

February 24, 2008

A Country Music Veteran Proves He's No Mere Hat Act

By KELEFA SANNEH

NASHVILLE

ALAN JACKSON, one of this era's most successful country singers, spent a recent Thursday night at the mall. To be more precise, in a theater inside the upscale shopping complex called the Factory, just south of Nashville in Franklin, Tenn. About a hundred fans had been summoned to hear him sing songs and answer questions for a special that would be broadcast on CMT, the country-music cable channel. (The questioners were vetted and selected; before Mr. Jackson arrived a CMT host told fans who hadn't been chosen not to bother raising their hands.)

Mr. Jackson will be 50 this year, and he presents himself as an old-fashioned star: a hard-working show-business professional who would rather sing than talk and rather go fishing than do either. (If this is a put-on, it's a convincing one.) But he tried his best to look comfortable while batting away softballs.

Did he have any preshow rituals? Indeed he did. "I gargle hot salt water, and then I drink apple cider vinegar," he said. "About a quart." There was a moment of silence before he chuckled and added, "I'm just kidding." Next question?

After nearly two decades of multimillion-selling albums, Mr. Jackson is part of the country music establishment, one of the most reliable hitmakers in a genre with more than its share of them. Like Toby Keith (46) and Reba McEntire (52) and the indefatigable duo of Brooks & Dunn (which will turn 108, collectively, this year), Mr. Jackson is a blue-chip veteran who seems able to churn out Top 10 hits indefinitely. He has been inspired in part by the example of his friend and occasional duet partner, [George Strait](#), 55, whose has been topping the charts for more than a quarter-century with hardly any dry spells. ("I Saw God Today," Mr. Strait's new single, recently made its debut at No. 19 on Billboard's country chart, his highest debut so far.)

This hospitality to established acts is part of what makes country music unique and, these days, uniquely profitable. The Nashville establishment is still pretty good at rewarding great singers and great songwriters. Mr. Jackson can be both, and his long, consistent career is just about unimaginable in any other genre.

Since 1990, when he first broke through, Mr. Jackson has been known as a crowd-pleasing honky-tonk hero, lumped in, by fans and detractors alike, with the so-called hat acts. (The signature Alan Jackson sound is old-fashioned but slick, a combination that tends to drive country purists nuts.) His résumé includes a dozen regular albums, two Christmas CDs and a fistful of compilations. The CMT special he was taping, "Alan Jackson: Invitation Only," is scheduled to have its premiere next Saturday. And on March 4 he releases a new album, "Good Time" (Arista Nashville); the first single, "Small Town Southern Man," has already ambled into

country's Top 10.

The day before the taping Mr. Jackson could be found nearby, at the home he shares with his wife and his three daughters, ages 10, 14 and 17 (although "home" seems too modest a word for a property that includes a lake, a field formerly used as an airstrip and a cluster of houses). Sitting in his hangar-size garage, which is stuffed with gleaming muscle cars and career souvenirs (a neon sign reading "Chasin' That Neon Rainbow," an early single; large-type lyrics to "Drive," from 2002), he sounded typically matter-of-fact as he described the new CD. "I wanted to go and make a really good country album, reminiscent of the albums I've always made," he said. A more demonstrative fellow might have shrugged.

But anyone who has been following Mr. Jackson's career knows that his forthrightness conceals a mischievous streak. He has spent the last few years cheerfully confounding the expectations of listeners who had grown used to a steady diet of drinking and love songs. Early in 2006 he released "Precious Memories," an album of gospel standards meant as a gift for his mother; it became an unexpected hit, selling more than a million copies. Later that year came "Like Red on a Rose," which was produced by Alison Krauss; that CD was conceived as a bluegrass album, but somewhere along the line it morphed into a subtle and sly collection of grown-up love songs.

So here comes "Good Time," which has widely been described as a back-to-basics move, his first straight-up country album since 2004. (A headline on a recent cover of Country Weekly magazine promised to explain "Why Alan Jackson Returned to His Roots.") And as is often the case with Mr. Jackson, the truth is a bit more complicated. In its own way, "Good Time" is just as audacious as what came before. It has 17 songs (a lot for a country album), and it is the first album of his career that has only one name — his — in the songwriting credits. But to hear him tell it, that's no big deal. He says he wound up having lots of songs, so he used 'em.

Mr. Jackson grew up in Newnan, Ga., and he moved to Nashville in 1985, just as Randy Travis and other neo-traditionalists were finding huge success by declining to compete with pop stars. Like many country stars, he had a publishing deal before he had a recording contract. He finally released his debut album, "Here in the Real World," in 1990, and it was a smash, spawning four Top 5 country hits. Although Mr. Jackson sings ballads beautifully, he became known for playful songs like "Gone Country" (a gentle and startlingly prescient jab at Nashville carpetbaggers), "Don't Rock the Jukebox" (a cunningly uptempo song about a guy in a downtempo mood) and "Chattahoochee" (which begins, infectiously, "Way down yonder on the Chattahoochee/It gets hotter'n a hoochie-coochie").

