

billboard Country Update

BILLBOARD.COM/NEWSLETTERS

FEBRUARY 24, 2023 | PAGE 1 OF 12

BILLBOARD COUNTRY UPDATE

Tom.Roland@billboard.com



Neon Union, 2 Lane Summer Bring New Level Of Multiracial Harmony To Country

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Parker McCollum Has 'Handle' On Top 10
>page 4

Brad Paisley Release Aids Ukraine
>page 8

Makin' Tracks: Dustin Lynch Blasts 'Confetti'
>page 10

Country Coda: Kelsea Ballerini's No. 1 'Legends'
>page 12

When multiracial duo **Neon Union** tweeted for the first time on May 4, 2021, the post included emojis of white and black hands fist-bumping.

Now the musicians, North Carolina native **Andrew Millsaps** and Miami-bred **Leo Brooks**, are locked arm in arm professionally, turning heads as one of two biracial twosomes in a genre that doesn't have much experience with blended groups and duos. Their first single is appropriately titled "About Damn Time."

"I don't think we ever really set out to make a statement necessarily," says Millsaps. "With me and Leo, we always kind of put the music first. But it's definitely a cool thing. I guess it's a little bit of a statement without actually trying to make a statement."

Jimmie Allen paired up Neon Union in a move reminiscent of the way in which former Arista Nashville chief **Tim DuBois** established **Brooks & Dunn**: by forging a musical relationship between two solo acts.

Earlier in February, Allen's producer, **Ash Bowers**, likewise announced his company, Wide Open Music, had signed another

biracial duo, **2 Lane Summer** — consisting of **Chris Ray** and **Joe Hanson** — to a publishing and management deal.



It's a sign of progress for the conservative genre, which has become more conscious of its historic lack of diversity in the commercial ranks. It's likely the first time that two multiracial duos have actively pursued mainstream country careers.

"It's a movement going on," Ray says. "Everyone just wants to do music that they love to do, you know. You don't have to be a set color to sing country music."

The positive trend for Black and biracial acts has received much publicity. Country rosters include **BRELAND**, **Tiera Kennedy**, **Kane Brown**, **Chapel Hart**, **Darius Rucker**, **Madeline Edwards**, **The War & Treaty** and **Willie Jones**.

But black-and-white duos and groups are rare. A few individual acts have collaborated for one-off pairings that became hits over the last 40 years — including **Willie Nelson** and **Ray Charles**, **Alabama** and **Lionel Richie**, **Earl Thomas Conley** and **Anita Pointer**, and **Blanco Brown** and **Parmalee** — but long-term

NEON UNION: FORD FAIRCHILD

AUTHORITATIVE INTELLIGENCE.
DELIVERED DIGITALLY.

billboard

DIGITAL NEWSLETTERS

CLICK HERE
FOR FREE
DELIVERY

biracial associations have been infrequent.

Malchak & Rucker charted five singles in the 1980s, and duo **Exit 216** briefly paired songwriter **Steve Battey** (“One Number Away”) and **Cole Burkett** during the pandemic. Now-defunct trio **The Farm** is the only multiracial act to land a top 20 hit: “Home Sweet Home” reached No. 19 in 2012.

At the time, The Farm was only partially aware that it was breaking barriers in Nashville. Life on the road put it into clearer perspective.



“When we were out, it became very apparent to us, you know, that this is what this is,” recalls former member **Damien Horne**. “But now, you see so much more of that. And not only the groups are looking more eclectic, but listeners are more eclectic in the way that they listen to music. So I feel like it might be a smoother path.”

Neon Union and 2 Lane Summer are charting different creative paths as they build their brands inside of country. Neon Union is a high-energy party duo, reflecting the big personas of its principals. Millsaps earned a reputation as a solo act for a mix of country and Southern rock, while Brooks played bass for the likes of **Pitbull** and **Cee Lo Green** in Miami. But offstage,

Brooks listened to **George Jones** for pleasure.

“My parents are from Roatan, Honduras, and that island, the main music is classic country and reggae,” says Brooks. “That’s what I grew up on. And then once I got to middle school and high school, I picked up the bass guitar and started learning R&B and stuff like that and started doing those gigs making money. And now I’m doing what I love.”

Neon Union was the first act signed to JAB Entertainment, established by Allen and **Aaron Benward**, and it earned a recording deal with **Jay DeMarcus**’ Red Street Country after a single audition last summer. Producer **Dann Huff** (**Keith Urban**, **Rascal Flatts**) became a quick believer and produced the duo’s forthcoming EP.

Neon Union has likewise made believers out of audiences that were initially skeptical in concert.

“Two thousand people are just staring at us like, ‘What in the hell is this?’” Millsaps says. “And then all of a sudden, by the middle of the first song or even before then, people are just like, ‘Oh, yeah,’ bobbing their heads. It’s like we had to win those crowds over.”

Conversely, 2 Lane Summer is establishing itself with a little more of a **Dan + Shay** vibe — big harmonies and pop-shaded melodic country. The duo has released just one track, “Eyes That Ain’t Yours,” so far, though Ray and Hanson have been writing four days a week on average since they met last year, stockpiling songs for future release.

Their launch comes at a time when race has become a wedge issue in some quarters, with books about the likes of **Rosa Parks** and **Henry Aaron** banned in one Florida school district. Still, younger consumers are more receptive to diversity than older generations, and youth are also more likely to invest their disposable income in music. The potential is there for a commercially sound black-and-white country act that is able to tune out social-media negativity from a loud minority.

