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## Meet Brett Young, the California-chill singer who may be country's next star



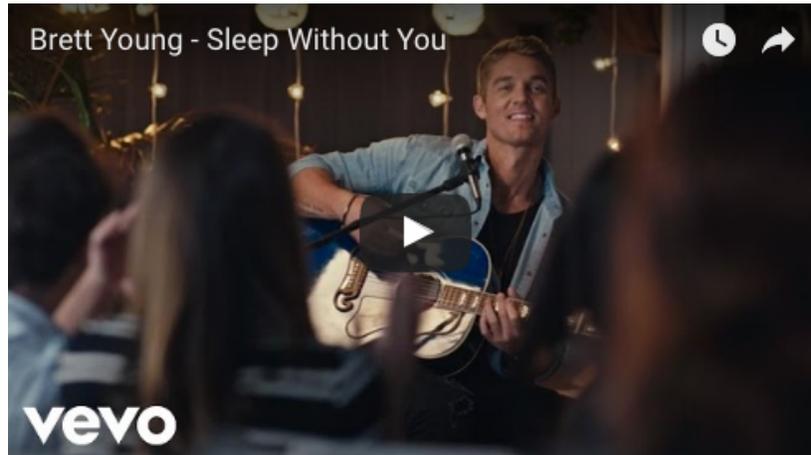
NASHVILLE – Brett Young can't make it through the hotel without someone asking for a picture or stopping to say hello, although he'll be the first to tell you that this is a biased crowd. He's here at a country music radio conference, and not only are the hallways filled with industry executives, but fans also stake out spots in the lobby, hoping to see their favorite singers.

Although you may not know his name, Young is in the fast lane to become one of country's breakout stars. Buoyed by such quick-rising singles as "Sleep Without You," his No. 1 hit about lovesick insomnia, and "In Case You Didn't Know," a ballad destined to be a staple on wedding playlists, Young, who performs at Lisner Auditorium on Wednesday, has checked nearly every box as he tries to embark on a Nashville success story.

Songwriting chops? Yes — Young, 35, honed his skills for years as a singer-songwriter in Los Angeles, often the only aspiring country crooner in rooms full of pop artists. A record deal? Check — a year after moving to Nashville in early 2014, Young's smooth vocals with a slight rasp caught the attention of label -execs. An opening spot on a big tour? Indeed — after stints on tour with Brad Paisley, Luke Bryan and Thomas Rhett, Young will be the first opener for Lady Antebellum's world tour this summer.

Young, a Southern California native, seems laid-back, considering the swirl of activity around him. But don't confuse a chill SoCal attitude with laziness. Young credits an intense work ethic to his days as a college baseball player, using an athlete's mentality to get him through his new thrilling (albeit exhausting) schedule.

"Country music isn't about being better than the guy next to you — it's just making sure that you keep working hard enough to deserve the position that you get in," said Young, who released his self-titled debut major label album last month. "There's room for everybody to have success, but the moment I start slacking is the moment people will forget about me."



Young learned early on how easily you can become disposable in Nashville, a town that has a revolving door of aspiring stars. When he first started testing the waters of Music City, he was earning a living playing bars and restaurants in Los Angeles, releasing several albums independently. Still, he was getting restless, and the California crowds had little patience for his beloved country tunes.

"I tried to mix country music into my sets in L.A., and I noticed that was when people checked out," Young said. "And I was like, 'That doesn't make sense. The genre that I love the most is the one that doesn't work.' "

He made Nashville connections through a mutual friend and started occasionally flying in to network and learn about the country co-writing process. Jetting back and forth every few months wasn't ideal; each time, he had to start all over to gain a foothold in the tightknit songwriting community. Eventually, he piled his belongings in his Durango and headed east.

Young spent a year writing songs and recording demos in hopes of pitching the tunes to other artists, yet he missed home. As he contemplated moving back, record label heads started asking: Who's the guy singing those demos? A wise friend told him, "You can't move if you're getting meetings with labels." So he stayed. Six months later, in August 2015, he signed a record deal with Big Machine Label Group.

These days, it's tough for solo male singers to stand out, particularly when it comes to country radio, the key to mainstream success. But Young's contemporary West Coast-meets-Nashville sound, infused with traces of soul and R&B, struck a chord with satellite programmers at Sirius-XM's the Highway country channel, which jumped on his songs early.

Later, commercial radio joined in and started playing the jaunty “Sleep Without You,” which hit the top of the charts late last year. “In Case You Didn’t Know” currently sits in the Top 30; Young’s team had no plans to release a ballad as his second single, until the Highway started playing it, and the song became one of the channel’s most popular tracks.

The Highway also favors Young’s album cuts, including “You Ain’t Here to Kiss Me,” a vivid slow song centered on a painful breakup on New Year’s Eve, and “Memory Won’t Let Me,” about the impossibility of getting over an ex. Although Young has a way to go in country music’s regimented path to stardom, he’s had a remarkably quick start — although he has a slightly different perspective.

“I was writing and playing in California for 11 years before I moved to Nashville,” Young said. “So people that only met me when I moved here, they like to say how fast it has moved and use the term ‘overnight success.’ And I joke, and I say, ‘Yeah — a 14-year overnight success.’ ”