agreed, saying, "There is such a unique opportunity right now for radio to create a community."

The session was moderated by Country Aircheck's **Chuck Aly**. —Phyllis Stark

You Look Like You Love Me

Mutual respect and admiration were on display at "The Conversation with **Ella Langley** and **Jo Dee Messina**." Attendees got a glimpse into their friendship as they discussed dealing with expectations, the importance of knowing who you are, and changes in the industry. For instance, when Messina came to town labels only signed one female.

"Everyone I write with knows way too much," shared Langley. "I'm spilling the tea and I gotta write about something. Luckily for me, my life is an insane place to live." She went on to say that the success of "You Look Like You Love Me," despite being a non-traditional single, made her realize she could win by being herself.

They discussed religion, with Langley elaborating on a 2025 panic attack that renewed her faith. The conversation also covered Messina joining Langley at the Ryman, a brief



Jo Dee Messina and Ella Langley

duet of "Bye Bye," and an audience question about Messina's sculpted arms. Answer: she works out hard! Langley summed, "Country radio has been very kind to me. I feel like I've been spoiled." —Sarah Skates

Song Cycle: Hello, 'Darlin'

The trauma bonding behind Chase Matthew's No. 1 "Darlin'" came out late in his "Cycle Of A Song" session Thursday. "This song was dead in the 30s ... we were cooked," said Ignition's **Loyd Potts III**, who co-manages Matthew. He and WAR's **Michael Chase** admitted almost coming to blows in the Omni Nashville lobby as the team struggled to find airplay answers. "We were touring and selling tickets, but we didn't know if Chase's radio story was done or not," Potts said. Despite having gone top five with his debut single "Love You Again," Chase said getting "Darlin'" to No. 1 was "hand-to-hand combat."



Tim Foisset, Michael Chase, Ken Madson, Chase Matthew, Loyd Potts III, Rod Phillips

That fight included convincing iHeartCountry's **Rod Phillips** to attend a show, where he was impressed by audience response to the song. "Give me tempo and give me a hook and we'll play the crap out of it," he said. It didn't hurt that Phillips found Matthew easy to root for. And it helped that Spotify gave Matthew's team "an incredible data story to take to Rod," said the DSP's **Tim Foisset**.

For his part, Matthew said that in the midst of airplay struggles for "Darlin'," he and his team built and leaned on relationships, including a life pillar learned from his grandfather: "Leave people better than you

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TOP 5 & CLIMBING!
DYLAN SCOTT
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TOP 40
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CURB RECORDS



BRANTLEY GILBERT

GOOD DAMN

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IMPACTING COUNTRY RADIO 3/30



found them." He gave ultimate credit for his and the song's success to God. Ignition's Ken Madson moderated.
 -Chuck Aly

Protecting Mental Health

"Protect Your Assets: 20 Micro Actions For Resilience" included a breathing exercise from WLHK/Indianapolis PD **Sean Copeland**, who spoke about "compartmentalizing" his day. That exercise, coupled with a verbal, "I'm here," helps him transition from being a morning host into being a programmer, and then into being a husband as he pulls into his garage each night. "You really want to be present in each thing you're doing," he said.



Cheryl Mann, Elizabeth Porter, Christina Barsi, Sean Copeland

When stress overwhelms, Entertainment and Health Services Pres. **Elizabeth Porter** suggested disconnecting from devices and engaging in physical activity like a walk in order to "reset." When walking isn't an option, Avant

Haus Media CEO **Christina Barsi** said she spends five minutes coloring with crayons in a children's coloring book, noting it "does wonders."

Copeland, meanwhile, makes every Sunday a "disconnect day" where he tries not to touch his phone, also noting that he doesn't want or expect to hear from his staff during their own time off. Asked about stress red flags not to ignore, Porter said, "Listen to your body. If it's starting to give out on you, don't try to power through. Give it some grace and get some rest." Barsi, meanwhile, suggested paying attention to what part of your work is draining and what part is energizing, and try to strike a healthier balance between the two.
 -Phyllis Stark

What Makes Country Listeners Click?

The second of three CRS research panels was presented Thursday (3/19) by **Strategic Solutions Research (SSR)**. Titled "What Makes Country Listeners Click," the quantitative study of 1,500 country music fans, all of them radio listeners 18-54, found that two thirds said they listen to country music the most, but only 16% listen exclusively. Fifty-four percent called country music "a major part of their identity," and 52% said they're listening more to country now than six months ago.

But radio is far from their only source of music, with 79% reporting use of streaming services, 70% using YouTube and 41% getting music from social media. Among DSPs, Spotify leads, with 45% of those surveyed reporting they use it the most, followed by Pandora (21%) and Apple Music (19%). Listeners also said they prefer playlists curated by humans rather than AI by a margin of five to one.

Drilling down on terrestrial radio usage, 68% stream stations through a phone app and 38% say their favorite local radio station is Country. As for listening location, 42% listen most in their vehicles, 36% at home and 17% at work. Radio also serves as a music discovery tool, with 49% of those surveyed saying it's where they find new music, compared to 25% citing DSPs.