“It’s such a charged climate for our society these days,” Hanson says. “But honestly, when God kind of brought our paths together, we didn’t even think about that hook. I mean, obviously, it’s there. But we just started making music and hanging out, and it really felt like two brothers coming together, making great stuff.”

Ultimately, these new biracial acts have a chance to change minds, the same way that The Farm did during its short run. Horne tells a story of a show at the Iowa State Fair where several large farm boys in the front row radiated skepticism. By the end of the concert — when a shirtless Horne was being passed overhead in a crowd-surfing moment — those same men were enthusiastically engaged in the performance.

“Music is so powerful in breaking down those walls,” says Horne. “That’s one of the things I was able to pride myself on when we did what we did with The Farm. Any of those negative moments that we did have could quickly be destroyed as soon as we started playing and interacting.”

Neon Union and 2 Lane Summer are both at work carrying on that new tradition. ●



BEN CHRISTENSEN

Chill Cowboy Country Club founder Brian Kelley (left) and Chase Rice performed for Chill Cowboy members on Feb. 11 in Scottsdale, Ariz., with former Miss United States/relationship coach Whitney Miller.



Tyler Braden visited with KYCIE Las Vegas staff when he performed Feb. 20 at Gilley’s. From left: KYCIE music director Ransom Garcia, Braden, KYCIE PD Shawn Stevens and Warner Music Nashville West Coast/WAR regional manager of radio and streaming Jenna Johnson.



Lucas Hoge (center) met up with **Big D & Bubba** co-hosts Sean “Bubba” Powell (left) and Derek “Big D” Haskins backstage at the Grand Ole Opry House following a Feb. 15 performance during the National Wild Turkey Federation Convention.



Greylan James was named a SiriusXM “Highway Find” during a Feb. 17 visit with the satcaster, which aired the radio premiere of his song “2 Years Back.” From left: SiriusXM producer Nick Coulson, James and SiriusXM personalities Macie Banks and Storme Warren.

#1
MOST
ADDED

**CHRIS
JANSON**

**ALL I
NEED
IS
YOU**

BIGGEST CAREER ADD DAY

**THANK YOU COUNTRY RADIO
FOR AN INCREDIBLE START TO A NEW CHAPTER!**

82 STATIONS ON!

KAJA / KATC / KATM / KAWO / KBEQ / KBUL / KCYE / KDRK / KEEY / KHAY / KHEY / KHGE / KHKI
KIIM / KILT / KIZN / KJUG / KKBQ / KKGQ / KNCI / KNIX / KRST / KSCS / KSKS / KSOP / KTOM
KUBL / KUZZ / KWEN / KWJJ / KWRN / KXLY / KZSN / MUSIC CHOICE / WAMZ / WBUL / WCKN
WCOL / WCTK / WCTO / WDRQ / WDSY / WDXB / WFMS / WFUS / WGH / WGKX / WGNE / WHEL
WIL / WIOV / WITL / WIVK / WJVC / WKDF / WKHX / WKIS / WKKT / WKMK / WKRO / WKXC / WLPF
WMZQ / WOGK / WPOC / WPOR / WQHK / WQIK / WQMX / WRNS / WSIX / WSSL / WTHT / WTQR
WUBL / WUSJ / WUSY / WWKA / WWQM / WWYZ / WXBQ / WYCD

**BMLG
RECORDS**

billboard Country Airplay

AIRPLAY
MONITORED BY
LUMINATE

ON THE CHARTS JIM ASKER jim.asker@billboard.com

Parker McCollum Gets 'Handle On' Country Airplay Top 10

Parker McCollum banks his third consecutive career-opening top 10 on *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart as "Handle on You" (MCA Nashville) rises from No. 11 to No. 9 on the survey dated March 4.



JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

In the week ending Feb. 23, the track increased by 7% to 19.8 million in audience, according to Luminate.

"Handle" is the lead single from McCollum's album *Never Enough*, due May 12. He wrote the song with Monty Criswell, and Jon Randall produced it.

McCollum, who hails from Conroe, Texas, follows his two Country Airplay No. 1s. "To Be Loved by You" led in March 2022, and his rookie entry, "Pretty Heart," reigned in December 2020, each for one week.

On the streaming-, airplay- and sales-based Hot Country Songs chart (dated Feb. 25), "Handle" held at No. 16, after reaching No. 14. It drew 5 million official U.S. streams (up 3%) and sold 1,000 downloads Feb. 10-16.

HOLD THAT 'THOUGHT' Morgan Wallen's "Thought You Should Know" (Mercury/Republic/Big Loud) rents the Country Airplay penthouse for a second week, up 4% to 34.4 million impressions.

The song, which became Wallen's eighth Country Airplay leader on the Feb. 25-dated list, is his fourth to rule for multiple frames. "You Proof," which dominated for 10 weeks starting in October, is the longest-reigning song in the history of the chart, which launched in January 1990.

Meanwhile, of the five songs that have ascended to No. 1 on Country Airplay so far in 2023, "Thought" marks the third multiweek leader, following Nate Smith's "Whiskey on You" (two weeks, February) and Jordan Davis' "What My World Spins Around" (two, January). ●

MOST INCREASED AUDIENCE

TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	GAIN (IN MILLIONS)
ROCK AND A HARD PLACE Elektra/Warner Music Nashville/WEA	Bailey Zimmerman	+3.275
GOING, GOING, GONE River House/Columbia Nashville	Luke Combs	+2.724
YOU Warner Music Nashville/WAR	Dan + Shay	+2.323
HEART LIKE A TRUCK Broken Bow	Lainey Wilson	+1.829
TENNESSEE ORANGE Megan Moroney/Columbia/Arista Nashville	Megan Moroney	+1.612
WHAT HE DIDN'T DO Big Machine	Carly Pearce	+1.328
HANDLE ON YOU MCA Nashville	Parker McCollum	+1.305
WILD AS HER Combustion Masters/RCA Nashville	Corey Kent	+1.184
THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	+1.181
LAST NIGHT Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	+1.045

