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## **Selling Songs Without Selling Out: Introverted Artists Like Tucker Beathard Tackle an Extroverted Job**



When Tucker Beathard took the stage during a Big Machine lunchtime showcase at Country Radio Seminar (CRS) in February, it was a potentially big moment, and he seemed to know it.

Perhaps 1,500 or more of the genre's decision-makers were watching him while they finished their chicken, and most had never heard Beathard before. He stammered a bit, spent a lot of time looking at the floor and seemed almost apologetic for being there.

"I like to write kind of deep, weird songs," he said, then scrunched his face as if it were an uncomfortable admission.

But then he launched into the songs -- "Rock On" used a classic country device, twisting a phrase into something unexpected. "20-10 Tennessee" used a football game as a clever metaphor for a relationship that bites the dust. He might think of the songs as a little "weird." They were, in fact, smart pieces from a singular mind, the kind of material that comes from someone who marches to his own drum and mines that perspective for his worldview. It's a far cry from the songs that would come from, say, crowdsourcing.

That difference is at the heart of artist development in country music in 2016. Once confined mostly to night clubs and small theaters, country now finds some of its biggest artists projecting to 50,000 or more on stadium dates. They're expected to look and feel comfortable before a camera. And social media begs for short, witty observations. It's a job that seems ideally suited to extroverts, people who find connecting with others a breeze. And some acts -- Blake Shelton, Luke Bryan and Dan + Shay, for example -- seem to fit that description to a tee. But a surprising number of artists, such as Beathard, Chris Stapleton, Hunter Hayes and Kane Brown, are introverts. They're not averse to other people, but their inner guideposts are so strong and specific that they have trouble promoting their own work. In the process, they can either appear awkward to other people or feel they appear awkward, even when they don't.



To be certain, an introverted disposition is not a death sentence for an artist's career, even though their business can require ultra-extroverted moments.

"You go backstage and you see Carrie Underwood, she's not jumping off the wall," says Sony Music Nashville chairman/CEO Randy Goodman. "She's very quiet, and she's very nice and very relaxed. She's not up in your face and doesn't want you to be up in her face. But she gets up in front of a crowd and she kills. She kills. Miranda Lambert I've found to be a similar kind of way. I think you [have to become] an extrovert when you hit that stage -- whatever that stage is."

The concept of introversion and extroversion was introduced by psychologist Carl Jung, who held that people saw the world either from their internal dynamics, such as dreams and contemplation, or from their external interaction with others. Some personalities can be extreme examples of either polarity, though most people have a mix of introversion and extroversion. Neither is good or bad -- it's a characteristic, much like being left- or right-handed -- but it's a starting place on how you navigate the world.

"Introverts get exhausted by social interaction and need solitude to -recharge," blogger Thorin Klosowski wrote on Lifehacker.com, simplifying the concept. "Extroverts get anxious when left alone and get energy from social interaction."

At least one-third of the population is made up of introverts, according to Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. In previous eras, the strong character and conscience that's a guiding force for developed introverts was highly regarded. But as the phenomenon of fame crystallized in the 20th century, following the introduction of radio and the movies, gregarious extroverts became the idealized persona.

"Introversion," Cain told *Forbes*, "is viewed somewhere between -disappointment and pathology."

Which adds to the pressure on an artist such as Brown. He's not certain if he was fundamentally introverted in his early youth, but when his stepfather beat him repeatedly around age 6, it turned him inward.

"If you do get to know me, I'll tell everything to you," he says. "But I don't want to tell everything to the wrong people."

That outlook makes "Learning," a song he wrote about his life and posted on YouTube, all the more powerful. Brown invoked much of the turmoil from his past, then threw it out there for the world to hear.

"I'm a role model to a lot of kids," says Brown. "I feel like I should show people that no matter where you come from -- you can get beat by your stepdad, if you get picked on for your clothes and having no money -- I just feel like everyone should know it will be all right as long as you keep focusing on trying to move forward and looking at the positive things in life."

It seems counterintuitive, but artists who tend to internalize the world are often more at home onstage than in one-on-one conversations with a stranger.

"Robin Williams was that way," talent coach Bill Cakmis notes. "When the lights were on, it was Robin Williams. When they weren't, he was very soft-spoken and introverted."

Cakmis, who has worked with musicians, actors and broadcasters, says air personalities tend to be more outgoing, while artists are the most internalized of those groups. Thus, the radio-promotion tour -- where an artist visits an unfamiliar location to make an impression on someone who might be bigger than life -- can be uncomfortable. Artists often feel like they're being asked to sell themselves. But, says Cakmis, it's the promotion person's job to sell the music. The artist is only being asked to make a connection. "If they know that it's not selling, that it's more about conversation, it makes it a little easier," he says.

Beathard, who has publicly referred to himself as an introvert, was again onstage in Nashville on Sept. 29, playing in front of industry VIPs in advance of his EP *Fight Like Hell* (Oct. 7, Dot). He was noticeably uncomfortable once more, partially hiding his eyes behind the brim of his baseball cap as Big Machine Label Group president/CEO Scott Borchetta bragged on his songwriting skills. But Beathard's speech was a little less halting than at CRS, a little more sure, as he introduced a batch of songs -- including "God and My Guitar," "Momma and Jesus" and the title track -- that are the hallmark of an introspective writer: thoughtful, different, perhaps life-changing for the right listener at the right time.

"I'm fortunate to be able to make a living off [songwriting] now, but that was never really the intention," Beathard told the audience. "It was always just kind of my therapy and my way to express myself and my identity."

Figuring out how to connect a unique internal identity with a complicated outside world is the mission for every marketer on Music Row. Successfully adapting that identity without getting damaged in the process is the goal for every artist.