



When he stopped running from his destiny, Jon Randall created a masterpiece.

“When I moved to Nashville, it was to be a songwriter – and I did everything BUT that,” he recalls. “At first, I took jobs as a sideman because I had to eat. Nobody was going to give a song-publishing contract to an unknown. But then, over the years, traveling became a way of life.”

Jon Randall’s skills as a tenor harmony singer and guitarist have led to membership in the bands of Emmylou Harris, Sam Bush and Lyle Lovett. He’s made his living working with everyone from Linda Ronstadt, Trisha Yearwood, Patty Loveless and Lee Ann Womack to Bill Anderson, T. Graham Brown, John Cowan and Kid Rock. And along the way, he nearly lost sight of his original purpose.

Now, Walking Among the Living reclaims it. Fourteen songs written or co-written by Jon Randall, the CD is a stunning showcase with a full, crisp sound and dynamic vocal performance. In the gorgeous “North Carolina Moon,” Jon Randall yearns for a mountain home accompanied by the angelic harmonies of Sonya Isaacs. He’s softly seductive on the lilting “In the Country” and shouting the blues on the rocking “Coming Back for More.”

The touchingly sad ballad “Lonely For Awhile” contrasts with the jaunty, sprightly percussion pace of “Long Way Down.” “Austin” has a funky swing, while “Somebody Else” is lonesome and lovelorn. Patty Loveless adds her voice to Randall’s hardcore “cheating” song “I Shouldn’t Do This,” and Alison Krauss guests on his troubling and sad “No Southern Comfort.”

Another standout on the album is “Walking Among the Living,” a stirring tune of redemption and renewal with Randall’s Sony label-mate Jessi Alexander providing vocal harmonies. The set’s lone “outside” song is “My Life,” written by Grammy Award winner Robert Lee Castleman (“The Lucky One”). Randall recorded it as a nod to his bluegrass roots. Rounding out the collection is the singer-songwriter’s own version of his celebrated song “Whiskey Lullaby.”

Walking Among the Living is such a profoundly great piece of work that it comes as a shock to learn he initially wasn’t all that excited about making it. Jon Randall’s recording history has been a bumpy one. The multi-faceted singer/songwriter/musician has been lured into the solo spotlight four times before, with frustrating results each time.

“That’s part of the reason that I was bit hesitant about doing this thing,” he comments. “But, then, there were all these songs that I’d been writing. Plus, (Sony Music president and A&R EVP) John Grady and Mark Wright gave me so much freedom that it was just scary. It turned into this amazing experience.”

This is the album Jon Randall was born to make.

“My earliest musical memories are of listening to Dad write bluegrass songs. When he started teaching me guitar, I started writing songs. I can’t tell you how many songs I wrote for my bands in junior high and high school. I wrote a song for every girlfriend I ever had. Seriously, from the moment I picked up the guitar, I was writing my own songs.”

Jon’s father Ronnie Stewart was a policeman who also had a bluegrass band. Mother Linda played dobro. They put a guitar in their son Jon Randall Stewart’s little hands when he was six. The instrument has been his life’s companion ever since.

As soon as he graduated from high school in Dallas, the boy packed his songwriting bags for Music City. The only trouble was, nobody wanted to listen. He formed a short-lived bluegrass band called The Prairie Dogs to pick up money. He also took a job delivering birthday balloons in a gorilla suit. In the summer of 1988 he was a strolling musician in Nashville’s Opryland theme park. Holly Dunn discovered him there and hired him for her band in 1989.

Later that year, Randall auditioned for a spot in Emmylou Harris’s band The Nash Ramblers. He was hired as the only unknown in a band full of established super pickers. The group won a Grammy Award in 1992 for its album At the Ryman.

Randall worked for Harris for five years. In the meantime, he landed a songwriting contract with Sony Tree and a recording contract with BNA Records. Because Larry Stewart, Lisa Stewart, Gary Stewart and Marty Stuart were already making records, the label abbreviated his name to Jon Randall. What You Don’t Know appeared as his debut album in 1995. Despite his songwriting talent, it contained only one original tune. A year later, he had a hit with “By My Side,” a duet with Lorrie Morgan. It was intended for his second BNA CD, Great Day to Be Alive. Like its predecessor, it had only one of his own songs. In any case, the disc never came out, and he was dropped by his label. The title tune later became a smash hit for Travis Tritt.

He signed with Asylum Records and in 1998 turned in Cold Coffee Morning as his third album. The record company folded just as the record was about to be issued. He recorded Willin’ for independent Eminent Records, which was released with much critical acclaim in 1999, but that label later went out of business as well.

Jon Randall contented himself with recording-session work as a singer and guitarist and by joining one of his musical heroes on the road. As a member of Sam Bush’s band, he recorded Glamour & Grits (1996) and Howlin’ at the Moon (1998). He and Bush then toured and recorded with Lyle Lovett’s group.

But many in Nashville still believed he should be concentrating on his own music. Patty Loveless hired him as her duet partner on Mountain Soul (2001) and Bluegrass & White Snow (2002). The two were also teamed to duet on the album Livin’, Lovin’, Losin’, which became his second Grammy-winning CD.

“How can I get you off the road to stay home and write songs?” asked music publisher Ree Guyer-Buchanan two years ago. Recalls Randall, “I promised her I’d stay home and write songs for her company, Wrensong. It was hard for me to make that transition. I did tour with Earl Scruggs last year. How could I turn that down? But otherwise, I kept my word.”

Last year his songwriting gate swung wide, with more than a dozen artists recording his tunes. “Whiskey Lullaby,” co-written with Bill Anderson, was sung to fame by Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss.

“Next door to Wrensong on Music Row was DMZ Records and [its then executive] John Grady. It turned out he was a big fan of my first record. He was actually aware of who I was and what I was doing, which was pretty cool. Since his office was next door, he’d come over, hang out, drink coffee and talk about music. After he moved over to Sony, he came to me about doing a record.

“As soon as we started talking, I said, ‘Whatever we do, whatever this turns out to be, I want to work with George Massenburg. I first met George on the Seldom Scene session. That’s why I insisted on working with him. I had never worked with him, but I’d loved everything he’d ever done – Little Feat, The Trio (Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris) and on and on.’”

Fate stepped in when Randall was hired to play guitar on a Seldom Scene album, produced by Massenburg. The two men bonded instantly. And that convinced the singer-songwriter that he did, indeed, want to make another album.

“George is a genius. He’s brilliant about microphone placement and so many other things. A lot of these songs were recorded live in the studio, sitting in a room together with no headphones and just playing. When I tell people that, I know the first thing they think is, ‘Oh this is one of those arty, too-cool records.’ The truth of the matter is, the reason we recorded it that way is because it sounds bigger. The production sounds enormous because of all the natural reverb in the room and the way George captures sounds.

“It was a priceless experience. Spiritually and emotionally I’ve matured a lot. So once we started recording this music, I really knew what I wanted it to be and where I wanted it to go.

“I stayed home. I did my job as a writer. And now I’ve found a group of people who believe in me as an artist. I can’t tell you what a great feeling that is.”

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3/2005