



Tucker Beathard Is More Than Country Music's Latest Punk

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There's a certain cachet to the name Beathard both in the world of professional athletics, where Beathards have served as general managers and quarterbacks of NFL teams, and in the close-knit Nashville music industry, where pro songwriter Casey Beathard has supplied a slew of hits to country superstars. Name recognition may have been what initially caught record labels' attention when word spread around town that his singing, songwriting, multi-instrumentalist son Tucker Beathard was serious about launching a music career, but it hasn't smoothed the path traveled by the younger Beathard, whose music possesses angst with a bit more edge than Nashville is accustomed to.

The 22-year-old is also part of another lineage, that of country music's long history of absorbing sounds and attitudes from rock, exemplified in recent years by the defiant hard rock bombast of Eric Church and Brantley Gilbert. Though millennial country acts are more likely to calibrate their sounds to the rhythmic cadences of hip-hop, R&B and mainstream pop, there have been

signs of more recent rock flavors — pop-punk and emo especially — influencing younger artists. That mini-trend finds its fullest expression by far in Beathard, whose performances you could imagine on the Warped Tour.

He signed with Big Machine Label Group at 19 and saw his debut single, "Rock On" the brooding of a guy left behind by a girl with flashier ambitions, reach the Top 10 on the Hot Country Songs chart last year. But its follow-up, "Momma and Jesus," which was powered by a snarled, sinewy guitar riff and testified to bad, button-pushing behavior, failed to register much of an impact, and Beathard, like many a headstrong artist before him, found himself somewhat at odds with his label.

So he's been touring hard, opening for established acts like Gilbert and headlining clubs in college towns, while sharing a house in the suburbs with six buddies, some of whom are in his band and one of whom apparently bunks in the pantry. Beathard's recently learned that he'll finally get to release his persuasive first album, *Dear Someone*, just a couple of weeks from now, on Nov. 17. It's comprised of songs from an earlier EP, including the deftly conversational "20-10 Tennessee" and a re-recorded version of "Fight Like Hell," whose anthemic hook is lifted by tenacious, emo-style conviction, and songs familiar only to fans who attend his shows, like "Underdogs" and "Boys That Make the Most Noise." NPR is premiering the latter, a tuneful track that showcases his scrappy spirit, sneeringly expressive drawl and taste for needling distortion.

Beathard sat down with NPR at an East Nashville cafe, clad in a trucker hat and camo t-shirt, a dressed-down get-up that wouldn't look out of place on many a young, male country contender. But he wore his pop-punk influences where his sleeve would be. Ringing his forearm, amidst a spatter of tiny tattoos, was one depicting a Blink-182 riff in musical notation. "I just Google it, honestly," he shrugs. "It could be totally wrong, because I don't know how to read music."

He was just as forthcoming about his battle of wills in the industry and his insistence on merging element of the seemingly disparate music that speaks to him.

You've been talking for a year or so about your impatience with this process. It seems like *Dear Someone* is almost an unintentional surprise album, sprung on people without much setup. The timing doesn't seem like what you would've chosen. How did that happen?

Tucker Beathard: Yeah, it's definitely not the exact way I pictured a debut album coming out for sure. I've written so many songs. ... If I had my way, I would've come out with this album two years ago, but there were some creative differences between me and the label.

That's a familiar phrase.

That's a safe way of putting it.

It could mean a lot of different things.

Basically, they were scared of the music I was making. It's not pop-country, which seems to be the only way to get on the charts nowadays. That's kinda what they wanted: anything easy to promote. For me, it's the music I feel in my heart is good, and that's the only music I know how to make and the only music I'm gonna give 'em to work with. It kinda just had them scared to pull the trigger on anything. So all I was doing was just hitting the road and trying to promote the songs live. Finally, [the wait] had gotten so long to where my great management really pushed and was like, "We've got to get more music out." ...I think it's a kinda passive aggressive way of them putting out the music, but at the end of the day, I just want to music out.

How did you decide what you were willing to try and where you needed to dig in your heels?

I never wanted to be stubborn just to be stubborn. I recognized the line of meeting halfway, and for me that was trying different producers. So I started off with Angelo [Petraglia].

Which you chose because of the Kings of Leon albums he'd made?

I wanted somebody edgy and more on the rock side who kind of understood things. ... Somebody from the label brought his name up, and I know of him, obviously, from being a Kings of Leon fan and was like, "Man, I would love to do that." So I did the EP with him and it was great. And then they wanted me to try someone else, and we agreed on working with Jonathan Singleton, which was great too. They still didn't pull the trigger on promoting anything. So I was like, "Let's work together. What is it gonna take?" ... Then I worked with the dude that they thought was the answer, Dann Huff, and I'm glad I did. It was great. I thought I was meeting them halfway, and they still were pretty scared and wouldn't do anything.

