



"It's Only Monday," the debut single from country newcomer Brice Long, is a sad song with a sunny side.

The evocative power ballad paints a post-breakup picture of a man struggling to put his life back together on a back-to-work, running-late, stuck-in-traffic Monday, leaving him the rest of the week -- indeed, the rest of his life -- to figure out what went wrong.

Where's the sunny side, you ask, in *that*?

It's not in the magnificently melancholy storyline of the song, but in Brice's stunning vocal performance, marked with bright, full-octave leaps from his regular baritone into an upper musical register on the chorus that sound like no one else on the radio. It's a soaring display of vocal artistry that announces the sun is shining on a new kid in town -- and he's a real contender.

"I've tried in the past several years to figure out what it is as an artist that makes me different, and to expand on those things," says Brice. "One thing is the vocal range that I have. I love to sing in that register. There are not a whole lot of acts who do that."

Indeed, there aren't a lot of acts who sound like Brice -- or who have his bona fide country credentials. Raised on a 60-acre farm just outside of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, he grew up working the fields, tending cattle and hogs and keeping his ears glued to the local country radio station.

"Country music was on the radio in the truck, on the tractor, in the barn," he says. "Whatever was happening--if we were stripping tobacco, there was a radio with country music. I remember Daddy planting beans, and me riding on the fender of our John Deere tractor, holding on with an arm around that radio."

"I just couldn't get enough. I would've crawled inside that radio if I could."

Now he *is* inside that radio, with "It's Only Monday," the first single from his self-titled Columbia Records debut album produced by Mark Wright (Gretchen Wilson) and Keith Stegall (Alan Jackson). It's a safe bet more radio exposure will follow from the album's strong lineup of songs about loving, losing and living it up, and from Brice's performances that segue easily from honky-tonk to high-class.

Even though Brice grew up with country music in the very air that he breathed, it wasn't until he was older that he actually considered making it a career. For one thing, there were too many other chores around the farm to keep him, and his older brother, occupied.

"Daddy worked for Bell South, the phone company, as well," says Brice. "But we farmed a *lot*."

Daddy worked sunup to sundown. And, of course, as kids, we fell right in there behind him. Had to--there wasn't much choice."

Like so much else about his young life, his musical tastes were based on the influences of his mom, dad and extended family.

"My dad's whole side of the family played and sang," remember Brice. Holidays, birthdays and other special occasions meant big get-togethers, with lots of food and an inevitable sing-along to follow. "Mamaw played piano, Daddy played guitar and my great uncle played fiddle. And my Daddy's brothers and sisters also sang, so the harmony thing was always there.

"Music was just always around. I don't remember music not being around, to tell you the truth. I can't remember *not* singing."

The first public performance he can recall was during an annual Sunday service for children at his grandmother's church. "Me and my brother and my older cousin sang 'I Shall Not Be Moved,'" remembers Brice. "My grandmother played piano. I was probably four."

In the years to follow, Brice sang at "just about every church in the area," and at weddings, talent shows and with his school choir. After graduating high school, he began taking the stage at nightclubs. His father encouraged his musical ambitions, but began to worry when Brice started getting serious about another pursuit--the rodeo circuit.

"I grew up riding horses and working cattle at home," he says. "I've always been drawn to the cowboy lifestyle."

In some ways, Brice came by his interest honestly. "Daddy roped calves when he was younger," he says. "But he never really wanted me to get into roping in high school, because he knew it was something that would really get into your blood, and that's all you'd want to do."

Daddy was right. After high school, Brice started hanging out with some older guys who were into competitive roping. He got to be a pretty good team roper himself as a "header," who tosses his lariat first, around the steer's horns. Brice started hitting the rodeo circuit in Kentucky, Missouri and Illinois.

"And started winning," he says. "And after you win once, it's over. You're bit."

He recalls being outside the house, on evenings after the chores were wrapped up, waiting for the dinner bell and practicing his roping. "I had this roping dummy, a steer head," says Brice, "and my dad would ride by on the tractor and yell, 'Don't let that get in the way of your guitar!'"

His father's advice eventually took hold and Brice turned his attention back to music -- and Nashville. He started making the hour-and-a-half drive into town frequently, performing at weekly open-mic nights in nightclubs. He also worked opening spots for nationally touring country acts who'd come through the central Kentucky region. One of them was Eddie Rabbitt, whose manager encouraged Brice to get serious about his music and bring it on down to Nashville. Two years later, in 1993, that's exactly what he did.

In Nashville, Brice started hanging out with a group of similarly minded young singer-songwriters, finishing college at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro and eventually getting his foot in the door with an internship in the publishing division of Reba McEntire's Starstruck Entertainment company.

