



(3.16.18) <http://variety.com/2018/music/news/country-star-brett-young-acms-interview-1202725773/>

## Country Star Brett Young Stood Up 'The Voice' Before Finding Nashville Success

The ACM-Nominated freshman toiled at Hollywood clubs for 10 years before getting his break in Nashville.



When Brett Young heads to Las Vegas to attend the Academy of Country Music Awards on April 15, he'll be closer to home than just about anyone else vying for a trophy. Uniquely among today's country stars, he was bred in southern California and still considers Los Angeles home. He spent more than a decade trying to catch a break on the local singer/songwriter scene, putting in dozens of appearances at Hollywood's Hotel Café alone, before setting up shop in Nashville led to a nearly instantaneous contract with Big Machine Records and a solid run of (so far) unbroken No. 1 radio smashes.

The amount of time Young put in looking for his big break in L.A. before he struck gold and platinum in the South makes him, at 36, the oldest of the nominees for the ACMs' New Male Vocalist of the Year award. He's not complaining about the delayed gratification, given some stats that put him in serious contention for being country's hottest freshman. His biggest song to date, "In Case You Didn't Know," a three-week No. 1, was just certified triple-platinum; he's the first debuting artist to accomplish that since Sam Hunt in 2014. His other two singles also topped country radio, all of these No. 1s occurring in the space of 13 months (with a newly released fourth single, "Mercy," he hopes will follow). He spent more weeks with a No. 1 airplay song than any other country artist of the past year, and he's one of only three to have a 2017 album go gold.

On a recent visit to L.A. (and to the California girlfriend who just became his fiancée, Taylor Mills), Young sat down with Variety to talk about a path that led the striking 6'6"-er from a promising college baseball scholarship (cut short by injury) to L.A. folkie or bar-band gigs to becoming a seeming Nashville insta-star.

**Variety: When we think California country, historically, we think of Bakersfield. Was there any suspicion of you as an incoming Angeleno when you got to Nashville?**

I think I might have been the most suspicious! [Or] just kind of curious as to how it would be accepted. I found country music in the early '90s with Tim McGraw and "Don't Take the Girl," so I have been a legitimate country music fan for most of my life. ... I was kind of reluctant about the move to Nashville, but I didn't think I could succeed in country music the way I wanted to here. So I decided to submerge myself in that community and write as many songs and learn as many things as I could. I was pleasantly surprised that I was very quickly accepted. It was perfect timing, because country music had made a lot of changes. Right at that point, Sam Hunt was just coming out, and that was a huge stretch for country music. And the amount of success he had with his first single I think kind of opened the door for people to be open-minded about what we were calling country music.

**Were you identifying yourself as a country singer when you were playing clubs in L.A., though?**

I was in the singer/songwriter world. That's such a vague term, because we'll call anybody that is singing and playing one instrument "singer/songwriter." For me, other than Gavin DeGraw and John Mayer, who were both very influential in my style, everything else was country music for me. It was Gavin DeGraw's songwriting that made me want to write my own songs. So I think that causes an interesting blend of a little bit of that blue-eyed soul thing with a little bit of this contemporary pop-country that we have in Nashville now. But I think I'm playing the same music I was playing in L.A. My writing style hasn't changed much. I just have a full band behind me now and I have an amazing producer in Dann Huff, who took the production to a place where it works for country radio.

**How did you catch a break once you were in Nashville?**

In L.A. it was over 10 years of trying to play the bar gigs to make enough money so that I could write the records I wanted to make, and trying to get in a room where somebody was influential enough to help me turn that last corner. I was just beating my head against a wall — and then I was only a year in Nashville and I got offered a record deal. It was 100 percent accidental. I was trying to hone in on songwriting for other people, get cuts, and start making what they call that "mailbox money." But every time we would write a song, I would sing the demo. About a year in, all these A&R people that we were pitching to started going, "Hey, who's the demo singer?" I hadn't gone so far as to say, "I'm not interested in the artist thing anymore," but the 10 years here had beaten me down.