MOST INCREASED PLAYS

TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	GAIN
ROCK AND A HARD PLACE Elektra/Warner Music Nashville/WEA	Bailey Zimmerman	+837
YOU Warner Music Nashville/WAR	Dan + Shay	+457
GOING, GOING, GONE River House/Columbia Nashville	Luke Combs	+420
TENNESSEE ORANGE Megan Moroney/Columbia/Arista Nashville	Megan Moroney	+382
THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	+334
HANDLE ON YOU MCA Nashville	Parker McCollum	+278
MEMORY LANE Arista Nashville	Old Dominion	+253
IT MATTERS TO HER Triple Tigers	Scotty McCreery	+249
WHAT HE DIDN'T DO Big Machine	Carly Pearce	+234
HEART LIKE A TRUCK Broken Bow	Lainey Wilson	+225

RECURRENTS

THIS WEEK	TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	TOTAL AUD. (IN MILLIONS)
1	SHE HAD ME AT HEADS CAROLINA Warner Music Nashville/WMN	Cole Swindell	21.768
2	YOU PROOF Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	19.988
3	WHISKEY ON YOU Arista Nashville	Nate Smith	19.526
4	THE KIND OF LOVE WE MAKE River House/Columbia Nashville	Luke Combs	15.911
5	5 FOOT 9 Hubbard House/EMI Nashville	Tyler Hubbard	12.896
6	HALF OF ME Valory/BMLG	Thomas Rhett Featuring Riley Green	12.244
7	SON OF A SINNER Bailee & Buddy/BMG/Stoney Creek	Jelly Roll	12.064
8	TAKE MY NAME Stoney Creek	Parmalee	11.134
9	WASTED ON YOU Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	9.463
10	'TIL YOU CAN'T CoJo/Warner Music Nashville/WMN	Cody Johnson	9.263



TEXAS REGIONAL RADIO REPORT

WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 23, 2023

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	WKS ON CHART	TITLE (Label)	ARTIST	TW SPINS	SPINS +/-	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	WKS ON CHART	TITLE (Label)	ARTIST	TW SPINS	SPINS +/-
1	3	7	COWGIRL (Independent) ★★ 1 Week at 1 ★★	Jake Bush	1881	157	11	2	7	STARTS IN A BAR (Independent)	Casey Donahew	1399	-390
2	4	7	BEERS WE AIN'T DRANK YET (Fool Hearted)	Jon Wolfe	1765	85	12	12	7	JACKSON (Independent)	Kaitin Butts	1349	-27
3	6	7	MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE I'VE EVER BEEN (Independent)	Case Hardin	1664	10	13	14	7	FRIDAY BEERS (Independent)	Drew Fish Band	1292	6
4	7	7	FAST CAR (Independent)	Randy Rogers Band	1592	100	14	15	7	COWBOY CONSTITUTION (Independent)	Curtis Grimes	1235	57
5	9	7	GOOD SIDE (Independent)	The Great Divide	1547	108	15	16	7	LOVING ALL NIGHT (Independent)	Jesse Raub Jr.	1154	145
6	11	7	TRENCHES (Independent)	Bri Bagwell	1496	114	16	1	7	THREE PEOPLE (ME, JIM BEAM AND YOU) (Independent)	Sundance Head	1027	-800
7	8	7	MOUNTAIN SONG (Independent)	Flatland Cavalry	1487	22	17	20	7	SUNNY AND 72 (Independent)	Kin Faux	1002	86
8	10	7	DAMN THIS HEART OF MINE (Independent)	William Beckmann	1438	37	18	17	7	LOCAL PARTICIPATIN' HONKY TONK (Independent)	James Robert Webb	998	20
9	13	7	KEEP UP WITH A COWGIRL (Independent)	David Adam Byrnes	1414	54	19	19	7	HEY THERE COWBOY (Independent)	Olivia Harms	960	29
10	5	7	LONELY GIRL (Independent)	Cody Canada & The Departed	1411	-244	20	21	7	IT GOES ON (Independent)	Mark Powell	955	78

Texas Regional Radio Report Top 100 is compiled from weekly online playlist reports from 86 radio stations located in Texas and surrounding states, including reports from specialty shows, internet and satellite radio outlets. Songs are ranked by total plays. For tracking, complete chart methodology and more information, visit www.texasregionalradio.com, or contact Dave Smith at 972-252-8777. Copyright 2023, Texas Regional Radio Report

billboard Country Airplay

AIRPLAY
MONITORED BY
LUMINATE

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	WKS ON CHART	TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	AUDIENCE (IN MILLIONS)		PLAYS		
					THIS WEEK	+/-	THIS WEEK	+/-	RANK
1	1	17	THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW Mercury/Republic/Big Loud ★★ No. 1 (2 Weeks) ★★	Morgan Wallen	34.355	+1.181	8301	334	1
2	3	19	GOING, GOING, GONE River House/Columbia Nashville	Luke Combs	31.708	+2.724	7599	420	2
3	2	25	THANK GOD Zone 4/RCA Nashville	Kane Brown With Katelyn Brown	29.779	-3.281	7120	-997	3
4	8	20	ROCK AND A HARD PLACE Elektra/Warner Music Nashville/WEA ★★ Most Increased Audience ★★	Bailey Zimmerman	25.354	+3.275	6545	837	4
5	5	41	HEART LIKE A TRUCK Broken Bow	Lainey Wilson	25.066	+1.829	6534	225	5
6	6	32	THAT'S WHAT TEQUILA DOES Macon/Broken Bow	Jason Aldean	23.167	+0.554	6033	146	6
7	9	36	WHAT HE DIDN'T DO Big Machine	Carly Pearce	22.395	+1.328	5962	234	7
8	7	40	WHAT MY WORLD SPINS AROUND MCA Nashville	Jordan Davis	21.082	-1.089	4834	-224	10
9	11	29	HANDLE ON YOU MCA Nashville	Parker McCollum	19.777	+1.305	5143	278	9
10	10	27	WAIT IN THE TRUCK Broken Bow/Big Loud	HARDY Featuring Lainey Wilson	19.620	+0.008	5242	-57	8
11	12	31	GOLD Capitol Nashville	Dierks Bentley	17.239	+0.739	4249	100	13
12	14	30	WILD AS HER Combustion Masters/RCA Nashville	Corey Kent	17.220	+1.184	4551	223	11
13	13	66	YOU DIDN'T BMLG	Brett Young	17.014	+0.533	4260	71	12
14	15	33	BROWN EYES BABY Hit Red/Capitol Nashville	Keith Urban	12.924	+0.214	3459	39	14
15	16	36	WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE MCA Nashville	Sam Hunt	11.712	+0.450	3360	140	16
16	17	38	HUMAN CoJo/Warner Music Nashville/WMN	Cody Johnson	11.676	+1.005	3407	170	15
17	18	32	YOU Warner Music Nashville/WAR	Dan + Shay	11.454	+2.323	3232	457	17
18	20	24	IT MATTERS TO HER Triple Tigers	Scotty McCreery	9.352	+0.953	3013	249	18
19	19	28	NO BODY Warner Music Nashville/WMN	Blake Shelton	8.615	-0.394	2739	-29	21
20	21	25	HOW IT OUGHTA BE Harpeth 60/BMLG	Shane Profitt	8.279	+0.371	2854	80	19
21	23	13	DANCIN' IN THE COUNTRY Hubbard House/EMI Nashville	Tyler Hubbard	7.907	+0.890	2527	198	22
22	22	48	GOOD DAY FOR LIVING Quartz Hill	Joe Nichols	7.601	+0.019	2745	84	20
23	24	14	TENNESSEE ORANGE Megan Moroney/Columbia/Arista Nashville	Megan Moroney	7.552	+1.612	2077	382	23
24	25	17	HATE MY HEART Capitol Nashville	Carrie Underwood	6.098	+0.503	1962	59	24
25	27	8	MEMORY LANE Arista Nashville	Old Dominion	5.724	+0.614	1947	253	25
26	26	26	GIRL IN MINE Stoney Creek	Parmalee	5.409	+0.092	1947	132	26
27	28	4	ANGELS DON'T ALWAYS HAVE WINGS Valory	Thomas Rhett	5.243	+0.590	1253	203	35
28	29	34	SOMETHING IN THE ORANGE Belting Bronco/WAR	Zach Bryan	5.159	+0.609	1853	107	27
29	31	43	EVERYTHING SHE AIN'T Songs & Daughters/Pigasus/Big Loud	Hailey Whitters	4.288	+0.374	1683	76	31
30	30	48	NOTE TO SELF Magnolia Music	Randy Houser	4.196	-0.051	1789	-65	28

COUNTRY AIRPLAY CHART LEGEND

RANKINGS

Country Airplay is ranked by total audience impressions for the week ending Sunday based on monitored airplay by Mediabase of 145 stations by Luminate. Audience totals on the chart are derived, in part, using certain Nielsen Audio-copyrighted Persons 12+ audience estimates (under license © 2023, Nielsen Audio). The list of all Country Airplay chart reporters can be viewed in Luminate's online platform.

TIES

On Country Airplay, if two songs are tied in audience, the song with the larger increase in audience is placed first.

BULLETS

Awarded on Country Airplay to titles gaining audience or remaining flat from the previous week. A song will also receive a bullet if its percentage loss in audience does not exceed the percentage of monitored station downtime for the format. Titles that decline in audience but increase in detections will also receive a bullet if the total audience erosion for the week does not exceed 3%.

RECURRENTS

On Country Airplay, descending titles below No. 10 in either audience or detections are moved to recurrent after 20 weeks, provided that they are not still gaining enough audience points to bullet or if they rank below No. 10 and post a third consecutive week of (non-bullethead) audience decline, regardless of total chart weeks. Plus, songs that ascend to a peak between Nos. 1 and 5 will remain on the chart for one additional week even if dropping below No. 10.

HOT SHOT DEBUT

Awarded to the highest-ranking new entry on Country Airplay.

MOST INCREASED AUDIENCE

Most Increased Audience on Country Airplay lists the songs with the greatest week-to-week increases in total audience.

AIRPOWER

Awarded on Country Airplay to titles ranking inside top 20 in plays and audience rankings for the first time, with increases in both plays and audience.

