

ACM WEEK WITH... LUKE BRYAN

Being the five-year-old new artist is really okay with me," Luke Bryan says. It's Saturday, the day before the 45th Annual ACM Awards, and he's making the rounds at the Westwood One radio remotes at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Bryan has a full schedule, a career milestone moment and his first major awards show performance in front of him, but he's not quite the wide-eyed freshman.

"I keep telling people I'll be a new artist as long as they'll have me. The past few years have been a slow ride, but if it had taken 10 to get to this point it would have been worth it. The fans have kept me going."

Bryan's riding the crest of his first No. 1, "Do I," which peaked more than two years after his debut single "All My Friends Say" reached the top 5. Remaining eligible in the new artist categories (he was nominated in 2008) may have given him a leg up in the two-year-old fan-voted format. His viral "Don't Vote For Luke Bryan" video campaign was a huge hit, propelling his win in the Top New Solo Vocalist category and making him one of three finalists for Top New Artist.

"That's been fun, and it's amazing to have some of the stars on there," Bryan says, noting the concept came from his label. The riotously funny leotard shot was also not his idea. "I didn't know Capitol was going to do that. That was shot for a Lady A video for CRS. I guess I'll be talking about that for awhile. That's okay, I've been answering 'Good Directions' questions for five years. And I like to talk."

Across several interviews for this story, Bryan projects cheerfulness over introspection. "A lot of artists try to be overly serious," he says. "But for me, it's entertainment. I like putting smiles on peoples' faces." But he does turn reflective discussing the career import his ACM performance slot holds. "I'll be a little amped up, but it feels right," he says. "This is the next step. If you want to be a superstar you have to do these national TV performances, so I'm ready."

Pants On The Ground: Rehearsals started Thursday before Bryan jetted to Arizona for a Friday night performance at Country Thunder (see photo). Saturday is heavy with radio and media prior to his performance at the Fremont Street Experience that night. In between, he makes time for hometown family and friends. "About 20 people from Leesburg [GA] flew in," Bryan explains. "We said a prayer at the table and said a toast for this moment." Speaking in the media room after his win, he jokes about how his hometown connections keep him grounded. "I'm sure I've got some buddies at home going, 'What the hell kind of pants has Luke got on right there?'"

And speaking of grounded, Bryan sees his only downtime of the week Sunday morning, and puts it to good use. "My wife Caroline and I had two hours today in the hotel," he says. "That's the first time we had nothing to do. We just sat there, talked, played video games on our phones and watched *The Wedding Singer* ... in our underwear."

Quiet soon gave way to mayhem, however. And it started when he and Caroline stepped onto the Orange Carpet. "A few years back, you get out of the car and nobody says anything," he says. "Now you get out and it's kinda like, 'Hey, I get some shouts!'"

Backstage, the mood is ebullient as awards are handed out that will have journalists writing about a sea-change in the format. Lady Antebellum is about to go onstage for their performance as Bryan accepts his award. "You should have seen the victory dance behind the wall as we were about to perform," Hillary Scott tells the press corps.



I Do: Bryan accepts his trophy for ACM Top New Artist.



Male Bonding: At left, country young guns backstage: Dierks Bentley, Bryan, Charles Kelley and Jason Aldean.

Do I Duet? Luke Bryan sings "Do I" with Lady Antebellum's Hillary Scott at the ACM All Star Jam (below).

Pool Me Once: At bottom, Lady Antebellum's Charles Kelley (l) and Luke Bryan (r) celebrate their ACM wins by tossing Capitol chief Mike Dungan into the MGM Grand pool.

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"It's amazing to watch the progression of the young artists having their day in the sun this weekend," Bryan says. "It's such a non-competitive feeling back there. You wouldn't even know we were country singers. We're all buddies that sing and we're all pulling for one another. We're hitting it on the road hard and run into each other so much at different shows, so it's fun having a close connection with everybody. That's the feeling I was getting from Miranda and Lady A, and the feeling was mutual from me. I was jumping up and down at every award that was being called out. It was really an amazing night back there."

Long Strange Drip: And the fun was just getting started. "All I know is, I'm at the party and hear a big splash," Luke says of the now notorious Capitol pool party. "Charles [Kelley], in high celebratory fashion, had jumped in the pool. And then there were whispers that he was going to throw me in, too. He comes over and grabs me. I could tell I was going to end up in there, so at some point I quit trying to resist. And then, honestly, it was [Capitol Pres./CEO Mike] Dungan's turn. We may have started a tradition. Dierks [Bentley] was really influential in getting people in the pool, but he was like, 'