

# NEAL McCoy

No doubt about it, in the 20 years since he released his first single, Neal McCoy – the one-of-a-kind country singer and consummate live performer – has enjoyed every minute of his long, successful career. Even with 11 albums, over 25 charted singles and countless thousands of touring miles already under his big belt buckle, the Longview, Texas-based artist has no intention of slowing down.

"I'm still on the road 220 days a year," McCoy says. "It's crazy, but I really do love it."

Whether he's delivering a stirring version of "America the Beautiful" in front of 65,000 standing, cheering fans in Texas Stadium or performing for troops in any number of harrowing, far-flung locales, or coming out of nowhere with a Top-10 comeback single on his own independent label, critics, radio programmers and legions of die hard fans have come to know that they can always expect the unexpected from Neal McCoy.

At the same time, McCoy is that most reliable and predictable of artists. He's certainly seen his share of success in the record business, but – even as that industry undergoes convulsive changes brought on by the digital revolution – McCoy, like some musical Energizer bunny, just keeps going and going. That's because, for all of his success in the record business, McCoy is, always has been, and always will be, in the *entertainment* business. In fact, now that James Brown has left the building, McCoy could easily adopt the appellation of "The Hardest Working Man in Show Business."

"We do work hard, and I'm going to work until I have entertained you," he says. "You may be the guy in coveralls sitting in the third row who's there because his wife wanted to come and who doesn't give a damn, but by the time my show is over we think you *will* be clapping, if nothing else, at least for the effort I put forth."

Growing up the youngest of three in Jacksonville, Texas, McCoy was subject to the radio tastes of his older siblings, and he was treated to a steady diet of '70s-era Top-40, from Elton John to the Carpenters. His brother and sister also taught him all about family harmony.

"I learned early, because I sang with them," he says. "They would tell me, 'You hear pitch well,' so they made me think I could sing. I did have that little dream of being a singer, but being in Jacksonville, I never dreamed it would happen."

After finishing junior college, McCoy moved with his dad to nearby Longview, where he landed his first professional gig, as lead singer in an (almost) all-black Kool & the Gang-style dance band, playing "tiny little clubs." Before long, he left that gig for a better one – singing supper club-style standards. While he was growing as a singer and expanding his songbook, McCoy's natural performing skills and uncanny way with an audience became more apparent with every passing night.

"I had a knack for sussing out whatever people I was in front of and saying and doing the right things to get along," he recalls. "I grew up with that attitude, and when I was able to get onstage it was the same thing. I wanted them to like my singing, but I wanted them to like *me* too. That entailed being confident and not cocky, I've always felt I've been pretty good at walking that line."

Those talents were in full flower when, at a Dallas talent competition, McCoy caught the attention of Opry star Janie Fricke, who introduced him to country superstar Charley Pride. McCoy worked for the next several years as Pride's full-time opening act and protégé, the friendship eventually leading McCoy to Nashville and his first record deal. After a sluggish start, the singer signed with Atlantic Records and was teamed with Muscle Shoals producer Barry Beckett. The pair hit it off immediately, McCoy absorbing the producer's southern soul sensibility and Beckett tapping into the incredible range of material his new artist could deliver. The album they made, *No Doubt About It*, yielded three Top-10 singles – including two No. 1's, "No Doubt About It" and "Wink" – and ignited McCoy's career as a recording artist.

"Beckett was a Muscle Shoals guy and he had a way of doing it that just kind of fit me," McCoy says.

Their potent artist/producer chemistry resulted in two more best-selling collections, and the hits – "They're Playing Our Song," "For a Change," "If I Was a Drinkin' Man," "You Gotta Love That" – kept on coming. But McCoy's eclectic style proved to be both a blessing and a curse with fickle radio programmers.

"We went from 'No Doubt About It,' in that lower register, to 'Wink,' which was upbeat and fun, to a country shuffle, 'The City Put the Country Back in Me.' We hit them with three different things and they were like, 'What's your identity?' and Barry and I were telling them, 'This is our identity, a little bit of everything.'"

