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It Just Comes Natural

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VINCE GILL
Making the Most of These Days

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BARBARA MANDRELL
Cool Country Tribute



being George Strait

by PHYLIS STARK

George Strait gave a memorable lead performance as Country singer Dusty Chandler in the 1992 film "Pure Country," but hasn't been seen on film since. But with his recent induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame and with 53 No. 1 hits under his big belt buckle, Strait confessed he's considering getting Hollywood once more.

"I am starting to get the bug again," he said of acting "if the right thing was to come along. I may get serious. I need to do it again because I really enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun."

In the meantime, Strait has plenty to keep him occupied on the music side of his career, with two new albums on the market and a major tour launching in January. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in November during "The 40th Annual CMA Awards" in Nashville.

Strait released his MCA Nashville album, *It Just Comes Natural*, his 34th album, on Oct. 3. Its leadoff single, "Give It Away," gave him that 53rd No. 1 at the same time Strait marked his 25th anniversary with the label and more than 82 million albums sold.

From sophisticated Western swing and clever barroom anthems to staidest two-steppers and smoky neon ballads, *It Just Comes Natural*, featuring 15 songs, is all that and more. It's vintage Strait from Bobby Braddock's timeless tongue-in-cheek "She Told Me So," to the sensual ballad "That's My Kind of Woman," co-written by perennial Strait favorite Dean Dillon. The deceptively simple title track, penned by Jim Collins and Marv Green, is a perfect fit for Strait's smooth, unaffected style, as is the easygoing Chris Moore and Lee Roy Parrell toe-tapper, "One Foot in Front of the Other." The whimsical "Texas Cookin'," written by the legendary Guy Clark, is culinary gold mined from the mid-'70s Austin folk scene: A trio of cowboy tunes help round out the album.

Strait also has a new holiday album, *Fresh Cut Christmas*, selling exclusively — and briefly — in Hallmark Gold Crown stores for only \$7.95 each with purchase of three Hallmark cards. Hallmark reported the album sold a million copies in just its first week on the rack. The retailer is also selling special "Say Hi With Music" song cards that play Strait's version of "O Christmas Tree," as featured on the album.

As for the Hall of Fame induction, Strait said he was "totally surprised" when he first got the news. While it was something he aspired to achieve one day, Strait never thought it would happen at what he considers to be this early stage of his career. "It's such a huge honor," he said, adding that it's an "outstanding idea" to induct some artists into the Hall at the prime of their careers.

Still, Strait said, it's only now starting to sink in that he's joined the legends as a member of the Hall of Fame. "I'm starting to get a little cockier, starting to treat people a little different, look down on people a little bit," he quipped with a boisterous laugh.

Not likely.

"I'm starting to realize that this is the ultimate compliment that can be paid to an entertainer in the Country Music field," he said, more seriously. "I'm wondering what he'll else am I going to do now?"

Longtime producer Tony Brown thinks part of the appeal of his five-time CMA Male Vocalist of the Year winner is that he's not trying to reinvent the wheel. He has a strong sense of what works for him as an artist, and he sticks close to what he knows his audience wants. Consequently, Brown said, "He's still a relevant artist after all these years."

"Unlike some artists who get bored and try to reinvent themselves, he's never felt the need to do that," said Brown. "It's fun working with an artist like that because he's not trying to push the envelope. He just enjoys being George Strait."

One secret to Strait's success, according to Brown, is that "George always comes to the studio and sings like he was performing in front of 20,000 people, which inspires the band. He still has that fire in his belly."

Brown said Strait likes to use the same studio musicians for each album, and "if someone can't make it, it's always a big deal. His comfort zone is to be around people he loves working with."

After a quarter century in the business, Strait said he still finds almost everything about it enjoyable, with the exception of the travel.

"It's still a lot of fun when I walk out on stage and do the shows," Strait said. "There's just hardly any words to describe it because the crowds are just ... awesome. The traveling part is not something I look forward to, but doing the shows I love, and making the records I love."

As a touring act, Strait's performances have been consistently successful. He holds more than 20 attendance records at venues around the country.

Given the 25 years he's been on the road, and the number of venue capacity records his shows have broken, it's hard to imagine that Strait still gets nervous about performing. Yet he admitted to getting butterflies in his stomach as plans for each annual tour ramp up, with the nerves continuing until the first gig is well underway.

"That first show is always a little nerve wracking," he confessed. "After all these years you'd

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think it would just come automatic, but you still have those doubts. You just don't want to mess up. But after I walk out and I've gone through that first song, it's just like we've been doing it all your long."

Strait will kick off his next arena tour Jan. 11, 2007, at the Cajundome in Lafayette, La., which means the butterflies began for him back in October. The tour's first leg, with Ronnie Milsap in the supporting role, will encompass 20 dates ending March 3 at the Pepsi Arena in Denver. Last year, Strait grossed more than \$15 million from 18 arena dates, according to *Billboard*'s Boxscore.

After six months or more off the road, Strait prepares for a new tour by rehearsing with his act in the Hole band to "knock the cobwebs off, grease all the wheels and get back in the feel of it," he said.

Asked what it is about him as an entertainer that consistently packs arenas, Strait modestly responds, "I wish I knew." Pressed for an answer, he credited his "great band," which ensures a show that is "musically very tight." He also credited the abundance of hit songs he has to draw on, and the fact that he and the band try to perform the songs just as they sound on the CDs, something Strait believes his audience really wants.

"Other than that, I have no idea what it is," he said of his appeal.

Despite the butterflies, and his jokes about "hanging it up," Strait has no plans to quit touring anytime soon. "We've had a lot of fans for a lot of years and they're very loyal," he said. "I'm going to keep going as long as they keep coming."

On the Web: georgestrait.com

