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(2.20.20) - <https://musicrow.com/2020/02/after-david-ashley-parker-travis-denning-showcases-his-rock-music-leanings/>

After “David Ashley Parker,” Travis Denning Showcases His Rock Music Leanings



When UMG Nashville artist **Travis Denning** joins labelmate and fellow Georgia native Sam Hunt’s Southside Summer Tour beginning in May, it will not only mark some of the largest stages the “David Ashley Parker From Powder Springs” singer has performed on, but it will also be a full-circle moment.

Denning, 27, first opened shows for Hunt back in 2014 at Bluewater Valdosta, a college bar in Valdosta, Georgia, and then at The Crazy Bull in Macon, Georgia. “There were maybe 700 people at Bluewater, which was a lot for that place,” Denning recalls. “This is really cool to have this kind of moment again.”

“It feels kind of like the pinnacle moment, and not only is it a huge tour and it’s my first amphitheater tour, but I mean, Sam was a guy that I’ve looked up to. And really, I’ve enjoyed his music ever since he first came out on the scene.”

He's been building his touring cred with his own series of headlining shows, as well as opening concerts for Justin Moore and making the trek overseas to perform as part of C2C. But he's been building his star power, songwriting chops and guitar prowess since grade school in his hometown of Warner Robins, Georgia.

"I grew up in an Air Force town," he says of his childhood, where his parents worked as civil servants for the United States Air Force at nearby Robins Air Force Base for most of his formative years. He says his parents both currently live in D.C., working out of the Pentagon.

As a child, he was "obsessed" with buying CDs, and reading liner notes while he listened to the songs that swirled from the three-disc CD changer that came as part of a cheap three-piece boombox.

But it was when Denning received his first guitar at age 11 that he knew music was his calling. Denning tried various sports teams growing up, and says his parents assumed music would be one more thing he briefly tried before moving on to the next hobby.

"I think maybe they thought, 'Okay, he's going to try guitar and it'll kind of blow over,'" he recalls. But Denning soon took up guitar lessons with a local instructor, and learned the chords to John Denver's "Take Me Home Country Roads," in part thanks to an uncle who appreciated Denver's music. "All of those songs, like 'Rocky Mountain High' and 'Leaving on a Jet Plane,' they're rooted in those strumming patterns and chords that, especially in country music, we use every day. As soon as I started learning songs, I was like, 'I'm not giving this up.' After two years or so, my parents were like, 'Alright, this is who he is.'"

However, like many youthful musicians just beginning to funnel their youth and passions into music, Denning was really yearning to rock.

"Honestly, country music came later in my life, when I was in high school. As a kid, I loved southern rock—Marshall Tucker Band, Allman Brothers, of course Skynyrd. I can tell you the exact moment it happened, when I was seven years old," he recalls. "My dad played *Back in Black* and 'Hells Bells.' Then as you grow older, as an 11-year-old guitar player it's like, 'I want to hear it faster, I want to hear it louder.'" Soon, bands like Metallica and Slayer made their way into Denning's musical collective.

"That's just as big of a musical influence on my live shows and my recording process, just as much as country music songwriting is to who I am as an artist," he says.

While he fine-tuned his guitar shredding on a foundation of metal and rock, he found his love for touring and performing through church music, spending two summers touring the East coast as part of a church youth choir, performing reinterpreted versions of Methodist hymns.

"It was literally the first time I toured, to be 16 and driving through Pennsylvania and seeing the Amish country. The choir director would let me bring my guitar and incorporate it into what we were doing. That encouraged me to keep chasing my passion and learn how to make it work with anything—by that time I had been playing guitar for a few years and I knew I wanted to make a living being a musician."

Around that time, Denning also began studying the craft of songwriting, falling headlong back into those country frameworks he grew up listening to, drawn in by country music's imagery and small-town stories.

"With my generation, we grew up on a lot of different music, but when I started to write songs, that's when I realized that country music has the best songs in the world. I related because I grew up with a bunch of rednecks, a bunch of country folks, and a bunch of people who worked at the Air Force base, things like that. I heard these songs and I was like, 'Oh, that's my people.'"

One of his earliest country influences came from another Georgia artist who grew up about 20 minutes north of Warner Robins—Jason Aldean.