One thing that didn't change was fan reaction to McCoy's now hit-filled performances, and the singer's touring life was more hectic and successful than ever when, in 2001, he got the call from the King of Vegas.

"Wayne Newton got in touch with me in 2001," McCoy recalls. "After 9/11, everybody wanted to do something, and I was one of the lucky ones who actually had the opportunity to help. Wayne had taken over as USO celebrity head after Bob Hope, and I was one of the acts he contacted."

McCoy, along with stars like Jessica Simpson, Kid Rock and Shaggy, traveled to Bosnia and Italy in 2001, and the singer gained a new perspective and forged a strong bond with the Las Vegas veteran.

"Wayne and I really hit it off and just had this mutual respect for each other," McCoy says. "We are so much alike, not just onstage but offstage in the way we treat people. We laugh about how we could entertain anybody, anytime, anywhere."

Next thing he knew he was off with Newton and the USO again, along with Drew Carey and a bevy of Dallas Cheerleaders, landing in hot spots like Iraq and Afghanistan to entertain the troops. To date, McCoy has done 13 USO tours, both domestic and overseas.

"It means the world," McCoy says "My mother was born in the Philippines, and growing up she made me understand and respect what it meant to live in the USA."

McCoy's USO tours have been life changing experiences, but his determination to leverage his celebrity status to benefit worthy causes goes way back. In 1995, McCoy and his wife, Melinda, established the East Texas Angel Network. Through fundraising activities, the organization has raised over five million dollars for medical treatments and related costs for children of East Texas with terminal or life-threatening diseases.

"When your child is sick and you're struggling to make a mortgage payment, or you can't put enough gas in your car to take your child 200 miles to Houston, that's a very big thing," McCoy says. "It means everything to them to come to our foundation, where they can receive funds so they can put gas in their car and go visit their sick child or take them to a doctor's appointment. We raise money for the stuff that can fall through the cracks, and we've helped over 400 families."

McCoy's good works haven't gone unheralded. In May of 2005, he won the Academy of Country Music's Home Depot Humanitarian Award for his extensive work with the USO and the East Texas Angel Network. He was honored again in 2006 at the 37th Annual Country Radio Seminar in Nashville with the Country Radio Broadcasters' Artist Humanitarian of the Year Award. And in 2007, the Masonic Grand Lodge of Texas honored the singer with the W. B. and Brandon Carrell Humanitarian Award, the highest honor given to a non-Mason.

With three Platinum albums and one Gold plaque on his wall, McCoy parted ways with Atlantic Records in 1999, moving to Giant Records and then to Warner Brothers before taking things into his own hands in 2005 with 903 Music, his own independent label named for his hometown area code. The company hit the ground running with "Billy's Got His Beer Goggles On," the leadoff single from his 903 debut, *That's Life*. The single made its way into the Top 10, while the video for the song, featuring comedian Rob Schneider, became a heavy-rotation hit. The label went on to sign country artists Darryl Worley and the Drew Davis Band, but, facing cash flow problems and confronted with the reality of shrinking corporate radio playlists, 903 closed its doors in 2007. While his label success was relatively short-lived, McCoy is characteristically upbeat about the experience and grateful for the lessons he learned.

"I didn't research 'Beer Goggles' or run it past a bunch of people," he says. "I just said, 'Here it is.' And they took it and broke through to the Top-10. I saw that it could still be done; you can still go on a hunch, so that's what I'm most proud of."

Between record deals, between hits, going with his gut, singing from the heart, it's been quite a ride, and these days you'll find Neal McCoy on the road doing what he does best – bringing down the house, night after night.

"We continue to work even when we don't have the hits, because we think we put on a great show wherever we go and treat people nice," McCoy says. "There's an art to that, and it's what I've tried to do my whole life."

McCoy's next project is in the works with *The Very Best of Neal McCoy* set for release early this summer by Rhino Records. Comprised of 19 of his top charted songs, this new compilation also features a new song, "Rednecktified," which McCoy co-wrote with his producer, Eric Silver. Already a crowd favorite, this song will be shipped to radio as a single this spring.