

Brooks & Dunn

#1s ... and then some

It was the country music equivalent of a sonic boom – a sound so bold, so different and so powerful it sent shock waves throughout country radio and up the charts. That sound was “Brand New Man,” the chart-topping debut single that heralded the high-octane arrival of Brooks & Dunn in 1991. Kix Brooks and Ronnie Dunn came out with musical guns blazing and in the years since have become the most successful duo in the history of country music.

Brooks & Dunn’s creative journey unfolds on *#1s ...and then some*, a sweeping 30-song set that includes such chart-topping hits as “Neon Moon,” “My Next Broken Heart,” “Husbands and Wives,” “Ain’t Nothing ‘Bout You,” “Only in America” and “Red Dirt Road.” The collection also includes the fast-climbing new single “Honky Tonk Stomp,” a swampy anthem that features Billy Gibbons, and “Indian Summer,” a picturesque coming-of-age tale about young love and consequences.

“We were playing at a fair and I just remember looking out behind it and there was a wheat field out there. It all came together in my head. I just started thinking this little adventure story about a girl who got hooked up with a football player,” recalls Brooks, who enlisted Bob DiPiero and Dunn to help finish the tune.

“Honky Tonk Stomp” was penned by Dunn, Bobby Pinson and Terry McBride. “Pinson said, ‘I’ve got this weird idea,’ and away we went. We wrote the song without a title, and I’m going, ‘What do we call it?’ So finally I said, ‘Okay, it’s “Honky Tonk Stomp,”” says Dunn, who then enlisted Gibbons to add his distinctive vocal flair.

“Indian Summer” and “Honky Tonk Stomp” fit comfortably among the Brooks & Dunn classics on *#1s ...and then some*. Those 23 #1 hits are touchstones in an impressive body of work that has helped define country music during the last two decades. When Brooks & Dunn’s debut landed in 1991, the first four singles – “Brand New Man,” “My Next Broken Heart,” “Neon Moon,” and “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” – all went to #1 on *Billboard*’s Country singles chart. Their debut album, *Brand New Man*, has been certified six times platinum. Since that auspicious debut, Brooks & Dunn have reigned supreme, charting more than 50 singles, releasing 10 studio albums, two greatest hits packages and a Christmas collection. Two of their #1 hits, “My Maria” and “Ain’t Nothing ‘Bout You,” were named *Billboard*’s #1 country singles of the year in 1996 and 2001, respectively.

The duo’s list of accolades is almost too numerous to mention, encompassing over 80 major industry awards and more than 30 million albums sold. Brooks & Dunn have won 19 Country Music Association Awards, including Entertainer of the Year in 1996. They won the CMA Vocal Duo honor every year from 1992 through 2006, except for 2000. Their hit “Believe” won Single and Video of the Year in 2006. They’ve won three American Music Awards for Favorite Country Band, Duo or Group and two Grammys

for Best Country Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal, for “My Maria” and “Hard Workin’ Man.” They are the most awarded of any act – duo or otherwise – in the history of the Academy of Country Music, capturing 26 ACM trophies in all, including three Entertainer of the Year titles.

The Brooks & Dunn juggernaut began when the former head of their record label at Arista Nashville was looking to sign a duo and introduced the two songwriters. “It’s so common in Nashville for people to hook people up,” says Brooks. “For me, it was just another day at the bank, you know, where you go in and hope something good happens. The thought of having a 20-year career with this guy was impossible! I mean, there was no chance THAT was going to happen. The chance that we might get a record deal, possibly have some success and make some royalties off our songs – that’s kind of what I was thinking of as best case scenario.”

Though both were initially hesitant to pin their hopes too high, the creative chemistry was immediate. They wrote their first two #1 hits – “Brand New Man” and “My Next Broken Heart” – the same day. “I went home, I remember, after writing ‘Next Broken Heart’ and telling [my wife] Janine I didn’t like the song,” Ronnie laughs. “And it became a #1 song! It was the second #1 off the record. So we wrote two #1s that day.”

Both brought considerable writing chops to the table. Brooks was a Shreveport, Louisiana native, who had already spent nearly a decade in Nashville and was a successful songwriter with cuts by John Conlee, Highway 101, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. He also had a solo album under his belt on Capitol Records. Dunn was born in Coleman, Texas but had migrated to Tulsa after college and become one of the hottest artists on the competitive Oklahoma club scene, winning the Marlboro Talent Competition and starting to turn heads in Nashville with original songs such as “Neon Moon” and “Boot Scootin’ Boogie.”

They both knew what audiences would respond to and knew what was already being served to the masses. They had a burning desire to offer something different, and they knew how to deliver. “One thing that’s made me smile over the years is people talking about hearing that record for the first time, and talking about the sound of it and how progressive it was,” Brooks says of their debut.