BREAKER

Awarded on Country Airplay to titles achieving airplay (at least one detection) at 60% of reporting stations for the first time.

billboard Country Airplay

AIRPLAY
MONITORED BY
LUMINATE

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	WKS ON CHART	TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	AUDIENCE (IN MILLIONS)		PLAYS		
					THIS WEEK	+/-	THIS WEEK	+/-	RANK
31	33	31	Y'ALL LIFE Monument	Walker Hayes	3.866	+0.164	1775	25	29
32	36	4	DRINKABY Warner Music Nashville/WMN	Cole Swindell	3.833	+0.465	1264	211	34
33	32	56	SON OF A Riser House	Dillon Carmichael	3.724	-0.111	1710	-32	30
34	34	32	DOING LIFE WITH ME EMI Nashville	Eric Church	3.527	+0.117	1527	-40	32
35	37	16	YOU, ME, & WHISKEY Valory	Justin Moore & Priscilla Block	3.522	+0.364	1329	224	33
36	35	21	YOUR HEART OR MINE Capitol Nashville	Jon Pardi	3.514	+0.107	1230	10	36
37	40	7	ONE THING AT A TIME Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	Morgan Wallen	2.780	+0.466	606	131	49
38	39	6	NEED A FAVOR Bailee & Buddy/BMG/Stoney Creek	Jelly Roll	2.757	+0.378	959	121	40
39	38	6	LOOKING FOR YOU RCA Nashville	Chris Young	2.690	+0.225	776	45	42
40	41	23	EXCUSES Combustion/Wheelhouse	Kolby Cooper	2.438	+0.191	1027	25	38
41	42	23	CAN'T HAVE MINE Curb	Dylan Scott	2.137	+0.054	1040	54	37
42	43	12	WE GOT HISTORY Riser House/Columbia Nashville	Mitchell Tenpenny	1.902	-0.086	643	-18	46
43	44	26	WORTH A SHOT RCA/Columbia Nashville	Elle King Featuring Dierks Bentley	1.791	-0.036	977	-10	39
44	45	21	SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING I'D DO Stoney Creek	Drake Milligan	1.764	-0.018	739	2	43
45	47	5	STARS LIKE CONFETTI Broken Bow	Dustin Lynch	1.704	+0.163	573	18	50
46	46	16	HEAVEN BY THEN Valory	Brantley Gilbert And Blake Shelton Featuring Vince Gill	1.560	-0.067	722	10	44
47	NEW		LAST NIGHT Mercury/Republic/Big Loud	★★ Hot Shot Debut ★★ Morgan Wallen	1.469	+1.045	333	219	60
48	50	8	IF YOU GO DOWN (I'M GOING DOWNTOO) Black River	Kelsea Ballerini	1.465	+0.165	804	134	41
49	48	15	IF HE WANTED TO HE WOULD EMI Nashville	Kylie Morgan	1.414	-0.006	611	8	48
50	52	4	FEARLESS (THE ECHO) Big Machine	Jackson Dean	1.328	+0.203	648	46	45
51	59	2	NEXT THING YOU KNOW MCA Nashville	Jordan Davis	1.327	+0.648	333	198	-
52	49	6	GOD GAVE ME A GIRL Triple Tigers	Russell Dickerson	1.314	-0.015	627	0	47
53	51	18	OVER FOR YOU Warner Music Nashville/WEA	Morgan Evans	1.241	-0.041	495	35	54
54	53	8	UP THERE DOWN HERE Big Loud	★★ Breaker ★★ Jake Owen	1.211	+0.199	535	76	52
55	55	13	MIND ON YOU RECORDS Nashville	George Birge	0.897	+0.010	490	-14	55
56	54	13	OKLAHOMA BREAKDOWN Show Dog Nashville	Toby Keith	0.878	-0.048	542	-10	51
57	57	5	COUNTRY CAN Curb	Hannah Ellis	0.800	+0.000	502	-8	53
58	58	3	19/BMG/Wheelhouse	Chayce Beckham	0.765	+0.001	444	16	56
59	56	7	FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH Bad Realm/Atlantic	BRELAND	0.751	-0.123	378	-21	57
60	NEW		ALL I NEED IS YOU BMLG	Chris Janson	0.709	+0.399	361	177	58



ERNEST performed Feb. 21 at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum for the organization's Troubadour members. Standing (from left): museum vp of development Ben Hall, Troubadour Advisory Council leadership team member Zach Farnum, ERNEST and Troubadour member Patrick Thomas. Seated (from left): museum senior manager of advancement, membership and annual giving Katherine Smith; Troubadour chair Katie Cline Moore; and museum executive vp of external affairs Lisa Purcell.



Trisha Yearwood, Shaquille O'Neal and restaurateur Giada De Laurentiis were tabbed as members of the Oak View Group's advisory council, bringing their food styles to venues around the globe in a program that launched Feb. 22. From left: OVG president Ken Gaber, O'Neal, Yearwood and OVG Facilities CEO Chris Granger and OVG chairman/CEO Tim Leiweke.

billboard



SXSW 2023

This issue features cover stories on the stars headlining Billboard's stage at SXSW and a preview of other festival highlights.

CONTACT

East Coast/Midwest: Joe Maimone | joe.maimone@billboard.com.

Southeast: Lee Ann Photoglo | laphotoglo@gmail.com

Latin: Marcia Olival | marciaolival29@gmail.com

Touring & West Coast: Cynthia Mellow | cmellow615@gmail.com

International: Ryan O'Donnell | rodonnell@pmc.com

ISSUE DATE 3/11 | AD CLOSE 2/28 | MATERIALS DUE 3/2

NASHVILLE & NATIONAL TOM ROLAND



Paisley announced a recording deal with EMI Nashville, a label under the Universal Music Group Nashville umbrella, on Feb. 22. From left: The AMG co-founder Bill Simmons, Paisley, UMGN president Cindy Mabe and The AMG day-to-day manager Kendal Marcy.

BRAD PAISLEY IS 'HERE' WITH NEW DEAL

After a 25-year association with Arista Nashville, **Brad Paisley** announced a move to EMI Nashville on Feb. 22 and tied his first new music in the deal to an anniversary in the Ukrainian War.

