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Newcomer Kip Moore finds his voice

Road to Music City was long, but artist is making his mark

By Cindy Watts

LAS VEGAS - Kip Moore has to be on stage at Mandalay Bay Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas in about 10 minutes.

Until now, the country newcomer has been circulating through the backstage area greeting media and music industry folks with his laid-back attitude and wide, easy smile.

But as the sun starts to set and his performance draws near, Moore tucks himself underneath the lip of the outdoor stage to steal a few moments before show time.



The act is indicative of Moore's personality. His producer, Brett James, says the singer is "often the quietest person in the room," but as soon as his boots hit the stage, Moore belongs to the crowd. Or, the crowd belongs to him.

"Playing is like breathing," he says. "It's a part of me now."

Moore's set is short. He has the crowd up dancing and singing along to his gold-selling Top 10 hit "Somethin' 'Bout a Truck" from new album *Up All Night*, which is in stores Tuesday. The singer regales the crowd with stories of growing up in South Georgia, tells them about a mean-spirited Music Row executive who told him he didn't have what it takes to succeed. And, after the crowd boos the big-shot producer, he plays them another song.

The audience didn't know all the words, but Moore is confident that after *Up All Night* hits stores, that will change. "I believe in this record," he says. "And I believe when people get it, they're going to listen to it and they're going to be singing these songs that aren't singles."

The album is intense, honest, intimate and gritty and covers topics ranging from the singer's first love to cutting loose as a young adult and his struggle with faith in recent years. He co-wrote every song, and the music is drawing rave reviews, one of which likened him to a "hillbilly Springsteen."

Moore is thankful for the praise, but he isn't ready to put himself on that pedestal.

"I have a lot I have to do to earn even being put in the same breath as Springsteen," he says. "This is my first record. I hope I can validate it."

The fact that Moore is making records and playing onstage at all is a feat unto itself. In

addition to the harsh words from the Music Row executive, the self-proclaimed introvert used to suffer crippling stage fright that he medicated with alcohol. His family wasn't supportive of his career in music, and he says the dream of being a country singer seemed so far-fetched it took him years to find the courage to even try.

"Where I'm from, you don't hear about people doing what I'm doing now," Moore says. "It was kind of a foreign thing to me until somebody heard my songs and said, 'You should give Nashville a shot.' And I was like, 'What do you mean?'"

Taking the long way

He comes by the desire to play music honestly. Moore's mother was the organist in a Southern Baptist church in their hometown of Tifton, Ga. His dad, who passed away about five months ago, introduced the singer to his biggest influences: Jackson Browne, Kris Kristofferson, Little River Band and Bruce Springsteen. And while Moore credits his dad, who he called "Pop," with helping shape his musical identity, his father was often his toughest critic.

"He was a very charismatic guy, but he had a really short fuse," says Moore, who is one of six children. "Looking back, I think that's a lot of the reason I'm so driven in everything I do. I think a lot of times it was just looking for that 'I want to make him proud' kind of thing."

Moore and his father often butted heads, and in an effort to find independence from his family as a teenager, Moore accepted a basketball scholarship at Wallace State in Alabama.

He later transferred to Georgia's Valdosta State University on a golf scholarship, but, thanks to his growing love of music, the scholarship didn't carry him through to graduation. He quit golf to make more time to play shows, and paid his last year of tuition with the money he earned singing in clubs.

Following graduation, Moore's free spirit kicked in and he grabbed a backpack and moved to Hawaii with a friend to pursue surfing. But it was in the solitude of the island paradise that he found the faith to pursue a career as a country singer-songwriter.

"I had so much time alone to think," he says. "I had a little beat-up Yamaha guitar I would write on all the time and I would backpack all over the island and camp out. I realized there was no way I was going to be happy unless I was doing this."

Hitting his stride

Moore moved to Nashville in 2004 and spent the next couple of years observing the town's finest songwriters.

"I was such a student," he says. "Instead of just listening and enjoying, I was always like, 'Why, why, why do I like this whole kind of thing and what's making people connect to this?'"

Moore first met James, his future producer, at the YMCA in Nashville. The singer introduced himself and asked James for a meeting to talk about songwriting. James, also a successful songwriter, couldn't find time until an executive from Universal Music Group called and wanted him to hear a new artist: Kip Moore.

"I was like, 'Oh, it's that Kip guy,'" James recalls. "I said, 'Send him over right now.' Kip showed up at my office 15 minutes later and he played me two songs and I said, 'Well, you have a publishing deal. What else can we work on?'"

Moore calls the partnership "a perfect fit." He started logging countless hours in the studio developing his songwriting and finding his voice. James says Moore had "raw poetic and melodic skills" but admits for a while he wasn't convinced it was going to develop into a marketable product.

"I always thought, either you got it or you don't," James says. "A couple of years in, I was like, 'Is this what I thought it was going to be?' Then all of a sudden about three years ago,

the light switch went off with that guy, and I tell people now that he may be the finest songwriter I've ever written with."

With a Top 10 hit under his belt, a spot on Billy Currington's current tour and plans to hit the road with Tim McGraw in late summer, Moore's hard work is paying off. And while his dad isn't here to watch as his youngest son finds success, the singer eventually won his approval.

"Before he died, he said, 'What you've done is something I don't know that I ever could have stuck through and stayed the course, and your music is great and it's going to cut through and make it,' " Moore recalls. "I knew that he meant that, because he didn't sugarcoat anything."

This time Moore is happy, Pop was right.

STORIES BEHIND HIS SONGS

Kip Moore's debut album, *Up All Night*, will be in stores Tuesday. He co-wrote every track on the album, and the bulk of the songs are inspired by situations from his life.

"I tried to dig deep to remember all the highs and lows of the last nine years when I wrote this record," Moore says. "I wanted people when they bought this thing to be really moved by the end of it."

Here are some of the highlights:

→ **"Crazy One More Time"** (Kip Moore, Aimee Mayo and Chris Lindsey): "This is probably my favorite song I've ever written. I went home over Thanksgiving two or three years ago and ran into someone I hadn't seen since my sophomore or junior year in college. We were wild about each other. I ran back into her and the moment we saw each other, we were right back in that place. I think everybody has that somebody that it's just going to always be that thing no matter what happens in life."

→ **"Fly Again"** (Kip Moore, Dave Lapsley and Dan Couch): "I was really into a girl in South Georgia. I look back now and it's like, 'Why?' I remember coming back to see her, and her mom asking me, 'What's going on in Nashville?' I remember her saying, 'He ain't got nothing going on.' I just remember thinking, 'Alright. I'm going to show (you).' I can remember driving out of there, and I just hopped up on the hood and had me a smoke and had me a drink and kind of letting go (of her) that night, and then I was good to go. That's what that song is. I feel like everyone has been through that heartache."

→ **"Faith When I Fall"** (Kip Moore and Brett James): "I wrote this the day after I was offered this record deal. I went in to write with Brett James and we were both kind of a little emotional. I was excited about the future, but I was nervous and scared and it was all those things. What came out that day was how much I had been kicked in the teeth and how many 'no's' I had gotten. Whatever it is, you're going to have so many bumps trying to get to where you're trying to get. Life is going to come around, but you gotta have faith in where you're trying to get to. And I've always had faith."