



**Senior Class:** The Broken Bow/Soney Creek SVPs with their leader. Pictured (l-r) are Jon Loba, Benny Brown, Paul Brown, Carson James and Rick Shedd.

# Benny and the Gents

## The Man (And Men) Behind Broken Bow's Against-All-Odds Success

“I’ve been in enough business relationships to know that if greed keeps things from being a win-win for both parties, then it’s a short-term relationship.”

— Benny Brown



**B**efore Benny Brown and Broken Bow Records, the trajectory for independent country labels was unwavering and unfortunate. With one very notable exception in the form of Mike Curb, the flight plan for indies always ended in a smoldering heap on some not-too-distant portion of the runway.

Not only did Brown and his upstart label bust down the major-fortified gates and forever shift Nashville’s record company balance of power, he also rewrote what it means to be a music man. Consider that this Northern California car dealer who is not a musician, songwriter or performer is the creative center of a company that has had, over the last seven years, three of Country radio’s No. 1 most-played songs. In 2005 it was Craig Morgan’s “That’s What I Love About Sunday,” followed in 2009 by Jason Aldean’s “She’s Country” and, last year, Thompson Square’s “Are You Gonna Kiss Me Or Not.”

“I love that it’s three different acts,” says Jon Loba, SVP over the Broken Bow and Soney Creek label group. “He’s got the best ears in this town. Some may say that’s hyperbole, but no other label group has done that twice in that time frame, let alone three times.”

### Bathtub Of Demo-aid

Brown’s music industry efforts started with trying to help a young singer he heard on a Northern California TV show in the late ‘80s. He visited Nashville artist manager Jack McFadden, who represented Lorrie Morgan at the time. While in McFadden’s office, Brown noticed a bathtub full of cassette tapes and asked if he could have the unwanted song demos. McFadden couldn’t imagine why there was any interest. “I told him I wanted to listen to them,” Brown explains. “He said, ‘You’ll go tone deaf!’”

But listen to them he did, taking a long interest in music a step further. “From 1963 to 1985 I was an independent car dealer and spent a lot of time on the road listening to Country radio,” Brown explains. “A lot of times that was the only thing you could get in rural areas. Sometimes I’d be on the road and go two days without sleeping. Me in the car, making stops at dealerships, and the thing that kept me awake at night driving from L.A. to Northern California to Seattle was the radio. And I got to where I could listen to a new song or artist and know whether it would be a hit or not.”

His fascination with music was extended with the early ‘90s purchase of Nashville’s Legends Studio, which he used to develop artists including Mercury’s Wesley Dennis. “I was so frustrated with the single choices, and we ended up buried

in recoupables,” Brown says of the experience. “Never saw a penny. That was my first issue with major labels.”

Brown also worked with artists Joanie Keller and Damon Gray. “We had a song called ‘Three Little Teardrops’ with Joanie and couldn’t get anyone interested,” he says. “So we started the label just out of frustration.”

Benny’s nephew Paul was the parts manager at his dealership while going to law school. “I was involved in concerts somewhat, and driving home from a show in Reno we talked about it,” Benny says. “I felt we needed someone on the legal side, so as soon as he passed the bar we started the label.”

That was July, 1999. Keller and Gray both released albums on Broken Bow in 2000, but the label’s first No. 1 was still years away. “We had to figure out what was real and what wasn’t,” Paul says. “When we got to town, we saw a lot of presentations from the different consultants we hired. At first we were told to go to secondary stations, and if you could get something going there it would pop up to the big chart. But that doesn’t happen. We had to learn that lesson, and Benny just kept pushing forward.”

### Almost Home

The lack of early success was surely disappointing, but it didn’t dissuade the young company. “My way of thinking was always long-term,” Benny says. “Even in the car business, I built it based on long-term relationships, not greed up front. After seeing what happened to me and my artists, I thought I could come up with a different business model that was fair to the artist and to the label.”