He doesn't deny getting sick of the tried-and-true. "Certain songs had a similar feel or similar guitar intro," he said. "And when you'd kick them off onstage, you'd have to think, 'O.K., which song are we playing?'" At times he seemed to be succeeding on reputation alone, as in 2000, when he managed to nudge a malformed U.R.L. — a wisp of a song called "[www.memory](#)" — up the chart.

People who are not country fans might have been surprised by Mr. Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)," a post-9/11 song that resonated in part because it was so restrained, as if he couldn't bring himself to do much more than sigh. But longtime listeners already knew that his versatility was related to his seeming stoicism: chuckling at heartbreak or shrugging through a love song, he tempts listeners to imagine all the things he's not expressing.

There's no question that Mr. Jackson is a country kingpin, respected even by the impatient young singers who complain that the country industry relies too heavily on proven hit makers like him. But outside the world of country music, Mr. Jackson is often viewed less respectfully, not as an American original but as a Nashville clone.

Mainstream country singers like him are routinely written off or ignored by listeners and critics who claim to champion the real thing. No profile of a quirky singer-songwriter or an aging pioneer is complete without a lazy swipe at the supposed intolerance of the Nashville plutocracy or the cravenness of country-radio programmers.

The truth is that country remains one of America's most vital commercial radio formats, driven by a singularly weird mix of teenagers and parents of teenagers, pop melodrama and old-school stoicism. (The loyalty of older, nondownloading listeners may help explain country's relatively healthy sales figures.) And the genre's obsession with tradition clashes in unexpected and interesting ways with its need for glamour and novelty.

Like many country-music success stories Mr. Jackson has criticized the genre — in “Murder on Music Row,” a duet with Mr. Strait, he sang, “The almighty dollar and the lust for worldwide fame/Slowly killed tradition, and for that someone should hang” — while also learning to play by its rules. He is a self-styled maverick but also a skilled craftsman who knows he has a job to do. In a city where the words “artist” and “entertainer” are used interchangeably, it helps to be flexible.

Mr. Jackson's flexibility may have been tested last year when his wife, Denise Jackson, published “It's All About Him: Finding the Love of My Life” (Thomas Nelson). It's a graceful book about how their marriage, which began in 1979, was saved by her renewed Christian faith (that “Him” isn't a “him”), and it found its way to the top of the New York Times best-seller list.

She reduced the juicy parts to a five-word sentence, putting the matter plainly without divulging any details: “Alan had not been faithful.” Asked about the book, Mr. Jackson said, “We're as happy as we've ever been.” But Ms. Jackson's conclusion in the book, though optimistic, is more bittersweet. The final chapter is called, “Happily Ever After, Even When We're Not.”

If the added scrutiny changed Mr. Jackson's approach to songwriting, he's not fessing up. “Good Time” is a handsome and slightly shaggy album, starting with that well-burnished first single, “Small Town Southern Man.” The lyrics are a moving tribute from one old-school paterfamilias to another. (In the video Mr. Jackson sings through the decades; the clothes change but the music stays gratifyingly steady.) And “Long Long Way” upholds the venerable tradition of deceptively cheerful bluegrass. “Don't think I've ever seen so many shades of blue,” Mr. Jackson sings as a mandolin goes scampering by.

One of the few low points is “Country Boy,” a mildly suggestive bit of nonsense about giving a woman a ride. (It could have been worse, or maybe better; he says his wife vetoed the original lyrics as “too risqué.”) But mostly the album is a joy, well made and packed with the clever musical details that make Mr. Jackson's best music so satisfying.

“I Wish I Could Back Up” is a beautiful and rueful love song that may send listeners running for their copies

of his wife's book. But instead of the expected string section, Keith Stegall, Mr. Jackson's longtime producer, added an accordion line, giving the song a faint hint of the exotic.

And when Mr. Jackson talked about "I Still Like Bologna," a half-serious ode to the good old days, the car mechanic in him came out. "We stripped that song down to nothing," he said. "It's got clean tick-tack bass, along with an upright." Runs pretty good.

Onstage in Franklin on the next night, he took "I Still Like Bologna" out for a test drive, and he seemed pleased when his fans, most of whom hadn't heard it before, chuckled in the right places. His folksy disinclination to take himself seriously creates an illusion of intimacy while also keeping listeners at arm's length. It may also explain how he has lasted so long and aged so well. When the song was over, he looked up and cracked half a smile. "That was touchin', wudnit?"

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