

# Rolling Stone

## Travis Denning's Shadowy 'After a Few' Is an Unconventional Summer Country Hit

Rising Nashville star breaks out at radio and streaming by singing about hook-ups and regret



Travis Denning's "After a Few" is an odd song to be a summertime country hit. A stormy account of a physical attraction that just won't quit, the brooding mid-tempo tune is shot through with longing and shadowy regret, rather than your typical warm-weather optimism. The Warner Robins, Georgia, native penned the song with writers Kelly Archer and Justin Weaver, and says he was floored by Archer's idea to have the melody start off high with the tension ratcheted all the way up.

"Hearing the sequence of that first verse going into the chorus," Denning says, "I definitely felt, 'OK, this is pretty in your face.'"

Like "After a Few" — which this week became his first Number One at country radio — Denning is something of an oddity himself in country music. His voice has hints of Don Henley and Bryan Adams, and his guitar playing peppers both his recordings and his live shows. The 27-year-old was supposed to be cultivating an audience as a supporting act on Sam Hunt's Southside Summer Tour, but with the ongoing pandemic, it could be months before he's able to get onstage, play guitar, and sing "After a Few," or any of the tracks on his EP *Beer's Better Cold*.

"I was like, 'Man, I'm excited and I'm pumped, and all these good things are happening, but I can't go do what I'm supposed to do, which is be onstage,'" Denning says, calling *Rolling Stone* in late May. "Have a beer, have fun with the band, tour the country."

Ironically, the idea of playing live was a driving force behind the songs Denning and his team assembled for *Beer's Better Cold*, released in mid-May.

“Our whole headspace was like, ‘OK, we have this huge summer tour [and] we’re the opening act. We’ve got a small amount of time to try and make an impression on people.’ If they leave that concert going, ‘Man, that Travis guy was really good’ and they go find my music, will that EP be a perfect reflection of what they saw onstage?” he says of how they put together the EP. “Now it’s funny, because we might have had a totally different perspective of what we picked if we knew what was going to happen.”

Totaling six tracks, *Beer’s Better Cold* shows off Denning’s wide stylistic range. In addition to “After a Few,” he cranks up the amps to highlight his guitar skills on “Where That Beer’s Been,” quiets down for the more intimate “Sittin’ by a Fire,” and embraces the lighthearted on “ABBY” (an acronym for “Anybody But You”). The song, built around a descending riff that has a touch of the Jackson 5’s “I Want You Back” — Denning supplied all the guitar parts on the recording — finds him unceremoniously severing ties with an ex before putting out feelers for a woman who “will love my beat-up truck and all my old country songs.”

In his late teens, Denning was already thinking about how to pursue a career in country music. He did a brief stint in college, but decided he’d rather focus his energy on performing and earning money. When he was 21, his father gave him a much-needed nudge toward Nashville.

“My dad told me flat-out in the car in front of the Flash Foods gas station, he said, ‘Travis, have you ever heard of an A-list actor from Bonaire, Georgia?’” Denning recalls. “And I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Yeah, they had to go to L.A.’ That’s all he had to say. It was like, I have to go.”

Denning introduced himself in 2018 with the debut single “David Ashley Parker From Powder Springs,” a true coming-of-age tale about the fake I.D. he used before he was 21 (Parker is a real person and makes a cameo in the song’s video). It proved to be a tough sell at country radio, stalling inside the Top 40.

“I wanted something I could sing at the Bluebird [Café] and make people laugh their asses off,” Denning says. “It was a no-brainer that it was the way I wanted to introduce myself to people. Deep down I knew it was going to be a battle to get it up the charts, because it’s specific, it’s kind of quirky and weird.”

While *Beer’s Better Cold* was just released, Denning is already thinking about new music he has in the works — a byproduct of the unexpected downtime. He’s dreaming of a full-length album and about “throwing away the blackboard and rethinking our whole year.” The possibilities, he says, are endless.

“I texted my A&R guy the other day and I said, ‘Dude, let’s scrap everything we thought of this year and let’s re-game plan,’” Denning says. “If it means more music? Killer. If it means an album sooner than we thought? I don’t know. There’s something exciting about going, ‘Well, it really sucks that everything’s gone out the window, but now we get to sit at the table again and brainstorm.’”