Brand New Man was named Album of the Year by the Academy of Country Music in 1992. “Our world really changed then. I remember distinctly,” says Brooks. “That award show was the same week that ‘Neon Moon’ went number one.”

“It shows you how important award shows are for new acts especially,” adds Dunn. “Suddenly people recognize you and put a face with the song. As soon as those award shows were over, we were on the bus. We’d be gone for 150 or more dates. So a lot of it is a blur.”

Those early days were a hazy mélange of headlights, spotlights, #1 parties and lonely miles on the road. Yet sweet memories somehow rise above the roar of the bus engines

and screams of the fans. Kicking back, the duo reminisce on the images evoked by the music on *#1s ...and then some*.

There was the night they discovered “Rock My World (Little Country Girl),” penned by Bill LaBounty and Steve O’Brien. “I remember getting that in an envelope and listening to it and going, ‘This is fun,’” says Brooks.

Adds Dunn, “I remember you playing it for me in a hotel and going, ‘What do you think?’ And [I said] ‘that’s our audience right now.’ So we went for it. We heard the song and the line went by, ‘She acts like Madonna but she listens to Merle.’ We looked at each other and said, ‘Turn the tape off – we’re cutting it!’”

They recall recording “She’s Not the Cheatin’ Kind” for their third album, *Waitin’ on Sundown*. “It was towards the end of the session, we were almost through with the CD and I had played a little bit of it for [producer] Don Cook,” Dunn says. “I remember him having an acoustic guitar and he said, ‘Play that song you were playing yesterday, play that “Cheatin’ Kind”’ and everybody sat down, as we do in Nashville, and scribbled out a chart. Brent Mason was a big part of those records back then. He came up with some brilliant, great guitar riffs just out of the blue. I remember we’d sit down and Lonnie on drums would hit it to run through it. All of a sudden here would come that lick from Brent. He did that on a lot of stuff. It brought those tracks to life.”

Kix remembers the first time he heard “Believe,” which was written by Ronnie and Craig Wiseman. “He had a work tape, singing with a guitar, and the first time I heard that song, it just killed me,” Brooks says. “It’s a spiritual song and that’s what moves people, but there’s such a difference in songs that are about religion and songs about God. It’s such delicate territory because you’re on real sacred ground, and to be able to write a song that sets right there in the pocket that people can just grab a hold of and it gives them some peace and inspires them, it’s real special to land on one like that.”

There are also fond memories of life on the road, and the friends who helped them on their way to headline status. “The year that ‘Boot Scoot’ went #1, we were on tour with Reba, and [her husband] Narvel actually came back to the dressing room and gave us a raise,” Brooks recalls. “He said, ‘You guys are hotter than what I’m paying you, and I don’t want this to come back to haunt me.’ And he gave us a raise. When we got off that tour, we were starting to play dates by ourselves here and there, and we were selling out. We didn’t immediately go to major coliseums or amphitheaters, but we did headline a tour in smaller buildings. They all did well, and we stepped up from there.”

And step it up they did. Over the years, Brooks & Dunn have become known for their high-energy live shows and innovative tour strategies like the Neon Circus Tour. “We had the idea of making country music shows an experience,” says Dunn. “You’d come and there’d be bikers and there’d be cowboy clowns on stilts and things like that. We were trying to set it up like a rodeo circus kind of vibe.”

“Auditioning those guys at that time was hysterical,” recalls Brooks. “I remember going to the management office one day, and they were all coming in and doing their stuff. There was a fire breather, and he was fixin’ to give our manager Clarence [Spalding] a big old shot of kerosene.”

Sadly, all good things do come to an end, and with the release of *#1s ...and then some*, Brooks & Dunn have announced they are going their separate ways following a 2010 tour, appropriately called “The Last Rodeo.” “After 20 years of making music and riding this trail together, we have agreed as a duo that it’s time to call it a day,” the duo announced on their website. “This ride has been everything and more than we could ever have dreamed.”

In trying to analyze their phenomenal success, Kix says, “There’s not an easy answer. It’s a dynamic that neither one of us understands and certainly would never have dreamed that we could have survived this long.”

Ultimately what drew them together in the first place and kept them at the top for so long boils down to one thing – the music. “The music has to drive you,” says Ronnie. “That’s just it. You follow it. You follow the songs.”

For 20 years, Brooks & Dunn have let the music drive them to heights no other country duo has ever reached. They’d be the first to tell you, it’s been one hell of a great ride. Yet even after they take their final bow together, the music will live on, and their place in country music history cemented by those *#1s ...and then some*.