**Who are your key people at Red Light Management?**

This is one of my favorite stories. The year before I moved to Nashville, I went out for the CMAs, just to go, and we got invited to an after-party at a bar called Legends. A friend who was trying to help me network introduced me to a guy named Enzo Divincenzo, who was introduced to me as the manager of Lee Brice — and I got very excited because that's one of my favorite voices in country music. We hit it off, and later I sent him one of those old records that aren't out anymore, and he got back to me and said, "Quite honestly, I love your music, but we don't have the bandwidth." But whenever I needed help, even though he wasn't my manager, we would have drinks and he'd say, "This is what I would do." A month before I signed my record deal, I was all set to come back to L.A. and do "The Voice." They had undercast for that season, and I basically got an email that said "You don't even have to audition. You'll go straight to TV. You're on the blinds. Can you come out and sign the paperwork and do the psych eval?" I did all that, and that's right when A&R people started wanting meetings with the demo singer. Two days before I'm supposed to fly to L.A. and start this show, I called Enzo and said, "Hey bud, I'm freaking out. Can we have drinks?"

**So you were faced with pitting the certainty of being on "The Voice" against the vague possibility of a record deal?**

I got together with Enzo for drinks and told him what was going on, and he said, “I don’t think you should go.” I said, “Hold on,” and I walked outside and I called [the “Voice” production] and let ‘em know I couldn’t make it. I came back in, and he kind of freaked out, because he felt he had made that decision for me, and what if it was the wrong decision? That was the scariest piece of advice I ever got.

**Can you imagine the alternate universe in which you gave “The Voice” a shot?**

It’s an interesting thing how that’s absolutely catapulted the career of all those judges. Blake was already killing it as an artist, but now he’s not just an artist, he’s a famous television personality, and the same with Adam. But as a contestant, you win the show, and then what happens after that? For the most part, that quick a rise makes everybody feel like the first song better be a smash, or else there’ll be that quick a demise. Yeah, there is that “what if” thing, but obviously we’re all feeling very blessed and fortunate we chose what we did.



**Going back to your L.A. singer/songwriter roots: Were you playing venues like Hotel Café in Hollywood?**

My favorite. I probably played there 50 times. I played it full band, I played it acoustic; I jumped up on stage with friends. I was there multiple times a week the whole time I lived in southern California. I played on the same night as Mandy Moore; I played the same night as Katy Perry there before she was Katy Perry, when she was Katy Hudson. That place and Room 5 on La Brea, which is gone now... Gavin was always trying to come out and see me. One night at Room 5 he got there after all the fans were gone and it was just my friends and family left, so it was me and him on acoustic and my violin player, for the 12 people who were left, unplugged. It’s one of my favorite memories.



**How did you meet DeGraw when nobody knew who you were?**

I saw 13 Gavin shows in one year. I don't know if you know this about him: He hangs in the crowd before his shows. He likes to watch the opener. He's okay if they bombard him, but they don't very often, almost out of respect. I'm like, "Hey, I respect you, but also I'm a huge fan—I'm gonna come say hello!" I met him at the Greek Theatre when he was out with Avril Lavigne; I just walked up to him and introduced myself. Then later that night, I was at Mel's on Sunset, at 3 in the morning, and he had just had a late-night bite. I was about to make my first EP, and I told him, "It's all your fault I didn't finish college and I'm making a record because I heard 'Chariot,' and now I have to be a musician and I blame you." He ended up standing there at Mel's for 20 minutes, giving me advice about what to do and what to spend your money on if you're making a budget record. Then I just kept running into him. In Hawaii, my buddy and I broke into soundcheck at Waikiki Shell. He goes, "I remember you from Mel's Diner." At the end of his show, he walks to his security guard and points at us, and the guy comes down and walks us backstage, and invites us out to a bar... Later I texted him that labels were interested, and instead of just texting back, he actually calls me and goes, "Tell me what's happening. Make sure you're protected." It's really cool to have your idol become a good friend.

**If you ever do a "CMT Crossroads," you'll want to do it with DeGraw, presumably?**

Gavin already told me he'd do it. He said, "Absolutely, in a heartbeat."