Paisley issued "Same Here," a ballad that emphasizes people's shared commonality across vast distances, on Feb. 24. The song's message is heightened in the final verse with powerful excerpts from a phone call with Ukrainian president **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, who connects the aspirational dots between Americans and citizens of his country.

The song's release coincides with the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an escalation of a war that began in 2014 with Russia's occupation of Crimea.

Paisley has occasionally infused his music with global perspectives, most notably in "American Saturday Night," "Welcome to the Future" and "Southern Comfort Zone." "Same Here" will be featured on *Son of the Mountains*, an album he intends to release later this year.

"One of the prevailing themes on this album is freedom," Paisley said in a press release. "That's something I truly believe in and think is our most precious gift as Americans. The song is grounded in observing life in the United States, then to people from other countries who speak different languages and to one across the ocean that's at war. We start to realize how similar we all are."

Paisley was recently named an ambassador for UNITED24, a fundraising campaign to rebuild Ukraine. Donate [here](#).

RADIO & RECORDS®

Big Machine/John Varvatos promoted Chicago-based **Allison Smith** to vp of promotion from national director ... **Billy Gilman** signed a recording deal with bluegrass label Pinecastle. He will release a single to radio on March 15 ... Audacy expanded the role of **KWJJ** Portland, Ore., brand manager **Scotty Roddy**, adding brand manager responsibilities for **KSON** San Diego and naming him regional vp of country programming for the company's West Coast territory. In addition to KWJJ and KSON, the vp title gives him oversight of **WDAF** Kansas City, **KMLE** Phoenix, **KKWF** Seattle and **KFRG** Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif. ... Midwest Communications/Lansing, Mich., appointed **Chris Tyler** PD for country **WWDK** and adult hits **WQTX**. He continues to work on-air in afternoons at WWDK ... **Jesse James** will return to country radio in mid-March when he starts as morning host for **KUBL** Salt Lake City. He arrives from adult contemporary **KLTA** Fargo, N.D., where he was morning host/brand manager for over a decade ... **Melissa Chase** was promoted to Audacy/Houston vp of programming, overseeing three stations, including country **KILT**, RadioInk.com reported. She was already brand manager for adult contemporary **KHMX** ... United Stations is syndicating the Audacy team **Holly Hutton** and **Rob Stone**, which already appears on 20 Audacy stations, according to RadioInsight.com. The show will launch Feb. 27 on United Stations ... **WKQC** Saginaw, Mich., morning co-host **Barb Sheltraw** retired at the close of her Feb. 20 shift, RadioInsight.com reported. A 45-year station veteran, she spent

over 20 years in the a.m. role ... Former **WKKO** Toledo, Ohio, personality **Gary Shores** died Feb. 19 after battling pulmonary fibrosis, according to *The Toledo Blade*. He was a fixture in the market for 40-plus years before he retired in 2019 ... **Avery Anna** will sing the national anthem during the Country Radio Seminar's opening-day CRS Honors event on March 13. **Carly Pearce** is also scheduled to perform, with an unnamed guest expected to help announce the 2023 Country Radio Hall of Fame entries ... The Big Machine Music City Grand Prix will return to Nashville Aug. 4-6.

'ROUND THE ROW

Triple 8 Management promoted **Samantha Steele** to COO from artist manager to oversee a team of 30. Reach her [here](#) ... UTA Nashville hired music agent **Brian Hill** and tour marketing director **Jaime Roberts**. Hill's previous work included two stints at CAA. Roberts was most recently Atmosphere director of experiential marketing ... Warner Chappell Nashville has two new A&R managers: **Bryce Sherlow** and **Benji Amaefule**. Sherlow was promoted from a coordinator position. Amaefule was previously Country Central head of artist and label partnerships ... King Business and Financial Management promoted **Mallory Mason Pascal** to partner from business manager. Concurrently, the firm rebranded as KBFM. Reach Pascal [here](#) ... Marketing firm CMS Nashville promoted **Matthew Forster** to president/partner from senior vp ... Singer-songwriter **Jewel** co-founded mental health platform Innerworld. She will act as chief strategy officer, working with founder/CEO **Noah Robinson** ... The Academy of Country Music partnered with the Black Music Action Coalition to develop an OnRamp program supporting young Black members of the Nashville music community. The plan provides networking and mentorship opportunities as well as a \$1,000 monthly stipend for one year ... The Country Music Association created a virtual field trip in partnership with Discovery Education to show the nuts and bolts of the country music business and TV production. The product is viewable [here](#) ... *The Grand Ole Opry* will celebrate **Ronnie Milsap**'s 80th birthday in the March 25 installment of the show with guests **Trace Adkins**, **Little Big Town**, **Mandy Barnett** and **Mark Wills**. **Chase Matthew** makes his Opry debut on March 14 ... **Kane Brown** and **Kelsea Ballerini** will co-host the CMT Music Awards on April 2 from Austin ... The annual Live in the Vineyard Goes Country event is scheduled for April 25-27 in Napa Valley, Calif., with a lineup that includes **Jake Owen**, **LANCO**, **Warren Zeiders** and **Kimberly Perry** ... FirstBank Amphitheater and Gibson Gives raised \$47,000 for the Williamson County, Tenn., school system by auctioning signed guitars from the artists who played the suburban Nashville venue during its first two years of operation ... The Americana Music Association is accepting submissions for potential panel discussions at AmericanaFest Sept. 19-23. Pitch topics [here](#) through April 6 ... Songwriter-producer **Kyle Jacobs** died by apparent suicide on Feb. 17 at the Nashville-area home he shared with his wife, **Kellie Pickler**. Jacobs' hit list included **Garth Brooks**' "More Than a Memory," **The Eli Young Band**'s "Dust," **Tim McGraw**'s "Still" and **Lee Brice**'s "Rumor." Jacobs also co-produced Brice's music, including "Hard To Love," "Memory I Don't Mess With" and "I Drive Your Truck." 📍



