

Sara Evans

Stronger

Sometimes the best way for an artist to move forward is to take time to be still. There's nothing that feeds a creative soul like taking time to soak up life and marinate in the moments that matter. Sara Evans embraced that philosophy, and now, six years after her last studio album, she's back with *Stronger*, a landmark record filled with the kind of gutsy explorations on life and love that have made Evans one of the most compelling female vocalists of her generation.

If people are surprised to hear that Evans is back, it's because it didn't seem as though she'd ever gone away. She continued to tour and maintain close contact with her active fan base. She became an author, signing a three-book deal with Thomas Nelson Publishers, which has already published two of her novels – *The Sweet By and By* and *Softly and Tenderly*. She released a greatest hits collection that included four new tunes, and she's continually remained a favorite at country radio thanks to such hits as “Born to Fly,” “Suds in the Bucket,” “I Keep Looking,” “Perfect,” “No Place That Far” and “A Real Fine Place to Start.”

Away from the spotlight, much has happened to Evans since her last studio record. She weathered a high profile divorce, yet focused on her three children, took time to heal and found love again with football-star-turned-sportscaster Jay Barker. They married, and Evans moved from Nashville to Birmingham, AL, devoting the last few years to happily focusing on home and their blended family of seven children. “I cannot believe it's been six years,” she says of her self-imposed hiatus. “In so many ways, I feel like I'm just beginning. I really and truly do. I feel like I'm just starting my life, my career, and there's nothing that I can't do. I'm definitely more confident now than I've ever been in my life.”

That confidence informs the album's lead single, “A Little Bit Stronger,” a portrait of a survivor that carries an empowering message. The song has quickly become one of the most successful singles in Evans' career, approaching the half-million digital sales mark even before the release of her album. “‘A Little Bit Stronger’ is definitely something that I can relate to, and everyone else can, too,” Evans says of the song, penned by Hillary Lindsey, Luke Laird and Hillary Scott. “Time really does heal everything. You come out on the other side, and you always are stronger from it.”

Though Evans readily admits she's the happiest she's ever been in her life, her new album is a diverse collection of songs that don't represent a singular season. “I honestly have to say that very little of this album is autobiographical,” Evans says, “because I really separate my personal life from my artistic life and my professional life. I could be going through a horrible, horrible day, but I could still go and write a happy song. I don't have to write about what I'm going through. I like to write about something I saw in a movie or something that I heard a friend say or something that I saw on the news. I can put myself into a song. It doesn't have to be about me in order for me to be passionate about it.”

Though she's occasionally taken the confessional approach to writing – best exemplified by her autobiographical hit “Born to Fly,” which is reinvented on *Stronger* with a spirited bluegrass twist – Evans generally takes an observational approach, and it serves her well on her new collection. “What That Drink Cost Me” is a heartbreaking ballad about a woman who loses her husband to alcohol. Co-written with her brother Matt and producer Nathan Chapman, the song is a classic country weeper that gives Evans a chance to reveal the full emotional range of her powerful voice.

She and Leslie Satcher co-wrote “Ticket to Ride,” a buoyant story song about a new relationship that blossoms on an airplane. She and longtime friend and collaborator Marcus Hummon teamed up to pen “Desperately,” an examination of the kind of love we all crave. Evans co-wrote six of the album's 10 tracks, but says her goal was to record the very best songs no matter who wrote them. “I didn't have a message really that I wanted to say. I just wanted each song to be incredible,” she says, “so that was my only focus. That was my goal.”

Evans puts her own distinctive stamp on “My Heart Can't Tell You No,” an '80s hit for rocker Rod Stewart that was originally intended as a country tune by Nashville writer Dennis Morgan and co-writer Simon Climie. Another highlight on the new album is “Alone,” a tender ballad about a woman letting her man know that what she needs most from him is space and time on her own.

In recording *Stronger*, Evans worked with hot young producer Nathan Chapman – known for his work with Taylor Swift – and with Music Row legend Tony Brown. “Both of them are brilliant producers,” says Evans. “It took me two years to make the album, so Nathan started out on the project and then he was committed to other projects so we begged Tony to come in and finish it. He so graciously stepped in and did a fabulous job.” Evans also teamed with Marti Frederiksen, who produced the track “Wildfire,” which he co-wrote with Evans, her brother Matt and Kara DioGuardi.

Stronger is just the latest jewel in an already stellar career. The New Franklin, MO, native has come a long way from singing with her family's band as a child. She has garnered numerous accolades including the Academy of Country Music's Top Female Vocalist honor in 2006 and the Country Music Association's Video of the Year prize for “Born to Fly.” She's been named one of *PEOPLE* magazine's “50 Most Beautiful People.” Her previous studio albums have been strong sellers. Her sophomore set, *No Place That Far*, has been certified Gold; 2001's *Born to Fly* is double-Platinum and 2003's *Restless* and 2005's *Real Fine Place* are both Platinum.

Evans admits to having mixed feelings about taking so long between albums. “If I'd released this music any sooner than now, I know it wouldn't have been the right timing,” she says, “but there were moments of feeling very anxious that I'd been off the radio for too long. My manager said to me, ‘You don't need to think about how long it's been or rushing into it. You just need to wait for the right song, and if you wait for the right song, it will all fall into place.’ He kept saying, ‘Don't make any decisions based on fear. Be patient. Know that your fans are there. They are waiting. Nobody is going anywhere.’”

He was right. Country radio and the fans have embraced her new music, and Evans couldn't be more excited about this next chapter in her career. "My goal with this album and then all the albums to come is just to continue to make the very best music that I can possibly make. I want to be at the top," she says, and the supportiveness of her husband is certainly as empowering as any lyric Evans might sing. "Jay tells me, 'There's nothing you can't do. There's nowhere you can't go. There's no song you can't sing. There's no venue you can't fill. Whatever you want to try to do, I'm there to support it. If you don't want to do it anymore, I'm also there to support you.' But I want it more now than I've ever wanted it."