

RICHIE McDONALD

Richie McDonald has long been one of music's most accomplished and wide-ranging talents. Recognized as one of country's best singers, he was the face and voice of Lonestar, ranked among the genre's preeminent groups. A polished and engaging entertainer, he was the focal point of the group's storied touring career. As one of the industry's most successful songwriters, he has penned some of the era's most memorable songs and earned a mantle full of awards and nominations.

Now, with the upcoming release of **"Slowdown,"** he launches his much-anticipated solo career and demonstrates that he is just now hitting stride.

"We had a great run and made a lot of wonderful memories," he says, "but I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing now. This feels right in my heart."

Richie's new album project, which spotlights both McDonald's legendary way with a big ballad and his ability to relay the magic of family life, is due for a 2010 release.

The list of accomplishments McDonald brings to his solo career is among music's most noteworthy. His was the voice behind songs like "Amazed," "Smile" and "No News" and the pen behind songs like "My Front Porch Looking In" and "Let Them Be Little." He has earned six gold and platinum albums, several CMA and ACM awards as well as BMI awards for songwriting. In writing and singing "I'm Already There," he was responsible for a song embraced so warmly by the military and their families it became an unofficial anthem for U.S. troops serving the Middle East.

"That has to be the most rewarding part about writing songs," he says, "when you can actually see the effect it has had on other people's lives."

He has also written songs recorded by John Michael Montgomery, Clay Walker, Billy Dean, Sara Evans and the Wilkinsons, among others.

His decision to launch a solo career came after a great deal of reflection.

"I just reached a crossroads in my personal and professional life," he says. "When our deal ended, I felt like it was a sign for me to do other things, to slow down and spend more time with my family and yet keep being an artist, hopefully making music that can really make a difference in people's lives."

He released a Christian record ("something I always wanted to do and another side of me the fans get to hear") before beginning his current project.

He is still embracing as strongly as ever the wide-ranging nature of his musical talents.

"Songwriting, recording and live performance are all connected for me," he says. "My passion is writing, but when I write a song and get to record it myself, it means that much more to me because then I get to perform it. I think they're all intertwined and I don't think I could do one without the other. Still, I feel like it all starts with the song, and the rest will take care of itself."

At this point, he is promoting his new music with renewed energy.

"Nobody said it was going to be easy," he says with a characteristic smile. "It wasn't easy the first time around. I feel like I'm a new artist, like I have to prove myself and that's what I'm doing. I think the great thing is I do have relationships I've built over the years. It's nice to go into a radio station and see familiar faces and not feel like a total stranger."

He is renewing those relationships as an artist extending his impact on the musical genre he loves, and a family man deepening his ties at home.

"This is a new chapter in my life," he says. "Included in that is trying to be a little more creative in how I spend time with my family and watch my children grow up. They're at ages where it's really important to me."

As he carves out the proper balance between home and road, he is looking forward to the joys and thrills of that connection with his audience.

"I want to be back out there in front of thousands of screaming people, seeing them sing the songs back."

It's a thrill that never gets old for any performer, and for Richie McDonald, it is one he can see both through his windshield and in his rear-view mirror.

"I'm grateful every day," he says, "for the chance to continue to do something I love so much."

--Rob Simbeck