His internship job involved "making tape copies, hanging out and getting to meet all the writers." One of those writers was another Nashville hopeful named Darryl Worley, still several years away from his smash hit "Have You Forgotten." Darryl gave Brice a place to sleep on the couch in the apartment he shared with another aspiring songwriter, where Brice later became a full-fledged roommate when the other writer moved out. He and Darryl remained roommates for seven years, until 2004.

Through his growing network of connections, Brice landed his first paid songwriting job at a publishing company, which also happened to be with Starstruck.

His reputation as a writer grew and Music Row started to take notice as John Michael Montgomery, Josh Turner, Randy Travis and others put their imprint on tunes he had written. Gary Allan turned Brice's "Nothing On But the Radio" into Brice's first cut to reach #1 on the charts. Gary also recorded "Sorry," which Brice now revisits on his own debut.

In 2004, Brice was signed by Sony, which teamed him with award winning producers Mark Wright (Gretchen Wilson/Brooks & Dunn) and Keith Stegall (Alan Jackson) for his debut project. Brice co-wrote eight of the eleven songs on the album.

When it came time to consider the visual image to go with the music, Brice knew one thing from the start -- he didn't want to be another male country singer in boots and a cowboy hat.

"I wore a hat for a long time," he admits. "But as my music progressed, and I really started to identify myself as an artist, what I really wanted to present was the whole picture. I don't want to make it sound like I'm not for hats and boots and all that stuff, 'cause I am. It's country. But there's just been so much of it. For me, it always seemed like, 'Well, you really don't know who you are, so let's put a hat, a shirt and some boots on you and put you out there.' That's really what I wanted to stay away from."

I'm just trying to do something that stays true to what I am. And I'm just as at home in a pair of jeans and boots as a hip, stylish suit." "I love all that, the whole cowboy lifestyle. But, there's more to me than just that, especially as an artist."

Country's hardcore honky-tonk and suave cosmopolitan textures find a natural fit in Brice, who grew up digging the entire spectrum of country's Top 40 of the '70s and '80s, when radio shuffled the gritty barroom balladry of Gary Stewart with the smooth sensuality of Conway Twitty and the rollicking R&B fire of Charlie Rich.

"I love the soulful side of country--Charlie Rich, Gary Stewart, Conway. And I love R&B music--Al Green and the blues. So when you entwine all that together, I feel like what we've got is more a presentation of me as an artist, instead of 'Here's another hat act.'"

Brice hopes listeners of his album will feel a certain "soulful" connection with his music--and feel like they're listening to someone who can connect, in a personal way, to the songs he's singing.

"I feel like this record captures my personality in a lot of the songs and represents me in a lot of ways," he explains. "It captures the fact that I love to have fun at what I'm doing. But there's also a serious side that realizes how important it is to have love and family, to enjoy all the times that you spend, be it with your wife or your friends in a bowling alley."

"I've learned, especially from writing songs, that you have to live and you have to love to really touch people," he continues. "You have to take a shot; you have to take a chance at just about everything that comes along. Because if you don't, when it's all over, you look back and say, 'I wish I'd done that,' or 'I wish I had just called her' or 'I wish I'd gone swimming that day.' All those things come together to develop a life, and that's where great songs come from."

As he gears up to promote his new album and head out into country's fast lane, Brice admits his roots are never far from the surface. For one thing, he married a gal from "back home"—his wife is a Kentucky native, too. For another, the words and work ethic of his father, and the lessons of the family farm, are still very much instilled in him. They got him through more than ten frustrating years of struggle, subsistence-level living and success by agonizingly small increments. They saw him through to where he ultimately wanted to be -- a recognized, successful singer-songwriter with his own record deal. And he knows they'll be with him as he continues to grow his career.

The way he was raised, says Brice, "taught me if you were gonna do something, it was gonna take a lot of work, and the only way to get it done is to *do it*. Get in there and roll up your sleeves and get after it."

"This business is that way -- no matter how tough it gets, you stick with the job until you get done. No matter how hot it was out there in the tobacco patch, you couldn't quit; that was just something you couldn't do. You had to keep going until you got it done.

"I don't know if it's a blessing or a curse," he says with a smile. "But maybe I'm just hard headed enough to have to prove to somebody that, 'You know what? This is what I wanna do.'" He pauses. "And this is what I'm *gonna* do."

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For More Information, Contact:  
Anita Mandell  
Director, Press & Publicity Sony Nashville  
PH: (615) 858-1315  
E: [anita.mandell@sonybmj.com](mailto:anita.mandell@sonybmj.com)

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