

TOBY KEITH

Two years ago I sat down with CRS-36 keynoter Toby Keith and was as surprised as everyone else in the room — including staffers from his own record label — when he revealed his plans to leave DreamWorks/Universal and form his own stand-alone independent. True to his word, Keith has since launched Show Dog Nashville, split with initial promotion team partner Big Machine, released a platinum-plus album and starred in his first feature film. On June 12, Show Dog will release Keith's next studio album *Big Dog Daddy*, the first album he's produced on his own...and the first he wholly owns. (*White Trash With Money* was a joint venture with Universal). As we've all come to expect from Toby, he was extremely direct in this latest interview:

CA: Why did you choose to produce this album yourself?

TK: I was on the verge of producing my own albums before *White Trash With Money*, but with everything going on I just didn't have time. I had to find somebody I could trust to finish the album and Lari [White] did a great job. I built this album more around my gut instinct. I don't co-own this with Universal. I own this album outright, so I wanted to make sure I dedicated my time to it.

I sing a lot of the harmonies myself, and I've never done that. Singing along with my own voice is kind of like sibling harmony, you know? I've always cut the tracks the way I want them and until it came time to mix I'd let James Stroud or whoever cut the background vocals and stuff like that. I didn't fret over all that too much. Now I've produced the whole project.

CA: Is Show Dog where you thought it would be at this point?

TK: For all practical purposes, we've only been open since January or February 2005. A year later we've scanned 1.2 million on [*White Trash With Money*] and shipped about 450,000 on the *Broken Bridges* soundtrack — scanning 250,000. We've scanned somewhere around 1.5 million albums in a year. I couldn't be happier.

This year we have two pieces of catalog, my new album and two new acts coming. I'll be working on another movie before this year is up and there will be a soundtrack. We'll probably have a Christmas album, too. This time next year we will have maybe six pieces of catalog. That's the secret — start building catalog.

CA: Two years ago you said this move was about freedom. Have you found the freedom you were seeking as a singer/songwriter?

TK: First and foremost I'm a songwriter who just happens to sing and have all these other activities, but if that goes away I'll still be a songwriter. And the freedom is the only reason I came over to do this. The ego and the want-to in me wants to make this label successful.

CA: Speaking of songwriting, you're being honored by BMI for 50 million performances of songs you wrote. That's an astounding number.

TK: I don't have anything to compare that to. That's one of those numbers that's so big — 50 million *anything* is a lot. I'm very fortunate and very thankful at the same time. BMI has always been the awards show out of all of them that I don't miss. I have so much fun

seeing all the songwriters there. It's such a great brotherhood and sisterhood. Those are people who don't get enough respect. It's such a feast or famine business, and a lot of times it's just famine.

CA: Back to Show Dog business, have you found the freedom you expected?

TK: I sat a group of people down and laid out a game plan. Every piece of it has come true and we haven't had one person quit. The only person I've had leave is [VP/Promotion] Denise Roberts, and she didn't take another job doing the same thing. She wasn't happy in Nashville and wanted to go back to California, where she's working with Blair Garner.

We just hired Tom Moran and all the pieces are in place. It might have looked like we struggled a little bit through the fourth quarter on the charts, but I didn't want to do a knee jerk reaction and just hire somebody. So we held tight until we got the right person.

CA: What new freedoms did you find with your own music?

TK: There was a huge argument that hurt a lot of feelings back at DreamWorks before I left over what song to release first off *Honkytonk University*. My gut said "As Good As I Once Was," but the label felt it needed to be "Honky Tonk U." "As Good As I Once Was" ended up being the most played song of the year at BMI.

For the new album, I cut all the tracks then started working on finalizing three or four. "High Maintenance Woman" and a couple more really floated to the top. I was feeling good about what I had, so I just sent it out, told Tom to get it to the regionals, pick a date in February and let's get going. That would have been a two-month ordeal before. I can travel with my gut. Now, you have to live with it. When you fail there's nobody to blame but yourself.

CA: What's been your biggest disappointment?

TK: Lindsey Haun's single "Broken." I gave radio a great vehicle, a visual star, a girl who can sing and sings a great song. I showed them by the sales of the soundtrack, by the downloads and by her being voted CMT's Rookie of the Year that she was hitting that demo right in the mouth. All they had to do was just climb on board. I thought it was a complete no-brainer. In the end it had more to do with the song being too pop sounding.

CA: Broken Bridges got off to a slow start, but now you've got a soundtrack album in the top 10. Have you been surprised?

TK: It's right in line with the game plan I laid out. I said as soon as the masses see the movie, this is what we'll sell. When Paramount didn't give us the screens we wanted in September, we had already shipped albums. Well, we had some returns, but look what happened when CMT started airing the movie. The thing is selling every bit as well as I predicted in September.

CA: Are you more or less hands-on with the business side of the label — sales, promotion, A&R — than you thought you'd be?

TK: I've talked to Tom Moran twice since December, and he officially came on board in January. I don't deal with the day-to-day and committee meetings. As for A&R, I'm 100% the man.

CA: Who are the two new artists you mentioned earlier?

TK: Flynnville Train is unbelievable. They're a must see. We're sticking them in people's faces and they just blow everybody away. They're coming first and radio's biting on all three of the songs we've got out there. Carter's Chord is three sisters with the last name Robertson. Their mom and dad Bonnie and Carter were in Waylon's band for years. Their mom being a background singer, they sing like birds and she taught them harmony structures that are really intricately placed in their songs. I'm producing them.

CA: Are you still an investor in Big Machine?

TK: I left money in there. When we split [Big Machine Founder Scott Borchetta] was trying to get his finances together. Being partly responsible for talking to him about going into it together, instead of abandoning him I said leave my money in there. He's got enough of a struggle trying to create the record sales you need to keep it afloat. If it does good I'll be an investor, if it doesn't I'll write it off.

LH: What's been the biggest surprise about having your own label?

TK: That there hasn't been one. At some point you expect it to jump up and be more than you can chew, but I've got such good people. **CAC**
—LON HELTON

“
FREEDOM IS
THE ONLY
REASON I
CAME OVER
TO DO THIS.
THE EGO
AND THE
WANT-TO IN
ME WANTS
TO MAKE
THIS LABEL
SUCCESSFUL.
”

