

DARIUS RUCKER

It's a voice that needs no introduction. Darius Rucker's soulful, rich baritone instantly resonates as a comforting companion in this journey we call life.

On LEARN TO LIVE, his first project for Capitol Records Nashville, Rucker has created a work that is steeped in the country traditions of meaningful lyrics and resonant melodies, yet sounds completely modern.

As the best country albums do, LEARN TO LIVE takes the listener on a trip. The album's arc covers major life themes such as falling in love, birth and death. "This CD is a journey," Rucker says. "I realized I'm 42. I'm not going to write many songs about drinking, chasing girls or booty calls. I was going to write songs about having kids and stuff - songs about life."

Guests on the album include Brad Paisley on the humorous "All I Want" and Vince Gill and Alison Krauss on the inspirational "If I Had Wings." "Brad just showed up in jeans and a t-shirt. To me, he's one of the best guitar players around," Rucker says. Gill and Krauss made Rucker, the ultimate fan, dizzy with delight. "They sounded like angels. You have these two artists singing on top of my voice . . . it gave me chills."

Rucker has always had a close kinship to country music and country artists. "Growing up in South Carolina, it was always around, always on the radio," he says. First an acolyte of Buck Owens, Rucker naturally gravitated towards Dwight Yoakam, New Grass Revival and Radney Foster in his twenties. "When I first heard Radney's voice on Foster & Lloyd's 'Crazy Over You,' I thought, 'this guy's voice is bigger than Texas.' I'm thinking, 'this is cool songwriting.' "

Rucker's career path veered first into pop as the lead singer/co-writer for the wildly successful Hootie & the Blowfish. The Grammy-winning group's 1994 debut, CRACKED REAR VIEW, is one of the best-selling albums in history, surpassing the 16 million album mark.

Fans of the band, many of whom have made the natural migration from pop to country radio, realize that Hootie & the Blowfish's catchy songs were rooted in the same elements that make great country music. In fact, Rucker says, "I begged the guys in Hootie to be a country band, and I just got outvoted!" Therefore, making his first country CD was not so much a big leap for Rucker as simply a slight shift in Rucker's musical evolution. As *Billboard* magazine noted, "*There's a sense of purpose that makes Rucker feel like a member of the country family, rather than an interloper...Sounds like country may have a shining new star.*"

As a student of great songwriting, Rucker earned his advanced degree while working on LEARN TO LIVE. "Writing with those songwriters was like going to Songwriting University," he says. His professors/co-writers included such legendary writers as Rivers Rutherford (Brad Paisley, Tim McGraw, Gretchen Wilson); Frank Rogers (Brad Paisley, Trace Adkins) and Clay Mills (Diamond Rio, Reba McEntire). "So many people in pop try to write all these psychedelic crazy lyrics, and I'm sure I've been part of that - but that's something you don't find in country music. The thing I like most about country songs is that they keep it simple. I love that, and I love the melodies."

Fellow South Carolina native Rogers also served as the album's producer, a job he secured immediately after meeting Rucker: "In the first 30 minutes, we wrote 'All I Want.' The label asked if I wanted to meet the other [potential producers] and I said, 'Never mind. I met my guy'."

The success of first single, the bittersweet "Don't Think I Don't Think About It," shows that Rucker had country fans at hello. The single, co-written by Rucker with Clay Mills, soared into the top 15 at radio even more quickly than anticipated. "It just breaks your heart," says Rucker of the song. "And it was country enough that it wouldn't be perceived as me being pop and just putting fiddle on a song."

That song and the universal emotion it evokes typifies the stripped-bare nature of LEARN TO LIVE. "I want people to take away a sense of realness," Rucker says. "I want everybody to find a song on it that they can relate to and go, 'Wow, I did that, too.' "

For Rucker, the welcome mat that country radio has laid out for him has been extraordinarily gratifying. "The reception has been unbelievable," he says. But smart programmers know that teens raised on Hootie are now confirmed country listeners, so hearing Rucker is like hearing an old friend. "People listen to country music because they know it's where you can find *songs*."

While Hootie & the Blowfish are an ongoing project, Rucker's solo career is taking center stage for the foreseeable future. He is devoted to promoting LEARN TO LIVE. "We're taking a long time off," he says. "It's not, 'make one record and go back to Hootie,'" Rucker says. "I'm making country music."

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