

# *Craig Morgan*

## *That's Why*

### Biography

When Craig Morgan was ten years old and on a school field trip to Nashville, he sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” well enough to catch the ear of a distinctive older lady in the crowd. “She walked up to me and said, ‘Son, someday you’re gonna be a famous singer,’” Morgan remembers. Two-plus decades later, he’d be looking at a picture of the woman—Minnie Pearl—in the Ryman Auditorium dressing room that bears her name, getting ready for his first performance on the Grand Ole Opry. What Minnie didn’t know was that before his moment in the spotlight finally came, Morgan would be an EMT, a contractor, a sheriff’s deputy and a Wal-Mart assistant dairy manager. He’d also spend ten years serving his country in the U.S. Army.

But *THAT’S WHY* Morgan is one of country music’s most beloved performers. It doesn’t matter if he’s jumping out of airplanes, putting gallon jugs on a refrigerated shelf or singing hits like “Redneck Yacht Club,” “Almost Home” and “Tough”—his honesty, humility and work ethic stand out as strongly as his talent. *THAT’S WHY*, the long-awaited follow-up to 2006’s *Little Bit of Life*, is Morgan’s fifth album and BNA Records debut. From the evocative and instantly familiar single “Love Remembers” to the rural rally cry of “Sticks” to the church-choir epic “Ordinary Angels,” it’s the sound of an artist soaring to new heights as both a vocalist and songwriter, but with his steel-toed boots still firmly on the ground (the same cannot be said, however, for the tires of his Kawasaki motorbike). As *Music Row*’s Bob Oermann wrote, “Craig Morgan is country music’s champion of the Everyman—a loyal husband and father, unblushingly sentimental, tough enough to kick your butt if you cross him, and the kind of friend everyone would like to have.”

*That’s why I keep swinging this hammer...break my back for a slice of that American pie,* Morgan sings on *THAT’S WHY*’s stirring title track, his stout voice ringing out with such authority and passion that you know the sentiment is no less true now that the hammer’s been replaced with a guitar. Morgan’s father played in country bands (and his grandfather was a farmer), but “I didn’t think music was something that I’d ever do for a living,” he says. As it turns out, selling records, being on the radio and playing some 200 shows a year has only made him embrace fatherhood and family more firmly. Morgan has four children with his wife, Karen, as well as a daughter from a previous marriage; they live just a few miles from the farmland in Dickson, Tennessee, where his mother and father went on their first date. “Family truly is the thing that’s most important,” Morgan says. “I love the music; I love singing and writing songs and producing records. But ultimately, I do what I have to do to take care of my family. Even someone who has the greatest job in the world would rather spend more time at home. I know I would, and I have *the* best job in the world.”

He’s certainly become quite good at it. “That’s What I Love About Sunday,” from Morgan’s 2005 album *My Kind of Livin’*, was the most played country song that year. Three songs off of *Little Bit of Life* (the title track, “Tough” and “International Harvester”), enjoyed stays in the Top 10, and he was nominated for Top New Male Vocalist by the Academy of Country Music in both 2006 and 2007. Truth is, you can’t tune in to a country station anywhere in the United States without hearing a Craig Morgan song within the hour. But he’s also just a bit like that great actor everybody knows and recognizes from

a big successful movie, yet can't quite place on sight. *Oh, that guy!* "People know the music," Morgan says. "When they come to my shows, they might know the latest single, or they may know a previous single. But sometimes I can read their lips: they're going, 'oh, I didn't know he sang that one!' Or, 'I forgot about that song!'"

The move to BNA from indie Broken Bow (after a heated bidding war) is bound to change that quickly. It's a full-circle move for Morgan, who released his self-titled first record for Atlantic Nashville in 2000, but declined to stay with Warners when the imprint folded. Instead, he went on a five-year run as country's most successful independent mainstream artist. Even in this troubled time for the recording industry, Morgan welcomes the additional support and distribution oomph of a more established label. "I went to an independent when everybody thought it was crazy, and now I'm going to a major when everybody thinks that's crazy," Morgan says. "I'm hoping this one works out as well as the first decision did."

Morgan and his longtime friend and partner Phil "Philbilly" O'Donnell have always been actively involved in choosing the songs they didn't write themselves, and always co-produced the records. "Producing is an aspect of the business that I love, because there's a creative process that takes place in the studio, outside and away from the writing and the singing," he says. Nothing's changed this time around. "We did all the same stuff we've done on the past three records. The only difference is, we get pitched better material. Both the writers I already know and people that I haven't written with, because of the success we've had, have started pitching me great songs."

Morgan's gift is for, as he puts it, "real-life stuff." His eye for the everyday, whether he's trying to make sense of a world where kids want iPods for Christmas instead of BB guns, or describing girls with ponytails tucked in their baseball caps, is so unerring that it's easy to overlook just how much goes into the songwriting. On the aching, piano-and-steel tinged ballad "Lookin' Back with You," Morgan spins today's most precious moments into tomorrow's cherished memories—nearly every line is ripped right from his life, but every line is also the work of an exquisite craftsman, whether he's going for humor, pathos or a mundane detail. *When my new truck is my old truck/and I take off these big old tires/and it's our turn to slow down traffic everywhere*, he sings. Elsewhere, "Sticks," with its bluegrass bar band vibe, seems destined to supplant John Mellencamp's "Small Town" as an American classic of both rock'n'roll and country. *I was raised in the sticks/that's where I get my kicks ... tailgatin' with my buddies/boots and dog and tires all muddy*. And if Morgan keeps writing songs like "Planet Her" for Karen, he may not ever need to get her birthday presents. "Ah, she's not much for the music," he jokes. "She'd still rather have a Corvette."

On "Lookin' Back with You," Morgan envisions the two of them in "Cracker Barrel rockers" but it's probably safe to say he isn't ready to trade in his KX-450 yet. Before most concerts Morgan jumps his bike across the stage; he attended the 2006 ACM Awards on crutches after crashing in a race. At the same time, he's also famously at home going 5 mph on a combine (International Harvester is now one of Morgan's sponsors). "I find great comfort and ease of mind at both," he says. "The great thing about being on a tractor is it slows your world down a little bit. Your thought process changes. It gives you a chance to reflect. On the motorcycle, I'm not thinking about anything but riding. For me, relaxing is getting on my motorcycle and going as fast as I can and as long as I can through the woods."

Needless to say, Morgan's full-on personality made him well-suited for the military. He spent 10 years on active duty in the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, and goes overseas to perform USO shows every chance he gets. "Sometimes you walk away feeling regret: that I should be there with them still," he says. "But I'm starting to appreciate what I can do now for those men and women

outside of being a soldier. Doing stuff for the USO will always be a priority for me.” Morgan received the 2006 USO Merit Award for his involvement, joining the likes of Steven Spielberg, Elizabeth Taylor, and Bob Hope as a recipient.

As with the touring, being in the military made him value home and family as much as ever. And he still runs his country music operation like an Army unit. “My dad and mom raised me to be grateful and thankful and appreciative,” he says. “They always told me, if somebody loans you something, give it back in better shape than what you get it in.” Thus, Morgan and the band and road crew sweep the stage before and after shows, and are not likely to ever get an angry phone call from a motel clerk. After most gigs Morgan’s right there with them loading up the truck. “Something in my genes and my blood requires that I work—right or wrong, it makes me feel like a man,” Morgan says with a laugh. “People ask me how I stay grounded ... man, I go home and I still mow my own grass. I clean my own pool. I have kids that I get onto and play with and love the same as everybody else. I will always be that same guy. Just like the people who buy our records and listen to our music.”

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