"I thought, 'Well hell, this guy went and did it. Why can't I?' Jason cuts outside songs, same with George Strait. So I would study his liner notes and see names like Wendell Mobley and Neil Thrasher. Of course, Rhett Akins. That sparked the flame in me, like 'Okay, these guys are kajillionaires, but maybe I can make money writing songs, and put food on the table by doing what I love.'"

When the time came to graduate from high school, his heart was set on studying songs, not textbooks.

"I graduated from Warner Robins High in 2011 with a 3.79 [GPA], and I took it all the way down to a 1.8 my first semester of college. You got to really work to kill a GPA like I did. I tried college for a semester, but I'll be honest, I knew at high school graduation that I was done."

The protagonist in Denning's witty, relatable Top 40 breakthrough track "David Ashley Parker from Powder Springs" may have been inspired by the singer-songwriter's own teenage experience trying to sneak into clubs with a fake ID, but Denning had a more pragmatic plan for making his way into Nashville's bar scene, where so many aspiring artists and songwriters begin playing writers rounds and networking.

Instead of moving to Nashville right away, Denning continued honing his craft closer to home, working and saving up \$10,000 along the way. He turned 21 in December 2013, and one month later he was crashing on an air mattress in a Nashville apartment.

"It's the networking in places like Losers where things happen," he says. "I wanted to move here when I was actually legal. I saved money so I could move here, make rent and eat, and not have to be worried about making money right off the bat."

Upon arriving in Nashville, Denning already had a friend in fellow Georgia native and songwriter, Cole Taylor.

"He had been here for about a year and I just kind of followed him around to things. Hell, he was figuring it out, too."

Taylor would soon find songwriting success in co-writing songs like Florida Georgia Line's "Sippin' On Fire," and "Home Alone Tonight," Luke Bryan's duet with Karen Fairchild of Little Big Town. Taylor and Denning attended every songwriter hangout they could, expanding their circle of songwriting buddies to include writers like Thomas Archer, who co-wrote Luke Combs' smash hit "Hurricane."

From there, things moved quickly—Denning inked a publishing deal with Jeremy Stover's RED Creative in 2014, and Jason Aldean recorded Denning's "All Out Of Beer" for his 2016 album, *They Don't Know*. Justin Moore recorded Denning's "Life in the Living," and in 2017, he inked a label deal with UMG Nashville, the label powerhouse behind artists including Hunt, Eric Church, Keith Urban, Carrie Underwood, Little Big Town, and others.

"My short-term goal was get a publishing deal, and just focus on songwriting, build that craft because that's something you always have. I hoped I would have one or two hits for other artists, sign a label deal and then be able to sing those in my own set. I moved up here to be on a tour of bus and behind the microphone. That's what I've wanted to do my whole life."

His debut single "David Ashley Parker from Powder Springs" peaked in the Top 40 on country radio, but Denning says he felt a career shift in the wake of the song.

"'David Ashley Parker' is everything I love about country music. Telling stories, and it kind of gives you a sideways smirk—it's a story that everybody has lived. When we sing that in our show, even opening, you almost can't tell it wasn't a hit because it just connected with people. It just proves that there will be success on radio, there will be success on streaming, and sometimes they're not at the same time. I think as long as it connects with people, and you're moving forward and finding your fans, I think they're all victories and they're all equal."

He followed the song with his current Top 20 single "After A Few," which resurfaces Denning's early rock and blues leanings; Denning also played the guitar solo and some overdubs on the original demo for the track. Another release, "Red, White and Blue" which he co-wrote with Cole Taylor, focuses on his respect for military and growing up in that small "Air Force town" in Georgia.

"I told someone the other day, 'After a Few' is kind of the anchor of all the music that has come out and will continue to come out. Tyler Rich told me he called it dark disco country, and I wanted that dark, dangerous kind of image when you hear that song but you still drink a beer to it, you know you can still have fun."

As "After A Few" enters the Top 20 on country radio, and a new track "Abby" has just released, Denning also has a co-writing credit on Michael Ray's Top 25 single "Her World Or Mine."

"Now, that dream of having a song on the radio that I'm not singing, but that I wrote, is happening at the exact same time that my song's taking off. And honestly, it's cooler. It's way better than I could've ever imagined."