



JIMMY WAYNE

Sara Smile

“Sara Smile” is more than another hit record for Jimmy Wayne. Much more.

“For 13 years, I have been singing that song,” he explains. “I sang it on the prison yard when I worked at the prison. Even though I didn’t write it, I sang it at writers’ nights in Nashville. It is the song that taught me how to play the guitar. In 2002, I sang ‘Sara Smile’ for Scott Borchetta, and he gave me a record deal. This song has had a major impact on my life.”

Jimmy Wayne’s remake of the Hall & Oates pop classic is now the centerpiece of an album that showcases his formidable talents as both a vocalist and a songwriter. His soulful singing permeates every note of such soaring, powerful ballads as “All the Time in the World,” “Belongs to You” and “Counting the Days.” He rocks splendidly on “There’s a Memory” and “Things I Believe.”

As a songwriter, Jimmy Wayne is uplifting and inspirational on “Just Knowing You Love Me.” He is soft, romantic and dreamy in “Just Look at You.” “Elephant Ears” is touching and tender. In “I’ll Never Leave You,” which he wrote alone, he finds a new way to explore a loving relationship.

The new album caps what has been an extraordinary year for Jimmy Wayne. “Do You Believe Me Now” soared to the top of the country charts, was No. 1 for three weeks and became one of the biggest hits of 2008-2009. He toured with Brad Paisley and Dierks Bentley and played Madison Square Garden. Nashville Lifestyles magazine named him one of its “Beautiful People of 2009.”

“It’s been amazing,” he says gratefully. “It just goes to show you what perseverance can do. That, plus having a great team.”

In 2008, Jimmy Wayne’s career was stone cold. “Do You Believe Me Now” turned him into one of the greatest comeback stories in modern country-music history.

Adversity is nothing new to this gifted artist. As his fans know, Jimmy Wayne survived a turbulent, abusive childhood. His father abandoned the family. His mother went to prison, and he was shuttled to a series of foster homes. His stepfather tried to murder him. He was a homeless teen, living by his wits on the street.

“I became very independent. I had to depend on myself. Folks ask me why I don’t drink. It’s because I needed and wanted to be very conscious of what I was doing at all times. That’s what helped me to survive.”

A North Carolina couple named Russell and Beatrice Costner took him in and encouraged his evolving love of music. At the time, he was singing and writing in a variety of styles, rock, country and even rap and opera.

“When I was about 15, I was on a school bus. I was just kind of staring out the window and singing a song. A girl in front of me turned around. She asked, ‘Is that you singing? That was really good.’ I was real shy. I’ve always been a loner. I never had any friends. I just never was the type of person to reach out to people. I spent a lot of time in my bedroom alone, playing music and writing. That day, I remember standing there and, like, hearing my singing voice for the first time.

“Then when I was in the 12th grade in high school, there was a convict from a local prison who came to our school. He was in a Think Smart program. He played and sang and told his story. All the years prior, I’d been experimenting with different styles of music. I was writing stories, which were songs. But I really didn’t know what to call them. When I saw that convict sing, I looked around and saw everybody in that auditorium being very moved. I remember saying to myself, ‘That’s what I want to do, exactly what he’s doing.’ He called it ‘country music.’ He said, ‘I’m a country singer.’ I’m like, ‘Really? I guess that’s what I am, too.’ That led to me getting a guitar.”

Jimmy Wayne worked his way through school in a textile mill. Then he became a North Carolina prison guard. Talent scouts from Nashville’s Opryland theme park came through his area, auditioning potential performers.

“I showed up, and I was the very last person to audition. Mike Whelan was there from the Opryland Music Group. I told him I wrote, but I forgot the words to the song. Then I sang ‘Love Me’ by Collin Raye and a Garth Brooks song, ‘Papa Loved Mama.’”

That audition led to an offer for him to write songs for the Opryland Music Group’s famed Acuff-Rose firm. He turned in his resignation at the prison, moved to Nashville on a Sunday morning in 1998 and started writing songs full time that Monday.

“I didn’t even know what a publishing company was. When I got here, I knew I wasn’t ready. But as much of a loner as I was, I wasn’t afraid to talk to people so that I could learn.”

He concentrated on improving his guitar playing, his vocal style and his songwriting skills. In 1999, Tracy Byrd had a hit with “Put Your Hand in Mine,” which Jimmy Wayne co-wrote with Skip Ewing. Three years later came that fateful audition with “Sara Smile,” which led to a recording contract with DreamWorks Records. His debut CD appeared in 2003 and spawned the top-10 hits “Stay Gone” and “I Love You This Much,” plus the top-20 chart successes “You Are” and “Paper Angels.” The last-named won him the William Booth Award from the Salvation Army in 2005 and has since become a perennial holiday favorite.

But DreamWorks shut its doors in 2005, and Jimmy Wayne’s career momentum was stopped abruptly. Former DreamWorks executive Scott Borchetta offered him a new contract with the Valory Music Company. But it took awhile to find the right comeback vehicle.

“I was in survival mode. I didn’t panic. I thought, ‘I have got to write and I have got to look for the right songs. It all comes down to a song.’ I knew that much. I said, ‘I have got to find THE song, and I won’t stop until I do.’ It was stressful. There was nothing going on. I was donating a lot of my time to charity and playing as much as possible. I was off the radar for three or four years, just trying to find that huge song that was, hopefully, going to get me a resurrected career. And then I stumbled across ‘Do You Believe Me Now,’ and, of course, that became the song. That was the comeback.”

It was followed by “I Will,” which also became a hit. While recording the songs for both the Do You Believe Me Now and Sara Smile albums, Jimmy Wayne worked with a variety of producers. But the sheer power of his performances make both albums into seamless listening experiences.

“I have been given this gift,” he says quietly. “And I want to use it well. I’ve been given this great opportunity. I want to go back and give hope through my music, somehow. I visit these homes, and I talk to these kids as young adults. It’s one of my passions. It’s hard, but I actually enjoy doing that.

“My goal is to build a foundation based on hit songs. Someday, I’d like to build an orphanage for kids who are too old to be adopted.

“I don’t see myself as anything like a ‘star.’ I don’t think that I’m better than the person I’m singing to. I’m just doing what I love to do. And the fans are the reason I’m allowed to do it.

“Sometimes it’s just wild the way things work out. There was this really good baseball player in our high school. We used to go down to the grocery store and wait for our girlfriends who worked there to come out on breaks. I asked him, ‘So what do you want to do when you get out of high school?’ He said, ‘I’d like to go to college or become a professional baseball player.’ He asked me what I wanted to do. And I said, ‘I want to be a professional country singer.’

“We didn’t stay in contact. The day I got my record deal, I remember I was celebrating by myself. I went down to the Longhorn restaurant and ordered a sweet potato and a sweet tea. I opened the sweet potato, and I took out a scoop. I looked up at the television screen, and there was a Braves game on, and he was standing on the pitcher’s mound! It said, ‘Millwood’ on the back of his shirt. I will never forget that feeling that I had.

“Kevin Millwood. He is with the Texas Rangers now. He did what he said he was going to do. And, now, so was I. Strange the way things turn out. A couple of years later when I was back home, I saw him. We just shook hands and laughed. He is so unassuming, just a good ol’ country boy. But it was like, ‘Dude! We did it!’”