Asked why they love country music, respondents' top three answers were "uplifting and feel good," "storytelling and relatable lyrics" and "emotional connection." Strengths they perceive radio has over DSPs include a "sense of community" (41%), local personalities (36%) and local connections (31%).

Key perceived benefits of Country radio include (top five answers): Plays the best songs; real personalities, not AI generated voices; good variety of new and old music; helps you discover new music; and plays the best new country. Less important: "personalities broadcasting live" (No. 8) followed by "keeps you connected locally" (No. 9). SSR's **Kevin Cassidy** said this means the physical location of the host is less important to listeners than the content they deliver.

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if daddy says no
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“ When I heard 'Son of Jolene' I thought it was very clever. No one had ever thought of it that way. What a twist, and I'm proud to now be a small part of this version. ”

– DOLLY PARTON

Son of Jolene

Belles with Dolly Parton



IMPACTING 4/20

CRS PERFORMANCES:

Wednesday 3/18 - 2:00 & 4:30

Thursday 3/19 - 2:30 & 4:30

Friday 3/20 - 10:30

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Among respondents, 41% said radio stations are “fun and spontaneous,” but nearly one in five (17%) said radio has become “too conservative or predictable.” Asked what they’d change about radio, 23% want more music variety, 20% percent want fewer commercials and 15% said more contests. The full study, along with video from the CRS presentation, will be posted on CountryRadioSeminar.com in the coming days.
 —Phyllis Stark

This Is My Town

“Get Local: It’s Easier Than You Think” welcomed WKLI/Albany, NY’s **Marissa Lanchak**; WBKR/Owensboro, KY’s **Chad Benefield**; WYCT/Pensacola’s **Brent Lane** and moderator **Sarah Kay** of WQMX/Akron. They addressed the importance of fostering relationships, shared strategies and agreed that correct pronunciation of local landmarks is crucial.

Involvement in events such as parades and fundraisers are important. “Show up and show out,” said Benefield, who ate 20 hamburgers in 10 days for Owensboro’s burger week. “I’m now on biological grade warfare Prilosec,” he said. Service projects are another opportunity. “Through that stewardship you get to help shape the community,” said Lane, a longtime board member of Manna Food Pantries. “Plus, you don’t want them to ask the other guy to do it.”



Sarah Kay, Brent Lane, Marissa Lanchak and Chad Benefield

From her home studio in upstate New York, Lanchak can be heard on 10 different stations. She checks multiple news sites daily to stay aware of news in each town and focuses on being accessible and responsive on social media.
 —Sarah Skates

Memphis’d Up As Me

Thursday’s (3/19) “The Power of Music and a Mission” featured **Keith Urban** and iHeartCountry’s **Gator Harrison** sharing their personal connections to **St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital**, and highlighted the Country radio community’s longtime involvement. “Your stations are part of that feeling of hope, because of your fundraising and support,” Harrison told the radio pros in the room.



Randy Owen with Keith Urban

Randy Owen made a surprise appearance to present The Randy Owen “Angels Among Us” award to Urban, who has been visiting the hospital since 1998. “You my friend, Keith, have played so many acoustic sets at St. Jude,” he said. “When you came to St. Jude I became an even bigger fan.” Added Urban, “It’s extraordinary. I’m one of the infinite links in the chain and glad to be part of it. The spirit of the families is what it’s all about. There’s nowhere like it.”
 —Sarah Skates

Metrics & Momentum

Finding the story worth telling in the data was a theme during Thursday’s “Nielsen Schmielsen” panel. “The holy grail is finding records that stream and research at radio,” said Records Nashville’s **Josh Easler**. Absent the rare cases when analytics line up perfectly, sorting data requires

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 “DEVIL AIN’T DONE”

BBR MUSIC GROUP STONEY CREEK BMG



Pre Haw: Sony Music Nashville's **Zach John King** at the label's PreRS event at Losers. Pictured are **Ken Robold, Larry Santiago, Christy Garbinski, Dan Nelson, Dennis Reese, King, Jansen Morgan, Bo Martinovich, Ali O'Connell, Anna Widmer, Nicole Walden** and **Mallory Michaels**.

perspective. WME's **Lindsey Dodge** offers the company's agents ammo by keying on "growth analytics" over comparisons to other artists. Chartmetric's **Chaz Jenkins** says his company's robust data sometimes undermines conventional thinking: "The perception is that country is one of the fastest growing genres, [but] what we found is country actually performing underneath the [broader music] market." MTheory's **Ed Rivadavia** moderated.