Jackson Dean received an RIAA plaque certifying his debut single, "Don't Come Lookin'," gold during a Feb. 21 party at BMI Nashville. From left: Big Machine Label Group executive vp of A&R Allison Jones, producer Luke Dick, BMLG president/CEO Scott Borchetta, Dean and BMLG executive vp Mike Rittberg.

billboard



2023

TOP MUSIC LAWYERS

Behind every artist, songwriter and music producer is a trusted group of advisers who provide guidance, advice and negotiate deals. Billboard's 8th annual Top Music Lawyers list will recognize the biggest names and most prominent legal minds in the world of music and entertainment law. They are the deal makers behind the major contracts and lawsuits in the music industry.

This feature will also include a round-up of top law schools attended by the notable alumni on the Top Music Lawyers list.

Join us in congratulating the 2023 top power music lawyers. Advertise to present your law firm to Billboard's influential subscribers, which include A-list artists, artist managers, business managers, label, publishing, and touring executives.

CONTACTS

East Coast/Midwest: Joe Maimone | joe.maimone@billboard.com.

Southeast: Lee Ann Photoglo | laphotoglo@gmail.com

Latin: Marcia Olival | marciaolival29@gmail.com

Touring & West Coast: Cynthia Mellow | cmellow615@gmail.com

International: Ryan O'Donnell | rodonnell@pmc.com

ISSUE DATE 4/1 | AD CLOSE 3/21 | MATERIALS DUE 3/23

MAKIN' TRACKS TOM ROLAND tom.roland@billboard.com

Dustin Lynch Drops Thomas Rhett-Penned 'Confetti' Onto Country Radio

Dustin Lynch's new single, "Stars Like Confetti," could have long-term consequences for his bottom line.

On one hand, if it succeeds, it could keep fans buying tickets to see Lynch sing it live for years. On the other hand, if "Confetti" becomes a signature song, it pretty much requires he blast celebratory bits of paper and mylar into his concert audiences nightly. And that comes with a cost.

"If this song becomes a hit, I guarantee you we're going to need more trucks [to get] confetti blowers behind the stage every night," he says.

That's just one of the extra expenses.

"Not only do you have to get it there, you've got to have people to operate it," he adds. "And then with something like confetti, you have to have a cleanup crew. All those things go into the equation."

"Stars Like Confetti" actually has its roots in Thomas Rhett's concert productions — and in a family vacation. He and his wife, Lauren Akins, took their kids to Montana, and the state lived up to its Big Sky Country nickname, impressing one of his daughters.

"In Montana, you see stars for years," Rhett notes. "The light pollution in Montana is like zero, and so we were looking up at the stars, and Willa Gray said something like 'Hey, that looks like the confetti from your show.'"

The comment became a teachable moment.

"We just started to have a conversation about how God made the stars and how some of those stars are really old," he says. "And sometimes those stars aren't there anymore, but we're just now seeing the light from the star. I'm not a scientist, but I was trying to tell her the scientific facts about stars, as well as I knew."

Naturally, Rhett logged "Stars Like Confetti" as a possible song title, and he popped it out early in the pandemic during a Zoom songwriting session with Zach Crowell ("Body Like a Back Road," "Sunrise, Sunburn, Sunset") and Josh Thompson ("I'll Name the Dogs," "Ain't Always the Cowboy") on April 17, 2020. It was Crowell's first experience writing via the video hookup, and he remembers it being awkward. But the nuts and bolts of the process — attempting to match words and music in a way that sticks with listeners — was pretty much the same.

"What in the world do we rhyme 'confetti' with?" asks Crowell rhetorically. "Do we say 'Yeti' in there? I'm surprised we didn't."

"Stars Like Confetti" suggests a cheery topic, though the narrative needed to fit the sound of the words and the down-to-earth mentality of the typical country plotline.

"Confetti," Crowell says, "is a softer word, so we needed to kind of probably tell the story of a guy and a girl kind of thing."

So they embraced a narrative about a young couple enjoying the same sky Rhett's family saw in Montana.

"I love that picture of looking at the star-filled skies and feeling like God was literally just taking a handful of confetti, just throwing it out over the universe," says Rhett. "It turned into this love song about an epic night on a back road."

They stuffed a bundle of images into the verses, providing enough background to get a sense of the couple and the setting: drinking beers in a rusty,

cherry-red pickup on a dirt road, with perfume and physical connection encouraging passion. The pre-chorus used an ascendant melody to provide a sense that the mood and images were leading the listener somewhere.

"It's kind of a tension creator," Crowell says. "Get ready for the chorus."

In classic form, that chorus has a singalong quality, rolling optimistically toward its hooky payoff: "Stars like confetti — ah, ah." The tag cinches the commercial effect, the two "ahs" giving it a punchy finality, with a scooped note in the middle providing an ideal "ah" separation. It was a T-Rhett move.

"During 2020, I was on a big kick of trying to find songs that what you thought was the hook actually wasn't the hook," he recalls. "When I listen to 'Uptown Funk,' Bruno Mars, 'Uptown Funk' is not the hook. The hook is [the horn riff]. That's the part that you remember. And like, 'Barefoot Blue Jean Night' — 'Whoa-oh-oh, we were livin' it up' — you remember the 'whoas' way more than you remember 'on a barefoot blue jean night.'"

