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## BROOKS & DUNN DISCUSS COLLABORATING WITH A NEW GENERATION OF TALENT ON 'REBOOT' [INTERVIEW]



As two of the soon-to-be inducted newest members of the Country Music Hall of Fame, the timing couldn't be better to celebrate the influence of Ronnie Dunn and Kix Brooks.

In 1990, then-Arista Nashville leader Tim DuBois saw something in two young singer-songwriters—Ronnie, an Oklahoma native with a sturdy, gospel-inflected voice, and Kix, a potent stage performer and vocalist hailing from Louisiana. Both fine songwriters, as evidenced by two tracks they penned within a week of meeting each other: “Brand New Man” and “My Next Broken Heart.”

By 1991, “Brand New Man” would earn the newly-minted duo Brooks & Dunn their first No. 1 single, with “My Next Broken Heart” becoming their second chart-topper.

The reaction from country radio—and country listeners—was immediate. Brooks & Dunn's first four singles all reached the pinnacle of the country charts. “Boot Scootin' Boogie,” a groovy 1992 track

seemingly custom-made for neon-lit honky-tonks and dusty dancefloors, revitalized line dancing across the U.S. and became an enduring classic for the duo.

Though Brooks & Dunn were put together, by the mid-'90s, it was hard to imagine them apart.

Brooks & Dunn earned the CMA Vocal Duo of the Year honor for eight consecutive years from 1992 through 1999—and followed with six more consecutive wins in the category from 2001-2006. Along the way, they amassed 20 No. 1 hits, two Grammys, and more than 30 million in album sales, and became known as two of the hardest-hitting live entertainers in country music.

In September 2010, the duo ended as they began, wrapping their Last Rodeo tour with a rendition of their debut single “Brand New Man,” before a sold-out crowd at Nashville’s Bridgestone Arena.

Now, nearly three decades after their first chart hit, Ronnie Dunn and Kix Brooks are witnessing—and collaborating with—a whole new generation of artists influenced by their music.

Brooks & Dunn’s upcoming album, *Reboot* (out Friday, April 5), marks the first studio album from the duo since 2007’s *Cowboy Town*.

The album’s genesis came from B&D manager Clarence Spalding—along with some inspiration from Luke Combs and Kacey Musgraves.

“Somebody sent me a clip of Luke Combs doing ‘Brand New Man’ with a couple of his band guys. He was wearing Brooks & Dunn gear, that was real flattering,” Dunn tells MusicRow, settling in beside Brooks for an interview at a barn on Dunn’s property just south of Nashville, decorated in the familiar western tones often seen on the duo’s videos and stage production.

“And Ronnie sent me a copy of a version of ‘Neon Moon’ that Kacey Musgraves was doing,” Brooks adds.

“Of course, we already had a group of people covering our songs—Keith Urban was opening some shows with ‘Brand New Man,’ and now it’s morphed to another group. So, we’re three musical generations down from where we were, in a way.” Brooks says.

Spalding took notice of the cover choices, and the ‘90s country influence nestled in the sounds of artists like Combs, Midland, Jon Pardi, and Cody Johnson, all of whom are part of the *Reboot* project.



"It happened quickly," Brooks says. "[Clarence] made one phone call. He said, 'If I don't hear back from them today, I'm going on down the line.' And it happened like that. He'd call back and go, 'Got 'em, bam.' 'Got 'em, bam.'"

"I wish I had thought of it," Dunn quips.

Rather than lifting the duo's s pre-recorded vocals from previous albums, or recording vocals separately and having them digitally added to the mix, Ronnie and Kix recorded each collaboration live in the studio.

"I think the first day of recording was with Luke [Combs] on 'Brand New Man,'" Brooks says. "That same day, I think we recorded with Jon Pardi and Kane. We got like four cuts that day."

Thomas Rhett guests on "My Maria," a cover of a 1970s B.W. Stevenson hit that earned Brooks & Dunn their second Grammy in 1996. Brooks made the request to have Ashley McBryde collaborate on a sparkling version of "You're Gonna Miss Me When I'm Gone." Musgraves brought her full band into the studio, adding some sultry disco undertones to "Neon Moon."

"She had a very definite idea of how she wanted to approach the song," Dunn recalls. "And Kacey is as far out into that realm that we ventured."

"Ain't Nothing 'Bout You" gets a slow burn treatment courtesy of Brett Young, while Cody Johnson offered a stripped down acoustic rendition of "Red Dirt Road."

Other tracks, such as Midland's take on "Boot Scootin' Boogie," and Jon Pardi's "My Next Broken Heart," hew closer to the original, by design.

"Jon's a Sacramento boy and worked for his dad's construction company," Dunn notes. "He's the one who walked in and said, 'I want it done exactly like the record. I don't want anything to deviate. That is what influenced me and that is what I like to do.' So he was spot on with it."



They called on producer Dann Huff, who has produced on albums for several of the artists involved with *Reboot*, as well as Megadeth, Keith Urban, LeAnn Rimes, Bon Jovi, Tim McGraw, Rascal Flatts, Reba, Taylor Swift and numerous others.

“It was fun,” Brooks says. “Dann said his greatest challenge was...he kept saying, ‘I’ve had more anxiety over this project than anything, just due to the fact that I feel like I need to honor the original versions, but at the same time give them a subtle twist.’”

“They have a nickname for Dann in music, they call him the sniper,” Dunn says. “Any time someone needs a project done within budget and within a certain amount of time, he can do it. And you’re having to herd a lot of cats for a project like this. He’s a great organizational wizard.”

Most of the artists selected their own favorite B&D song to cover. One of the most startling was Kane Brown’s choice of the 2005 hit “Believe,” which served as a visceral showcase for Dunn’s rich voice.

“That’s one of the most challenging vocals for me to do,” notes Dunn. “The second he walked up to the mics, we were facing each other, there was no set way to do it, we were just going to start singing and try to swap off and see what happened. I heard him sing and the whole room got quiet. He has the chops.”

“He wasn’t competitive at all, he just slid in there and did his own thing in a really cool way. I think Dann said, ‘Well, when Ronnie’s singing that high stuff at the end, whatta you wanna try to do about that?’ And Kane said, ‘Let Ronnie sing that high stuff!’ I remember talking to Dann after the recording and he was like, ‘That’s that thing I’m wanting people to see about Kane. He’s got it.’”

“I don’t think any of us have seen that side of Kane,” Brooks says. “So he’s stepping right into this song that’s going to be a challenge as a singer more than anything else.”

Brothers Osborne’s improvisational rendering of “Hard Workin’ Man” amplifies its soul and pride, turning the blue-collar tribute into a guitar-thrashing, blues-soaked embodiment of those giving work (and life) their all. For Brooks & Dunn, the track just might be the most full-circle take of any on the album.

“Kane brought up that Brothers Osborne liked to do this ‘70s hippie stoner kind of thing, with elongated leads and instrumentals and stuff. And we’re going, ‘that’s right where we came from.’ Back in the day we were listening to that stuff, grew up on it.”

Given the star power and high-octane collaborations, one might naturally presume an all-star concert or more music from the superstar duo could be on the way. Dunn says no plans for more B&D collaborations are in the works for either at the moment, aside from the Country Music Hall of Fame induction later this year, several Vegas shows and a handful of festival dates. Earlier this year, the duo made a surprise appearance during Kacey Musgraves’ Ryman show, joining her on “Neon Moon,” and say more surprise appearances with their *Reboot* cohorts are possible.

“We are taking it one step at a time. We never say never...it’s like the mafia. It keeps pulling you back in,” Dunn says.

