



Phil Vassar: *Traveling Circus*

Over the course of the past decade, Phil Vassar's unbounded energy and limitless talent have proven him, again and again, as one of Nashville's most prolific and versatile stars. "You have to wear many hats," Phil says, "when you're writing songs, playing, singing, producing. But I love being involved in all facets of music." It is this hands-on approach that's made Vassar a hands-down success as a songwriter, singer, musician, performer, and producer. His resume boasts six #1 hits for country artists including Alan Jackson, Tim McGraw, Jo Dee Messina, and Collin Raye, and three more as an artist in his own right. He's been named the ASCAP Songwriter of the Year twice and has taken top honors from the Academy of Country Music, *Billboard* and *MusicRow*. Now releasing his sixth album, *Traveling Circus*, Vassar approaches his uniquely piano-based, rhythm and blues-infused, infectious buoyant brand of country music from the back-to-basics school of thought.

After co-producing his breakout debut album, *Phil Vassar*, which was RIAA certified gold and gave rise to his first #1 hit "Just Another Day In Paradise" in 2000, Vassar continued to work with such heavyweight producers as Byron Gallimore, Frank Rogers, Dan Huff and Mark Wright for his next three studio albums. But when it came time to begin cutting songs for the upcoming album, Phil felt that the time was right to fly solo for the first time. "This is my album," he states. "This time around, it's just me. Writing, mixing, mastering, playing—I was there for every second. It feels much more a part of me."

Throwing convention to the wind and staying true to his own taste, Phil bypassed traditional Music City session players and hired his road band to play on *Traveling Circus*. While the band had played on some of Phil's *Greatest Hits: Vol. 1* album, and had become his go-to guys for demo work, never before had Phil used them for a full album of original material. "I just always loved the way my demos sounded, and I love my guys. They're the best," Phil explains. "Plus, there's something I always liked about Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, the Elton John Band, these guys who really stuck together and were loyal to their band in and out of the studio. I respect that." What's more, Phil found that his road band, who contribute so much to the frenetic creative energy of his legendary live shows, were much better equipped to capture his concert sound than hired session musicians would be.

With his road band, and friends, on board, Vassar had the opportunity, for the first time in his career, to really get lost in the studio. Over the course of five

months, Phil—enamored with the killer drum and bass acoustics—booked Quad Studios in Nashville for days at a time. Free of ticking time clocks, Phil was able to cut several songs, 11 of which ultimately made the album. “My guys really wanted to be there,” Phil says, “they really wanted to play. So we had the chance to experiment a lot. Sometimes things didn’t work and sometime they did; in other places we really hit our stride.” Looking back, Phil recognizes this recording experience as one of the most rewarding of his career. Above all, he enjoyed an unprecedented level of control—right down to the single selection.

Lead single “Bobbi With An I,” an unusual depiction of an outrageous small-town cross-dressing linebacker, “would never have made it to country radio if I hadn’t sent it out myself,” Phil says. A longtime favorite at live shows, the song met with early enthusiasm at radio, validating Phil’s hunch that “everyone’s sick of hearing about the economy. We all know it’s bad. Let’s just lighten up, have some fun... at least for the summer.” The song is indeed pure fun, inspired by a real-life acquaintance of Phil’s who “showed up at a club one night dressed as a girl. It was just a funny way to pick up chicks. And women were all over him!” Phil laughs. “So often in country music you hear ‘I’m so country,’ ‘She’s so country’—everybody wants to define what ‘country’ is, and if you’re different from that, you’re a freak. I don’t think it has to be that way,” he says. “So we live and let live/That’s how it is/Nobody gives a second thought these days” goes the song, promoting a message of tolerance and acceptance that’s winning over a broad spectrum of country music fans from all walks of life.

Vassar’s status as somewhat of a country music outsider makes him a fitting ambassador for such a message. “When I was trying to make it,” Phil recalls, “I had label heads literally tell me I would have to put on a hat and start playing guitar, but I always stuck to my guns. Piano sounds are very important to me, and I’ve always wanted to put them out front.” With *Traveling Circus*, and especially the closing track “Where Have All The Pianos Gone,” Phil enjoys the last laugh as Nashville’s preeminent piano man. Co-written and performed with James Slater, the tune laments the lack of Billy Joels, Stevie Wonders, Elton Johns and Ray Charleses in contemporary music, reminiscing how such music “Spoke to me with soul and a melody/The rhyme and the rhythm, I’d sing along with ‘em/On my back porch, I carried the torch.” Vassar continues to carry the torch throughout *Traveling Circus*, his passion for piano decidedly unrestrained. And at this stage in his life and career, Phil’s clearly enjoying himself.

While writing and recording his previous album, *Prayer Of A Common Man*, Vassar was experiencing the heartache of divorce, which surfaced in the album’s darker, more introspective mood. “You write where you are in your life,” Phil says. “Things fester, and inevitably show up in your writing. But you eventually move past things, and the new album has a greater sense of peace to it.” A Craig Wiseman co-write, “A Year From Now,” epitomizes that. Looking beyond the turmoil of a break-up to “A year from now I’ll think about the best of times/And

not the love we left behind every time you cross my mind,” the song offers a refreshingly positive spin on the loss of a relationship.

Co-written alongside Jeffrey Steele, “Everywhere I Go” echoes that theme. “Even at the end of a relationship,” Phil reflects, “you can always see the good that’s left behind. You’ll look at your kids, and see some of your ex in them, and that’s really a special thing.” Phil’s own daughters, Haley, 10, and Presley, 5, provided the inspiration for “She’s On Her Way,” one of the album’s most poignant tracks. “I remember sitting in the waiting room while Haley was being born,” Phil says, “and this older man came up to me and said, ‘Congratulations. Your daughter is the one woman you’re going to love unconditionally for the rest of your life.’ I could hardly keep from bawling the entire time I wrote this song, because he was absolutely right. No matter what happens, she’s my daughter.”

While not tugging at the heartstrings, Vassar just wants to have a good time. Setting the mood with the funky groove of, “Save Tonight For Me,” Phil makes it clear he’s ready to get down to the business of having some fun. Whether turning lemons into “Lemonade,” forgetting all his troubles in “Tequila Town” or dealing with life’s mysteries in “Life,” Phil’s having a party and everyone’s invited. He definitely has something to celebrate. “It’s been a lot of fun, going into the studio again, being creative, and really getting my hands dirty. I spent a lot of time on this album, and I think it shows.” Firmly in the driver’s seat of his own career, he has perfected his signature sound while venturing into new territory as a songwriter, an artist, and producer. “This is not just another project for me,” Phil says. “This is my best album yet.”

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