When they finished writing, Rhett recorded a vocal over acoustic guitar. Crowell started layering instrumental parts over that work tape to build the demo, calling on multi-instrumentalist Devin Malone for an assist. They created most of the final production in the process, and they fully expected Rhett to record it. But he never did.

"I don't know why I didn't cut it, to be honest," says Rhett. "I don't even recall why that wasn't in the running. Sometimes I do think that God will just kind of put you off something because it wasn't for you, because it was for somebody else."

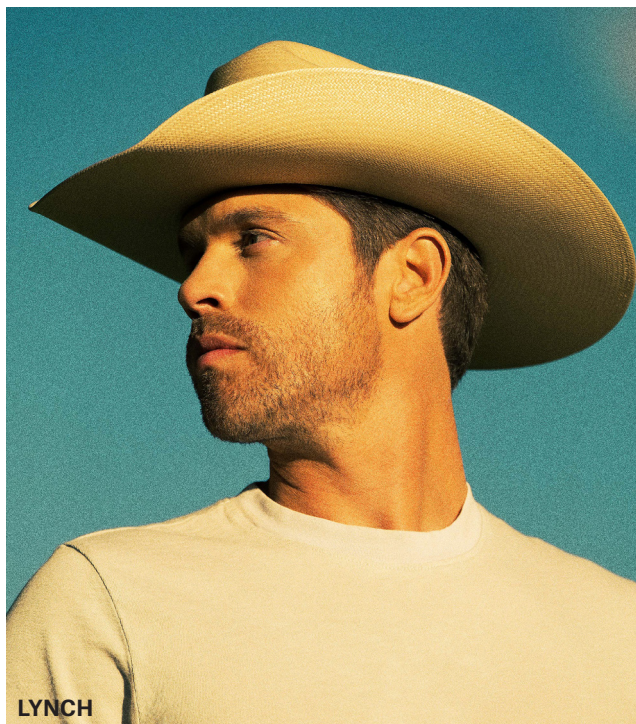
Once it was clear that Rhett was passing on "Confetti," Crowell sent a copy of it to Lynch, who was partying with friends on his boat when it arrived on his phone. The group gave him immediate feedback.

"Thomas Rhett was actually singing the demo whenever we heard it for the first time, and everybody loved it," Lynch remembers. "The best gauge you can have is whenever people that hear a song want to hear it again later in the day, and that was the case with 'Stars Like Confetti.' It was a great sign and a great starting point."

Crowell and Malone used the demo as a foundation for the master recording, keeping an estimated 95% of it in place. Crowell brought in live drums and a handful of other instrumental parts, and the end product included appropriate spare touches — short bursts of guitars and steel that darted in and out of the verses behind the melody, creating a sonic stars-like-confetti effect. Lynch delivered his lead vocal with relative ease.

Broken Bow was bullish on "Stars Like Confetti" from first listen and finally released it to country radio via PlayMPE on Dec. 16, 2022. It rises to No. 45 in its fifth week on Country Airplay. As it moves upward, it seems likely that "Confetti" — bolstered by real-life production and airborne paper bits — could be suitable for American holiday celebrations and parades as 2023 unfolds.

"I'm sure those opportunities are going to present themselves," says Lynch. "It does sit very well for wonderful TV moments, you know. With all it lends itself to, we can really spice things up with the performance. I'm hoping it connects and we're offered those opportunities." ●



CODA

REWINDING
THE
COUNTRY
CHARTS

5 Years Ago Kelsea Ballerini's 'Legends' Became A No. 1 Story

In 2018, she scored her fourth of five Country Airplay leaders

On Feb. 24, 2018, **Kelsea Ballerini's** "Legends" topped *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart, becoming her fourth of five No. 1s among eight career top 10s.

Ballerini wrote the song with **Hillary Lindsey** and **Forest Glen Whitehead**. "Legends" was released as the lead single from her second LP, *Unapologetically*. It entered Top Country Albums at its No. 3 best in November 2017, marking Ballerini's second of five top 10 sets.

The track also reached No. 10 on the streaming-, airplay- and sales-based Hot Country Songs chart, the singer-songwriter's fifth of seven top 10s.

The Knoxville, Tenn., native sent her debut single, "Love Me Like You Mean It," to No. 1 on Country Airplay in July 2015. The feat ended a 10-year drought in which a woman hadn't reached No. 1 with a rookie single since **Carrie Underwood** did so with "Jesus, Take the Wheel" in 2006.

On Feb. 14, Ballerini released the six-song EP *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*. Her latest single, "If You Go Down (I'm Going Down Too)," from her 2022 album, *Subject To Change*, ranks at No. 48 on the March 4-dated Country Airplay chart. —JIM ASKER

Ballerini at the Musicians on Call 2018 anniversary celebration in Los Angeles.



THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	WKS ON CHART	TITLE Imprint/Label	Artist	AUDIENCE (IN MILLIONS)		PLAYS		
					THIS WEEK	+/-	THIS WEEK	+/-	RANK
1	2	37	LEGENDS Black River ★★ No. 1 (1 week)/Most Increased Audience ★★	Kelsea Ballerini	38.559	+4.813	7821	878	1
2	1	23	WRITTEN IN THE SAND RCA Nashville	Old Dominion	37.297	-3.586	7134	-692	3
3	3	39	FIVE MORE MINUTES Triple Tigers	Scotty McCreery	36.641	+3.652	7318	632	2
4	4	14	MARRY ME Valory	Thomas Rhett	33.660	+1.249	6688	353	4
5	8	31	BROKEN HALOS Mercury	Chris Stapleton	31.493	+3.111	6392	644	5