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BILLBOARD COUNTRY UPDATE

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## Kip Moore Takes 'The Bull' By The Horns And Flips The Bird To Conformity

"The Bull" is finally out of the pen.

Since MCA released Kip Moore's album *Slowheart* on Sept. 8, 2017, there has been a buzz around "The Bull." A sonic rebel stand carved across an ambitious guitar riff, it's a contemporary piece that echoes the anti-establishment vibe in Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shove It" and in Johnny Cash's famed middle finger, flashed for photographer Jim Marshall at San Quentin State Prison.

"Thanks to the bulls that bucked me off," the payoff hook in Moore's single, is a pointed kiss-off to anyone who has ever rejected the song's protagonist. But in its early development, the title was perceived as a problem for country radio: Stations that market themselves as "The Bull" might feel skittish about playing a song that attacks their logo, while outlets that are up against such a station might fear that they're offering free advertisement for the competition.

But even if terrestrial radio wasn't riding with "The Bull," Moore had a bevy of fans who were, a fact that helped the label eventually let the song out of the chute.

"There's so many people that already have tattoos of 'Thanks to the bulls that bucked me off,'" says Moore. "I count 10 every night at my meet-and-greets."

And with good reason. "The Bull" might be written from the vantage point of an artist, but its underlying message is one with more universal reach.

"You don't have to be a musician to know rejection," says songwriter Luke Dick ("Burning Man," "Kill a Word"). "You just have to be a person."

The hook was Dick's original concept, an idea that came to him when he woke up in the middle of the night some time in 2016. He wasn't sure what the phrase meant, but he wrote it down and eventually went back to sleep. In the following days or weeks, Jon Randall ("Drink On It," "Whiskey Lullaby") dropped by the Dickhouse Studios in East Nashville for a songwriting appointment. Dick was already playing a self-described "country Paul Simon thing on the guitar," and he mentioned the "bulls that bucked me off" line to Randall.

"I said, 'Maybe it's like this sort of ridiculous acceptance speech,'" recalls Dick. "It's kind of like delusions of grandeur. We got a good chuckle out of that and just took off with it. It felt like a really inspired day. We were really amped on the song — at least if nobody else liked it, we really liked it. We had both accepted Grammys by the end of the day."

Randall supplied the chorus' opening lines: "Thank you, Uncle D, for teaching me 'La Bamba' on guitar/Thank you girl from Broken Bow who shot an arrow through my heart."

Uncle D isn't real (Randall did have an Uncle Don, though he didn't teach Randall guitar, and he allows that his nickname for Dierks Bentley is "D" — "Maybe it's Dierks," he says. "I don't know.") "La Bamba" didn't have a particular meaning for him either, and the "girl from Broken Bow" is likely to disappoint a lot of Music Row executives who have been convinced that line is a spitball toward someone from the BBR Music Group; in fact, it's a reference to a fictitious girl from Broken Bow, Okla.

But every musician in Nashville knows the essence of rejection, either from a label, a love interest or both.

"I can remember when I first got there, a big-time producer said, 'You know,

you're probably best off heading back to Georgia,'" recalls Moore. "I've always held on to that."

That's the meat of "The Bull": the recognition that a closed door can provide the fuel to the creative fire. It was certainly the heart of the bridge once the song headed into the home stretch, as the singer anticipates the day when he can "flip the bull the bird."

"I was really proud of that bridge because we did actually drive the whole hook of the song home more so than even in the chorus," says Randall. "The whole meaning of the song is in that bridge, and flipping the bird is the ultimate thing."

Dick hunkered down in his studio for several days, playing every instrumental part on the song except for a faint Dan Tyminski mandolin piece that was lifted from a warmup before an unrelated session. The main riff, played on 12-string guitar, meshed with a *Graceland*-inspired bassline; quirky keyboard parts that hint at Dick's side project, *Republican Hair*; a careening guitar solo; and a four-on-the-floor drum beat that uses lots of toms and high-hat, but very little snare, creating a dark percussive environment that pays homage to *Dire Straits*.

"There's a part of 'Sultans of Swing' where he just goes crazy on the bell on the right cymbal, and I just loved it," says Dick. "That was the vibe that I was trying to pick up, but in a more wily, cowboy way with the guitar solo."

Dick was proud of the work and played it for Moore at the end of a co-writing session. It wasn't intended as a pitch — Moore had doggedly recorded his own songs up to that point — but he bought into its fighting, underdog spirit.

"It has a lot of angst in it, it has a lot of 'fuck you' to it, it has tons of attitude to the whole song, which is what I always loved," says Moore. "It's a very galvanizing, celebratory song of standing your ground."

Dick made some changes, including paring back the harmonica parts, over several different mixes to accommodate Moore's artistic tastes.

"It was super crunchy and bright in the beginning, and we had to warm it out and give it a more earthy tone, make it sound a little more analog," says Moore.

He knocked out the vocals in a scant 15 minutes after living with the song for about a week.

"I was already pissed off and ready to sing," he says. "There wasn't anything that I needed to do, like turn off the lights or drink whiskey or anything. I was already living in that head space."

He started playing "The Bull" in concert as soon as *Slowheart* came out, and the fan tattoos that employ Dick's hook line have already worked as an affirmation.

"I really can't think of anything more gratifying as a songwriter than to actually have a song be something to somebody," says Dick.

Moore resisted attempts to change the title, and MCA released it to country radio on Feb. 19 via PlayMPE. "The Bull" now has its opportunity to buck those early fears about radio branding. Whether or not programmers buy into it, the song definitely amplifies Moore's personal brand.

"We are living in the most plastic times ever," he says. "Everything is so disposable, and everybody's trying to be a piece of plastic: What can I do to fit in with the rest of all the plastic? I've always been like, 'Fuck that.' I want to be a piece of iron." ●

