



DUSTY DRAKE

Dusty Drake – At a Honky-Tonk Near You

Biography

Brawny, charismatic Dusty Drake has proven himself as a hit songwriter, a dynamic stage entertainer and a popular television personality — now he's gunning for radio stardom.

"I've never wanted fame and fortune," says Drake. "I just want a shot. I just want my day in court."

Now he has it with "Say Yes," a gorgeous wedding ballad that showcases his expressive, robust voice. Modern country music has given us such classics as "Could I Have This Dance," "Forever's as Far as I'll Go," "From Here to Eternity," "I Do" and "If You Ever Have Forever in Mind." But it has been nearly a decade since the genre had a wedding song as powerful as "Say Yes."

"I've been going around to radio stations playing my new album, and what's rising to the top is this song," comments Drake. "It's written by Brett James and Don Schlitz -- who is not new to this how-to-write-a-hit-song thing -- and Josh Turner. Brett came in and sang all the background vocals, and he sounds just awesome."

Dusty Drake is no stranger to writing hits, himself. He cowrote the 1996 Joe Diffie single "C-O-U-N-T-R-Y," as well as tunes recorded by Mark Chesnutt, Ricochet, Janie Fricke, Oak Ridge Boys and others. He also cowrote his forthcoming Big Machine Records CD's title tune, the rocking "At a Honky-Tonk Near You."

It's a collection infused with the performer's trademark grit and passion. Drake is equally at home belting raucous party anthems and softly caressing tender laments.

"My wife's always said I'm a balladeer. But I grew up honky-tonking, playing Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard and Brooks & Dunn. I like getting rough and raucous and dangerous. I'm all that stuff. I like going out on that stage and kicking butt, then slowing it down and doing a ballad.' I want to do both. Why can't I do both?"

He can and does on Dusty Drake at a Honky-Tonk Near You. Country tunes don't come much more lathered up than "Shortcut to a Longneck." But he also wrings every drop of emotion out of the heartbreaking "How's Your Mom and Them." Whatever the tempo, this is a singer-songwriter of striking authority.

His oversized talent is matched by his physique and larger-than-life personality. Since he stands 6'2" it's pretty hard to miss Dusty Drake. Then there's the earring through his left lobe, the tattoo of his wife's lip print on his left bicep, the tattoo of a tornado on his right bicep, his long hair and the sideburns. He looks like the biker he is. Drake is also an avid outdoorsman who hunts and fishes.

His natural flair for story telling, droll sense of humor and outgoing nature make him a charming interview subject. Those skills also landed him hosting duties on the weekly Turner South macho-movie cable series True Grit in 2003 and 2004.

“We got a call from someone down at the channel saying, ‘We’re looking for a country act who’s a male tough guy. Would you be interested in going down and auditioning?’ I said, ‘You get me in the building, and I’ll get the gig.’ So they asked if I had a ‘reel’ [clips of his TV work]. I said, ‘I got a rod and a reel.’ I had never done any TV whatsoever. Anyhow, I did the audition and got the job. It ran every Sunday night for a year and it was a blast.”

As his song says, “Not Bad for a Good Ole Boy.” An Atlanta TV studio is a long way from Monaca, PA, a small city of 6,000 on the Ohio River near the West Virginia border. His dad is a steel worker. His grandfather was a coal miner. Drake is the middle child of seven siblings. To keep the large brood amused, his parents bought various musical instruments. Records by Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, George Jones and other country favorites were everywhere.

The boy’s seventh-grade teacher noticed he could sing and coached him for a solo role in the school’s spring show. He loved the applause and was hooked for life.

“After that, it didn’t take long. I started playing drums. I played my first club gig with a band when I was 13. I just fell in love with music. When I was 16, I started playing regularly in bands. I have played in a band every year since then, with the exception of one, the year I met my wife, Maria.

“At the time, I was working at a cement company. Mom was done raising us and had gone back to school to study nursing. Maria was in the same school, and they started studying together. I walked in from work and went, ‘There’s a babe in the living room with Mom. What’s up with that?’”

One evening, Maria volunteered to go fishing with him. Love bloomed between the fishing buddies. They married in 1989. He went back to school and became an air-traffic controller at the Beaver County Airport. He also resumed making music. With his band Silverado, Drake became a star country attraction in the Tri-State area of Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. A show promoter misidentified him as being named “Dusty” instead of “Dean,” his real name. Eventually, the nickname stuck.

By this time, Drake had swapped his drumsticks for a guitar and had begun writing songs. Maria repeatedly urged him to give Nashville a try. They finally moved to Music City in March 1993. At their first visit to a songwriters’ showcase, Craig Martin sang his then-unknown “Don’t Take the Girl,” and Drake burst into tears.

“I looked at my wife and said, ‘I am so sorry.’ She said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘I have never written anything that is even in that ballpark, not even close.’ This guy is singing something that good in a dump to seven people. We left good jobs, friends and family. At that moment, I could have chosen either to be defeated or to be inspired. I went, ‘I want to write a song like that.’

“I knew there was a brick wall in Nashville the size of Montana. I think two things kept us here. The first was complete ignorance. I couldn’t find Music Row with a map. I didn’t have a clue. The other thing is that Nashville has a way of endearing itself to you. I never felt so much ‘at home’ as I did when I went to my first songwriters’ night. Nashville is like a mom, ‘Let me hear you sing, honey. Have some more pie, now.’”

Within three years of his arrival Dusty Drake was recording “demos” of his and others’ tunes, getting his songs recorded and attracting attention with his live performances. But he was still making ends meet by delivering pizza.

“I was the living example of that old Nashville joke: How do you get a songwriter off your porch? Pay him for the pizza.”

Drake signed his first recording contract and his singles began hitting the charts in 2002. Although an unknown, he was chosen as an opening act for a Brooks & Dunn tour. In 2003, he issued the startling “One Last Time.” The saga of a passenger saying farewell to his wife as the plane goes down had echoes of Flight 93 that resonated strongly with listeners. It cracked the top-20 on the country chart and led to the release of his debut CD, an opening-act slot for Kenny Chesney and Dusty Drake’s Grand Ole Opry debut later that year.

“I can’t really explain how important being on the Opry felt to me. I went out there early to touch the floor, look at the mic stands and see all the things you’ve seen on TV. You see all these stars that you recognize, just walking this way and that. It’s like stepping into a movie. You become a part of it, instead of being the observer.”

Another highlight for the Pennsylvania-raised Drake was singing the National Anthem at the Pittsburgh Steelers game that commenced the winning streak leading the team to the 2005 Super Bowl championship. Back home in Nashville, he began working on an album without any record label’s backing. Drake doesn’t know how, but a copy reached the desk of Big Machine Records executive Scott Borchetta.

“He called me up and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Making music.’ He said, ‘You need to be on the radio, dude. Come see me. Let’s make this happen.’” Together they finished the album that will be released to country music fans later this year.

“I just love to sing,” says Dusty Drake. “That’s what I’ve always wanted to do. I sing in the car, the shower, everywhere. I just can’t help it.”

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