A Nashville entertainment attorney retained to draft the label’s early contracts was taken aback by Brown’s parameters. “‘Nobody gives this much,’ he told us,” Benny recalls. “We set it up so the artist has a really fair portion. I’ve been in enough business relationships to know that if greed keeps things from being a win-win for both parties, then it’s a short-term relationship. I wanted whomever I worked with to feel good about it. So we came up with a model and have pretty much stuck to it.”

Curb’s early mainstream country success came via co-ventures with labels, so Broken Bow’s notion of winning a toe-to-toe slugfest with the majors seemed foolhardy to some.

# Benny and the Gents

"Before we came to town we talked to a lot of people who told us the majors will circle the wagons and won't let us break through," Paul recalls. But break through they did.

"Craig Morgan was really a turning point in all of our minds," Loba says. "We had a wonderful team of consultants and a wonderful staff who fought vigorously to keep Benny from putting out 'Almost Home.' They begged him. It's a 4:38 ballad on an unknown act. Career suicide, they said. I was everyone's last chance to talk Benny out of it, so I got him on the phone. At the end of the conversation he said, 'I've been a gambler my whole life. You don't bet on nines, you bluff on nines. I'm not going with any other song, I'm going with my ace. That's the ace. Tell them to go work it.'"

Paul adds, "Benny said, 'If we can't win with a great song, we need to know that. We can't afford to push good songs up the chart. There's no return on investment.'"

"Almost Home" was a top 10 hit in 2003, suddenly elevating an independent from the kiddie table. "I heard a lot of people laugh about the car guy," Paul says. "What does the car guy know? He knew what he liked and pretty early on learned we can't be making albums for Benny. He started making music for what he perceived the mass audience to be. He'd bring employees into the dealership's conference room and play them songs, take that feedback and make decisions based on it. These are real people. Music isn't confined to Nashville, L.A. or New York. It lives throughout the country."

## Spend & Save

Even with Morgan's success, there were many hard lessons learned. Sherrié Austin, Chad Brock, Lila McCann and Joe Diffie taught Broken Bow an important lesson about known artists hoping for a second chance. "No matter how much you believe in someone, once they fall out of grace or sight with radio, it's hard to ever bring them back," Benny says.

His affection for the artists only deepened the disappointment. "You feel like you're family to them and want so much for good things to happen. That's the hard part of this business, seeing people who are so deserving and you can't make it happen, no matter how much money you spend."

Paul Brown points to his uncle's almost irrational passion and resolve as keys to Broken Bow's success. "People always ask me what it takes to make it as an independent, and I tell them you have to have someone who's willing to throw \$15 million in the street," he says. "If it's not there when he comes back the next day and doesn't ruin his day, you have a chance. We didn't hit a home run right off the bat, and it's easy to give up. We were in it for millions, but the more we learned, the more we realized that nobody really knows anything. The audience tells you whether you've got a hit or not. Until then, it's just gut."

And Benny's increasingly dead-on gut shouldn't overshadow his business acumen. SVP/Promotion Carson James remembers his first in-person meeting with Brown at his dealership. "We're in his office talking philosophy and getting ready to negotiate, but he leaves both doors to the office wide open," James says. "The whole time we're talking, people are coming in and out, asking him quick questions. But he never lost his focus, which really impressed me. And when you called Corning Ford and asked to speak to Benny Brown, they never asked who's calling. He picked up every single call. For him to be worth what he's worth and have all the successful businesses he's had over the years, that says a lot."

"One of the things I've learned in the 20-some-odd years I've been working for Benny is that \$100 is a lot of money to him," Paul says. "A million is a good investment or bad investment, but \$100 is a lot of money. He helps control costs across the board, even in deals with artists. Jason Aldean fully recouped in his first royalty period and has been recouped ever since. Part of that is controlling costs, and Jason has created a really nice royalty stream for himself."