-Chuck Aly

The Day Ahead

Friday, March 20

7:30-8:45am

Women's Networking Breakfast

Michelle Buckles, Sloane Cavitt Logue, Heather Froglear, Katie Neal, Jen Morgan, Tay Hamilton, Stephanie Wagner, Lauren "LT" Thomas, Jamice Jennings, Rakiyah Marshall, Kathleen St. Clair, Jess Tomlins, Amber Anderson, Ashley Wilson, Patti Diaz, Bryce Gravitt, Tracy Martin
Acoustic, Level 4

8am-5pm

CRS Registration Open

Broadway Hallway

8am-3pm

Exhibitor Booths Open

Jewel Box Platinum, Coleman Insights, Exostage, Strings For Hope, Pat Boone's Gold Label, Music Master
Level 2, Broadway Hallway

8am-5pm

The Row Open

Riser House, St. Jude Juice Bar, CMA, Texas Red Records
Level 2, Broadway Hallway

8:30am-4pm

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Espresso Bar Open

Music Row Room 4

8:50-9:40am

Embracing the Change: Country Is Cross-Pollinating and That's Okay

Steve Knopper, Heather Vassar, Emily Cohen Belote, Alissa Pollack
Legends Ballroom D-G

8:50-9:40am

Lead Me Like You Mean It: Intently Crafting an Environment for Future Leaders

Allison Warren, TJ Taormina, Dawn Ziegerer, Mia Jones
Legends Ballroom A-C

9-9:40am**Workshop Alley: AI - Efficiency Tools**

Phil Becker
Music Row Room 1

9-10am**Workshop Alley: 360° Jock - Fix Your Feed**

Bo Matthews, Izzy Guit
Music Row Room 3

9am-Noon**St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Juice Bar Open**

Level 2, 5th Ave. Hallway

9am-5pm**Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum Access**

Show your badge for one complimentary museum admission
Country Music Hall of Fame

9:45-10:25am**Workshop Alley: AI - Creative Tools**

Nick Steele
Music Row Room 1

10-10:30am**Workshop Alley: 360° Jock - Boosting Your Leverage In Contract Talks**

Denise Shackelford
Music Row Room 3

10-10:50am**Workshop Alley: Cycle Of An Ad - Everyone Is In Sales**

Sarah Frazier, Dina D'Addario, Kari Stoddard, Bobby Bowen
Acoustic, Level 4

10-11am**CRS Research Series: The Music Test (presented by NuVoodoo)**

Legends Ballroom D-G

10:30-11am**Workshop Alley: 360° Jock - From Sold To Sound: Imaging & Promos**

Neil Wilson, Jess Jennings, Cowboy Kyle
Music Row Room 3

10:30-11:10am**Workshop Alley: Prompt Writing**

Stan Marczewski
Music Row Room 1

11-11:30am**Workshop Alley: 360° Jock - Breaks That Land: Relatable, Real, Zero Cliches**

Emily Harlan
Music Row Room 3

11-11:50am**CRS Presents Jelly Roll with Humanitarian Award**

Legends Ballroom D-G

11:15-11:55am**Workshop Alley: 30 Tech Tools In 30 Minutes**

Clay Walker
Music Row Room 1

11:30am-Noon**Workshop Alley: 360° Jock - Make The Music Work For You: Music Scheduling**

Nikki Thomas
Music Row Room 3

11:45am-Noon**Pre-Lunch Performance ft. Lucie Tiger** (Sponsored by 2120 Music)

Broadway Hallway

12-1:50pm**Lunch and Performance (Sponsored by Big Machine Records/ Nashville Harbor Records & Entertainment)**

Mackenzie Carpenter, Cole Goodwin, Naomi Carman, Greylan James, Caroline Jones, The Band Perry, The Jack Wharff Band
Broadway Ballroom

12:30-8:30pm**Country Western Photo Booth Open**

Omni Lobby Near Elevators

2-2:50pm**Creative Talent: Why "Playing It Safe" Is the Death of Your Radio Career**

Phil Becker, Katie Neal, Woody of *The Woody Show*, Greg Beharrell
Legends Ballroom A-C

2-2:50pm**The New R&R: Roles and Relationships** (sponsored by FAM)

Justin Cole, Matty Jeff, Moranda McDonald, Chris Fabiani, Marci Braun
Legends Ballroom D-G

3-3:50pm**It's Not the Size That Matters: It's How You Use It**

Clay Hunnicutt, Scotty Lindy, Allyn Walker
Legends Ballroom D-G

3:30-4:20pm**Cycle of a Song: Koe Wetzel "High Road"**

Josh Easler, Gemma McInturff, Chad Rufer, Jeb Hurt, Ben Maddahi, Koe Wetzel
Legends Ballroom D-G

4:30-6pm**Quartz Hill/Stone Country Ball In The Hall**

Country Music Hall of Fame BMI Hall, 4th Floor

4:30-6:30pm**Tennessee Songwriters Week Showcase**

Barlines

5-6:30pm**New Faces Cocktail Reception**

Broadway Hallway

6:30-10pm**New Faces of Country Music**

Kelsey Hart, Ella Langley, Chase Matthew, John Morgan, Meghan Patrick, Josh Ross (Host: Elaina Smith)
Broadway Ballroom

Saturday, March 21**9am-5pm****Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum Access**

Show your badge for one complimentary museum admission
Country Music Hall of Fame

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