

ACM WEEK WITH...

JAMEY JOHNSON

Las Vegas. April, 2009. Jamey Johnson ascends to the ACM stage to accept Song of the Year for "In Color." He is planning a little-known emotional tribute for his upcoming performance on the show. And the next day, he'll pay tribute to a man who, in many respects, made it all possible.

Two years earlier at the same event, George Strait's "Give It Away" won Song of the Year, and co-writer Johnson took heart. "That's the song that in many ways revived my will to keep doing this," he says. "Not that I decided I was going to quit, but him cutting that straight, traditional-type song showed me there's an audience out there. It instilled hope in me that people were looking for that kind of music."

And for Johnson, unquestionably, the music is everything. Strait's cut starts a chain of events that eventually results in Mercury picking up Johnson's self-released *That Lonesome Song*, now a gold record and one of the most widely praised country albums in years. And an amazing weekend in Las Vegas helps show Johnson just how far that music has taken him. "It's like being welcomed into a family," Johnson says of his full-circle journey. "It's just a huge honor."

Music First: Performing for two national television broadcasts, one live and one taped, is the entirety of Johnson's focus leading up to the shows. "I brought my band and I'm playing live," he tells *Country Aircheck* two days before the awards. He's not interested in singing to track, a fairly common practice on live telecasts.

Johnson's decision is complicated by the set producers have chosen for him. "There's a strange delay because I'm on a small stage in the audience that's like a football field away from the band. You expect a delay in a stadium, but I get done here and sit there for a half-second to hear the end of the song."

At rehearsal, Johnson's reps and show producers discuss trying to get a shot of a red road case the singer always keeps close by. The case is stenciled with the name Randy Hardison. "Randy and I met onstage at a writer's night neither one of us was booked for," Johnson says. "We were friends from the start, and



Ol' Maple: Jamey shows off his recently signed guitar (above), which now has ink from George Strait in addition to Willie Nelson. And (right), the act itself.

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he introduced me to ['Give It Away' co-writer] Buddy Cannon. And then a month after we met, he was murdered.

"It tore a lot of people up," Johnson says of the death that shook the Nashville music community in 2002. "He was one of the best studio drummers in town, and was right on the verge of hitting the next level as a songwriter. All my friends in my band today were his friends then. And not a night goes by with these guys playing behind me that I don't think about him.

"I've got his snare case and we use it to hold straps and strings. It was supposed to be his job to be right behind me every night on that drum kit, so I keep his case right behind me onstage."

A boom shot during rehearsals prominently features the case, but, ultimately, the moment never makes the telecast. For Johnson, the meaning is unchanged. "He is very much the reason I'm even at the ACMs, so it's fitting."

Between rehearsals, a full run in the Westwood One radio remotes and the actual performances, Johnson has some downtime. But he can't be found in the MGM Grand casino. "What I do for a living is already gambling," he smiles. "And I'm winning. Why would I want to give it all back?"

Hail The King: For the *George Strait: Artist Of The Decade* taping, Johnson plans a duet arrangement of "Give It Away" with Lee Ann Womack. "There are very few things that are as humbling as to get that opportunity," he says of honoring Strait. "George has affected so many lives over the years, mine in particular. He kept me afloat in a period when I didn't have deal or a way to get my music out there."

And Johnson is beyond thrilled to share the stage with Womack for the performance. "She's incredible," he says. "She brings a tear to my eye, no matter what song she's singing. It's almost hard to sing standing next to her."

After the performance, Johnson takes his guitar over to Strait and pulls out a pen. "I've been wanting him to sign Ol' Maple for the longest time, and never had George and the guitar in the same place. I felt like kind of a redneck fan, and probably am, but I handed up that Sharpie and just got it done."

Strait and Hardison are joined by Trace Adkins on Johnson's list of biggest "thank yous." Adkins had recorded and planned to release "In Color," but gave it up so Johnson could use it as a single. "I really loved seeing him win Single of the Year for 'You're Gonna Miss This,'" Johnson says. "When I was accepting my award, I forgot to thank Trace, but I'm eternally grateful."

The NashVegas confab also gives many a chance to thank Johnson for his music. Alan Jackson, Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Matthew McConaughey and others all made a point to show their appreciation for *That Lonesome Song*.

"Getting to hear Jamie Foxx sing at the Strait tribute was incredible," Johnson says of the indelible memories he carried away. "I met Garth Brooks for the first time. I also got to hug Jennifer Love Hewitt's neck. That was pretty cool. Right after I hugged her, she said, 'Oh, by the way, here's my boyfriend.' No offense, buddy, but I wasn't going to get that close to her and not hug her."

The contrast with 2007 isn't lost on Jamey Johnson. "We're in a different place now than we were then. And two years from now, we'll be in a very different situation than we are now. That's just part of life and living past the obstacles that stand in your way." **CAC**



Two Fisted: Johnson holds his second Song of the Year trophy, this one for "In Color" at left. He also spent the better part of a day visiting with radio stations at the Westwood One remotes (above). He's pictured with WCTK/Providence morning personality Tim Leary.



In Color: Jamey rehearses his ACM Awards performance of "In Color" (left). Pictured above is the snare case that once belonged to the late Randy Hardison, whom Johnson counted a friend.