"The other thing is loyalty, and Megan Mullins is a perfect example," Paul adds. "He cut 34 sides and released four singles trying to get something going. For whatever reason, it didn't connect."

## Hit Pickin'

Much of the impetus for starting Stoney Creek was Brown's belief in Mullins. "For whatever reason, I thought maybe we need a different promotion staff with a fresh start," Benny says. "And we'd never really been able to push more than two songs at a time on the charts. I don't think it's fair to talent for them to sit in the wings and wait. With a second staff we had a chance for those people to be heard."

Benny relocated to Nashville 18 months ago, and still owns five new car dealerships out West. But being in Music City may not be completely to his advantage. "When I was in California going to work every day at the dealership, I probably listened to twice as many songs," he admits. "But I just finished a media room at home, and I told these guys I'm going to start devoting more of my time to where it all starts."

Brown remains extremely hands-on with song selection. "You have to match the song and music to that person," he explains. "Some artists can't hear themselves doing it. You finally talk them into it and they do it, and it becomes their favorite song. With some artists it takes more persuasion than others. Out of all the artists I've ever worked with, Jason has been the easiest. We've been on the same page, for the most part, though his single choices may be a little different. Craig Morgan was the opposite. He didn't want to cut 'Redneck Yacht Club,' much less have it as a single."

SVP/Operations Rick Shedd says, "Benny's so focused and engaged in the creative part of the business. His joy is finding songs, matching them to artists and then bringing them to market. It's a collaborative process and all opinions are considered and encouraged, but at the end of the day, Benny Brown makes the decision."

His work with Thompson Square highlights Benny's ability to help artists find songs that reflect who they are. "Shawna's voice is what really attracted me, and when I heard the demo for 'Let's Fight' it all came together," he says. "I knew what I wanted to do with them, but I didn't say anything. So we invited them to a Christmas dinner we were having for the staff, and I announced at dinner that they were going to be our newest artists. They actually broke down and started crying."

Song selection continues to be a give-and-take process. "I barter with them," Benny admits. "Keifer and Shawna Thompson are great songwriters, but it's all about the best side. I don't care who wrote it, who published it, who gets the money. We cut 'Are You Gonna Kiss Me Or Not' in the first group of songs for them and always felt like it was the big song."

## Beyond Broken

Broken Bow and Stoney Creek aren't the company's only music-related ventures. "Years ago, we started on the publishing company and have been building on it," Brown says. "We've got some great writers now. We're getting some good cuts. If you've got great writers and it's the right song, you get to hold it and own it."

"I've been very pleased with the progress we've made with Stoney Creek, but I don't see myself starting any more labels. I want to grow these and do the best we can for the artists. We do have a management company and plan to grow that. We've got BBR Land, which is buses to take care of our artists. We've also got BBR Air to take care of me and the artists. Those aren't all about money-making."

Paul points to return on investment. "Right now, if you leave capital sitting in the bank, not much is coming from it," he says. "So when you can put it to work, it makes a lot of sense. Especially with a brand new artist, it's very difficult for them to ride comfortably. We're able to put them in a newer bus and they get charged back for it, but we're very fair about that, too."

That fairness makes the company a great place to work, according to Shedd. "There's a true family feel in whom he hires, whom he signs and the way we're treated," he says. "If you've been in the record business for more than five years, you're a refugee from somewhere, but here we do everything for the right reasons. We do things other companies wouldn't do and we don't do things other companies do. And we always make the best decision for the artist and the music. That's the biggest difference. We're not driven by corporate pressures."

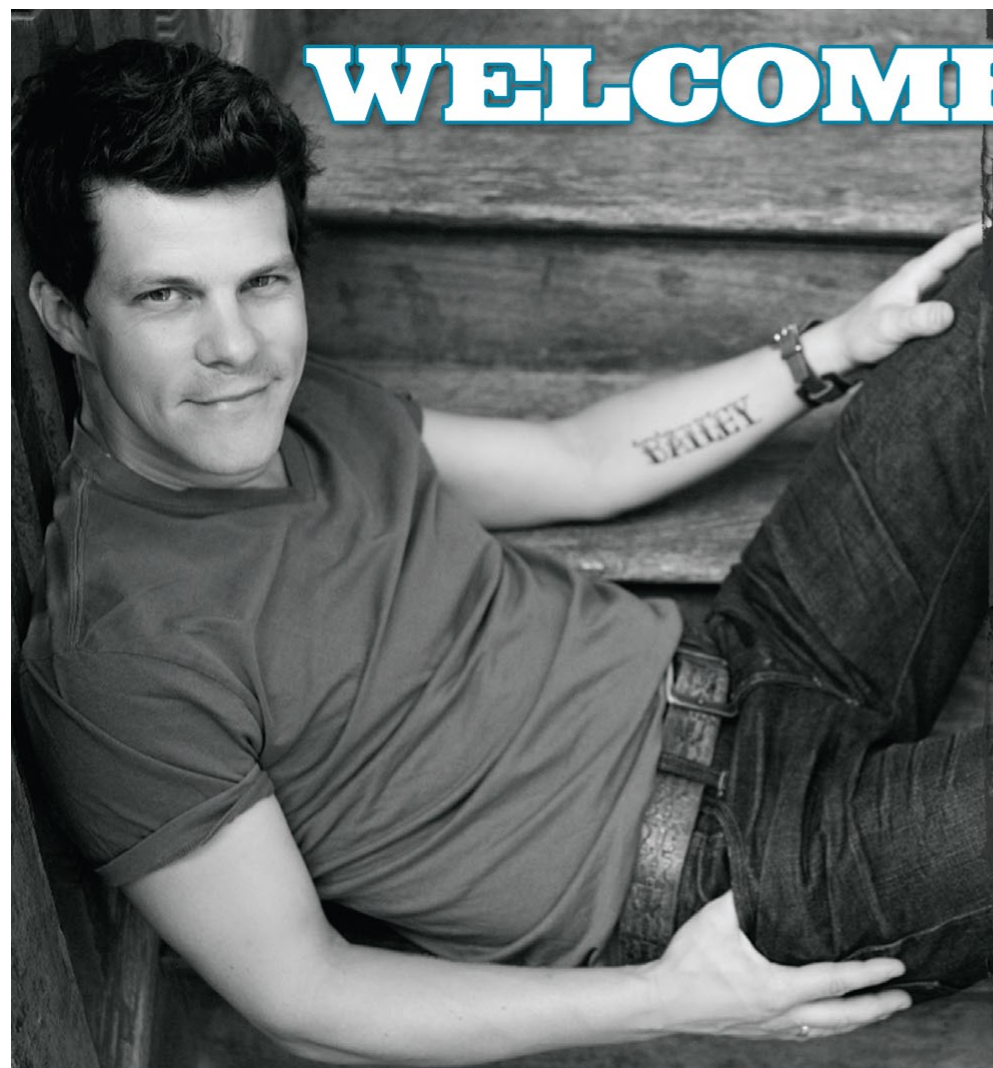
Nor is there a scramble to take credit for the label's successes. "You won't hear Benny taking credit for breaking Jason Aldean," Paul says. "We didn't break Jason Aldean. We did everything we could to promote him, but who Jason Aldean is broke Jason Aldean."

Adds James, "The family atmosphere is so tight. Make no mistake: It's a business, but everybody really does care about each other. It's not about individual accolades, though they are recognized. It's about what we do collectively."

And driving that collective success is Benny Brown, who once found himself in the office of songwriter Larry Shell and saw a plaque for "Rumor Has It," which was a hit for Reba. "I'd found that song in the bathtub of demos," Benny says. "I'd wanted it for one of my acts at the time. I said to Larry, 'I can tell you one thing about that song: It was a long time between when you wrote it and when it got cut.' And Larry said, 'Yeah, seven years. How'd you know?'"

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