

John Rich
Son of a Preacher Man

With the leadoff single to his first solo project, John Rich has captured the tenor of a troubled age. "Shuttin' Detroit Down," a populist anthem that gives voice to millions of hard-working Americans who have watched an economic elite benefit while the nation's economy collapses, has quickly swept the nation. Its premiere airing on Detroit country radio stations galvanized the working class in the beleaguered blue-collar city, and the universality of its sentiment lit up phone lines across the country and made it the fastest-rising single of Rich's storied career.

The song is a fitting kickoff to *Son of a Preacher Man*, an album that finds country music's Renaissance Everyman giving full rein to his own creative voice in a project as personal as it is musically arresting. With its release, one of modern music's most prolific and creative spirits opens yet another chapter, stepping into the front ranks of solo performers amid a career in musical partnerships and as someone whose songwriting and producing skills have helped shape the talents of others.

"Shuttin' Detroit Down" is as powerful an entree into a solo career as an artist could hope for.

"It's a humbling experience," he says. "This song is bigger than me. It's bigger than my career. It's one of those divine experiences you have once in your lifetime, if you're lucky, as a songwriter."

And it came to him, as so often happens with art of this import, quickly and unexpectedly. He had been watching news reports involving yet another company whose top brass were buying frills after bailouts from U.S. taxpayers.

"I felt so disrespected as an American taxpayer," he says. "I felt like these guys were laughing at me and laughing at the American people in general, like they're getting away with something, and guess what--they are. I figured I had a choice. I could sit at home and be mad, or I could do what a country songwriter does--pick up a blank sheet of paper, a pencil and a guitar, and write a song about it. And that's what I did."

He played the song live at stations he was visiting as part of a radio tour, and the reaction was so strong he rerouted the tour into Nashville on a Friday night, recorded the song on Saturday, and hit the road again with the CD. Two weeks after he wrote it, it was part of the *Son of a Preacher Man* album, which to that point had been considered finished.

For those familiar with Rich's wide-ranging creativity, the lessons of "Shuttin' Detroit Down"--Rich's finger on the pulse of America, his unbridled creativity and penchant for connecting with his audiences--are nothing new. Few people in Nashville history have had the wide-ranging success that Rich, an entertainer who can truly do it all, has had. He is a three-time ASCAP Songwriter of the Year with 13 top ten hits, including Faith Hill's "Mississippi Girl," Faith and Tim McGraw's "Like We Never Loved At All," Jason Aldean's "Hicktown" and Taylor Swift's "The Way I Loved You"; a sought-after producer who has worked with legends like Randy Owen and John Anderson, pop stars like Jewel and a host of new artists; a TV star, host and ringmaster who has shepherded CMT's *Gone Country* from interesting idea to well-established franchise; a proven talent scout who helped Gretchen Wilson move from singing bartender to cultural phenomenon; and an accomplished performer who was an integral part of the early Lonestar sound, then half of Big

& Rich, whose bigger-than-life personas spearheaded the Muzik Mafia and launched a bona fide country movement. He is also that rarest of commodities--a true character, a walking brand with one of country music's most identifiable faces and voices.

Son of a Preacher Man grew out of a combination of factors that has so often worked magic for him--a creative window and sheer talent. A prolific songwriter--he has written more than 1300--John had a number of songs that were outside the scope of Big & Rich.

"Songs need to fit a certain slot for us," he says, "and I'd written a lot that would never wind up on a Big & Rich record."

Then, in late 2007, Big Kenny announced that he wanted to take time off of the road as he dealt with rehabilitation for a pre-existing neck injury and, John says, "I looked at that as a window to go record."

During the holidays in 2007 he laid down the first half of the album, then wrote and finished it during the coming year.

"I wasn't honestly thinking the record label was going to put it out or follow up on it," he says. "I just wanted to go record them." Still, he knew they needed to be heard.

"I think I've got some of the best lyrics I've ever written," he says, "and they're definitely the most personal. At this point in my life I think this is an important record for me to make. It's really the way I think and really what I feel about certain issues."

The record is a wide-ranging work, with songs ranging from the upbeat, riff-laden "Trucker Man" to "The Good Lord & The Man" and "Preacher Man," poignant and personal looks at his grandfather and father, respectively; from the aching "Another You" and "I Don't Want To Lose Your Love" to "Everybody Wants To Be Me," a honky-tonk rocker fans will recognize as vintage Rich. Capping it all off is "Drive Myself To Drink," a big band extravaganza that rates as pure musical adventure and which was recorded live.