I'm pulling a lot of weight in the production, because I'm really picky about certain things. I'm playing guitar and drums on it.

On which tracks?

All of 'em, but there's maybe four on there that, for time's sake, we just got a different drummer.

I can't write a song unless it has an initial guitar something, like a riff. And then when I'd make up the riff, I'd already hear the drum beat in my head, because I started off a drummer.

How heavily did you rely on session players?

Session players are some of the best musicians, but sometimes they're almost too good to where they almost can't dumb down certain things, certain guitar riffs We didn't use 'em too much.... Some songs it was just me and Jonathan playing everything.

How did you intend your songs "The Boys That Make the Most Noise" and "Underdogs" to push back against your being told to tone it down?

They're just kind of products of built-up emotion from all that stuff, like the chip on your shoulder. ... There's other people out there that I know feel like that too, that feel like outcasts and underdogs. That's where I feel at home, is singing the songs that I sing. Most of the people who like 'em are gonna be the same people that can relate to 'em.

Were you actually told that you were too loud?

A couple years ago when we played outside LP Field for CMA Fest — the first time that people in Nashville came and checked out what we've been doing on the road for a while — one of the first things they said was, "That's too grunge, too loud." "The Boys That Make the Most Noise" is about saying, "Yeah, but you have to stand out." ... Actually, I'd be more scared if they weren't scared of the music I was making. ... The fact that it kinda scares 'em makes me wanna run with that and turn it up louder.

I'd expect any artist who grew up in the digital era to have wide-ranging listening habits. But you did list a pretty interesting assortment of influences in your official bio: Blink-182, Mindy Smith, Eminem, Rush, Filter, Deftones, Train and your dad's demos. What does that range represent for you?

When I look back, I totally get where my playing or this or that came from. ... Whether it's the heavy guitars of the Deftones or the really pretty melodies and lyrics of Mindy Smith or the angst of Eminem or the wild and fun stuff of Blink 182, it all kinda shaped me.

You encountered country music through your dad's songwriting. Did you pay more attention to his demos than to the songs he's had recorded by big acts?

I think so. He's got so many songs. ... There's only a select few that actually get put on the radio, that people actually know. So I was listening to songs that no one will ever hear of his. I guess just having access to my dad's catalog and him sharing music, it's just always been around, whether it's in the car or getting to go into the studio and hear him sing a new demo. Honestly, some of his best songs were never cut. The ones that weren't on the radio were probably the ones that influenced me the most. I just really respect his craft as a songwriter.

How did you latch onto the country songwriting approach to narrative that builds to the payoff in the hook and uses clever wordplay. That's not what you would've gotten from the other stuff you were listening to.

I think that's just a product of the demos of my dad.

Even as a misbehaving teenager, you never thought that kind of writing was corny?

Honestly, yeah, I probably did, but I think I thought it was more [because of] the music. I loved the stories that I got to hear in my dad's demos, what he was saying and the play on words. I thought lyrically that was great. So naturally when I started writing songs I just thought that was how you do it, but I'm gonna make it cool with the other influences when it comes to the music and melodies.

You weren't just melding stylistic sensibilities. The music you were into had divergent cultural values. Pop-punk is known for its disaffectedness and impatience with the monotony of suburban life, while country has often celebrated the sturdy simplicity of smalltown life. How'd you go about reconciling those values in the songs you write?

I think it's kind of a mixture of both. ... There's a lot of young attitude coming from the songs I write, but at the same time there's certain foundations that I was brought up on and feel passionate about, like faith and what you're standing for and stuff like that.

So you didn't feel the two to be in conflict?

I feel like it was natural to take a little bit from both sides. ... Just being a punk and getting in trouble as a kid, bands like Blink 182 felt like they could be my voice. ... And singing songs that are more country when it comes to moral foundations or stuff like that, it's kind of a mixture of both sides.

Your dad is your co-writer on several songs. Before you started doing your thing, he wrote a song with Eric Church, "Homeboy," that you inspired. What did you make of it at the time?

I didn't know it was about me at first. I remember I was a sophomore in high school when I first heard it. My friends at school were the ones who said, "Dude, your dad wrote 'Homeboy' about you. And I was like, "No way." I went home and asked my dad, and he was like, "Yeah. It was definitely inspired by you and your older brother."

How could they tell?

I guess they probably just knew because I'd be grounded and always getting into trouble. I guess it made sense too, my older brother being the good child and me being the opposite and us having each other's backs.

You project a "bad boy with a good heart" persona through your own music. What difference has that made to people connecting with what you're doing?

The fans who have actually taken the time and bought in and like me, it's for the right reasons. It's for what I would want someone to like me for, which is actually who I am.