



# TURNING TWENTY

**T**he “good ol’ days” typically get a lot better press than they deserve. Unless, of course, you’re talking about 1989, country music and Country radio. The NFL may have the quarterback class of ‘83 – Elway, Marino, Kelly, et al. – but Nashville’s “Class of ‘89” tops even that illustrious group.

“I remember this kind of stocky kid who kept coming into the station because he had nothing else to do during the day,” says former KPLX/Dallas GM **Dan Halyburton**. “Garth Brooks would literally just hang out before he played at a little honkytonk that night. I can remember him sitting, talking to one of our sales secretaries just like he was talking to his cousin. It wasn’t an organized artist visit; he just kind of showed up.”



**Dan Halyburton**

An astounding two-dozen artists saw their first chart action in 1989, with six scoring top 15 hits: Clint Black, Suzy Bogguss, Brooks, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Lorrie Morgan and Travis Tritt. Alan Jackson, who charted in ‘89, had his first hit in the spring of 1990. Jackson recorded for Arista/Nashville, which almost deserves membership in the Class of ‘89. “I think we were the only label launch that year,” recalls former President **Tim DuBois**, who remembers those days fondly.

DuBois says. “I’d never run a record label so I can’t say it changed all of a sudden, but radio was just so open to new music. I used to call it the giant flush. All of a sudden there in ‘89 and ‘90 there were a ton of artists, who had previously been occupying chart positions, that just went away. When that happened there was room for all this new stuff.”

Halyburton remembers the shift, though not quite as all-encompassing. “Mac Daniels [then KPLX MD] and I were talking in [PD] Bobby Kraig’s office,” he says. “All these acts were coming out, and there was an intensity to all of them that was compelling. I remember saying to Mac, ‘It’s really changing.’ Young Country (KYNG) had just come on the air and we were talking along the lines of, ‘I don’t think we’ve gone far enough.’”

“Young Country pretended like the past didn’t exist. For KPLX, it was a little bit ‘right now’ and also hanging on to what we had known. People had expectations in that way, too, so I don’t want to say we all embraced [the new artists] like crazy. There were certain artists we did that with: Garth Brooks, Clint Black, Mark Chesnutt, Suzy Bogguss. But Nashville was still very much invested in its core artists because those new guys weren’t the core yet. So I remember a lot of pressure about how to fit it all in.”

pretty easy to see where the potential on the roster was. Nobody knew big numbers here. I marketed the first album right along with the second one, which was what nobody got. When a new record comes out you force them to do catalog and market them side-by-side. I was getting reorders of a million units from one account. Amazing. You made them, you shipped them and they disappeared.”

The balloon was on the way up. “That Class of ‘89 morphed into the ‘New Country’ explosion,” DuBois says. “I remember going from doing country fan rag interviews to taking calls from *Forbes* and doing interviews with *Business Week*. You have to remember that we got so spoiled there as an industry that we quit celebrating gold records.”

Mansfield recalls a telling moment: “I was in New York on business, standing on Fifth Avenue waiting to cross the street. Clive Davis, who was my boss back at CBS, was standing next to me carrying a bag that looked like he was going to the airport, but it was filled with contracts and songs. He said to me, ‘When are you going to get Garth out of No. 1 so I can get Whitney Houston in there?’”



**Joe Mansfield**

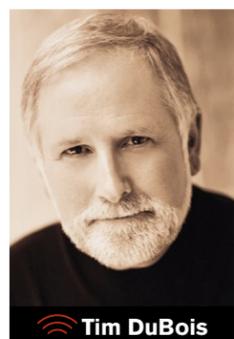
In Dallas, the mood was euphoric. “All that music really spoke to Texans and to the lifestyle,” Halyburton says. “The lyrics just fit. It was probably like driving around Miami during the disco era and playing the Bee Gees. Perfect music for that city at that time.”

“It was an embarrassment of riches,” he adds. “If you go back and look at the ratings, the Country stations were all top 5. There never were before and probably never will be again so many Country stations in one city driving such incredible numbers. All three stations were making a lot of money. There were tons of western wear stores, and they were all on the radio. The truck dealers. The nightclubs. There were major country venues on every corner, and they were always jammed. It was hard just to get all the calendar info to people about what was going to be in town on a weekend. It wasn’t unusual to have three or four name acts playing in Dallas/Ft. Worth.”

“It was an amazing time to be in Texas. It was the perfect alignment of the planets. I keep thinking when I’m really old and get Alzheimer’s or something, I’m not going to remember that I just took a leak, but I’m going to remember the color shirt Garth Brooks wore to the station that day.”

**CAC**

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**Tim DuBois**

“We budgeted about \$200,000 to try to break an act,” he says. “All those early albums cost less than \$100,000. I think we spent less than \$50,000 on that first Alan record. Marketing consisted of getting it played at radio. There wasn’t much beyond that. There were key accounts at retail, but it wasn’t nearly as concentrated as it is today.”

Then as now, airplay was the deciding factor. “There was an openness at radio to new artists,”

**Joe Mansfield** worked for Capitol’s pop and rock division in Los Angeles before taking over as Capitol/Nashville VP/Marketing in March 1990. “The branch manager in Dallas told me there’s an act we’ve got down here, Garth Brooks, who’s really starting to happen,” Mansfield recalls. “I pulled it up on the computer and thought there wasn’t a whole lot going on compared to Poison, Heart, MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, Bonnie Raitt, etc. But he came out to visit in L.A. with his managers, Pam Lewis and Bob Doyle, and I thought he was a pretty neat guy.”

Brooks’ performance at a subsequent sales meeting in Atlanta won Mansfield over. “He just blew me away,” he says. “So when I came to Nashville and looked at the budget I had, which by rock and roll standards was nothing, it was