Overall, the CD is a window into the creative approach of a unique musical stylist, a country music original whose high-profile celebrity status belies his humble origins and reflects his desire to pack everything into the life he lives and the art he creates.

"I'm trying to give people everything I can," he says. "I'm a guy who grew up in West Texas in a trailer, and I remember going to the food bank, and fifteen dollars for a CD is a lot of money when you don't have money. You've really got to appreciate people who will go out and buy one, and the level of respect that shows for me as an artist."

That upbringing shaped his appreciation for country fans by molding him into a fan of the genre. Listening to KMML-FM in Amarillo, Texas, he dreamed as a youngster of being on country radio and playing the Grand Ole Opry. He followed the dream to Nashville, where he got a job at a show at the Opryland theme park. There he met part of the core of the band Lonestar, which he helped launch, writing some of their early hits. After parting ways from the group, he had a short-lived solo deal, then teamed up with friends for a Tuesday night jam that spawned the Muzik Mafia, the most eclectic collection of entertainers and artists ever to hit the city. Big & Rich, Gretchen Wilson, Cowboy Troy, James Otto, Two-Foot Fred and painter Rachel Kice were among those who emerged from that incredible scene, and their influence is still being felt across the musical and artistic landscape.

One of the industry's hardest workers, John carved niches for himself in a variety of creative endeavors. He co-produced Big & Rich's *Horse Of A Different Color*, Wilson's first two albums, Cowboy Troy and James Otto, whose song, "Just Got Started Lovin' You" was nominated for

a Grammy. His songwriting output includes Wilson's "Redneck Woman," "Here For The Party" and "When I Think About Cheating," and songs recorded by Martina McBride, Clay Walker and Aaron Tippin, among many others. At bottom was a pure love for the art.

"The only thing I ever cared to do with my life, from the time I was 5 or 6 years old, is make country music," he says. "That's why I write as much as I do. It's why I'm constantly looking for new artists to work with. I'm constantly producing new records. I'm always on tour. It's all I care to do. Country music is not a hobby for me. It's my DNA."

One of the biggest thrills is bringing new talent to the table.

"I get a huge buzz out of knowing that I get to be a part of somebody else's career, to help get it up off the ground," he says. "I guess I got hooked on that when the whole Gretchen Wilson thing happened. To watch her go from a bartender to this iconic status, you know, in country music. That's one thing I'll do beyond being an artist is going to be to discover new talent and help develop it."

The offshoot for him, though, both inside and outside the industry, is a kind of celebrity few ever attain.

"I'm a fan of the era when country music singers had their own TV shows," he says. "Johnny Cash had a show. Glen Campbell had a show. The Statler Brothers, Barbara Mandrell, Dolly Parton, Porter Wagoner, on and on and on. I think that was a great time in country music. I would hope to be considered one of those artists who has enough identifiable character about me that you could have your own TV show. I'll never be the greatest singer or the greatest at anything, but there ain't no doubt I'm a character, and unapologetically so sometimes."

That is perhaps nowhere better displayed than in CMT's "Gone Country," which, he says, "sounded like a fun thing to do" and became the highest-rated show in the history of the network.

"Now," he says, referring to the third season, "I find myself running around downtown Nashville with George Clinton, the godfather of funk, and introducing country music to people that are icons in their world, and who respect Nashville and country music so much they're willing to come here on a completely remedial basic level and just go, 'Tell me everything. Show me everything. I just want to absorb Nashville and country music.' I'm the perfect guy to be that teacher-- if you will, a honky-tonk teacher. Lord knows I've had them teach me a lot down there, so I'm just passing along the information."

Woven through all of it is a personality focused like a diamond on furthering country music, bringing fans and artists together like few have ever done and attracting newcomers to the genre.

"One reason for my success is people know what they're getting when they get me," he says. "I've never B.S.'d anybody about anything when it comes to music or how I approach the fans or what's important to me. They know. That's why people let me have my own TV shows and it's why hopefully I'll be able to have a solo career. I'll be able to make records with my friend Big Kenny and go tour with him like we're doing this summer, and when I have songs that don't fit those records, hopefully I'll be able to have success on my own, as well as continue to produce records on all kinds of people and write songs and be an impact in Nashville."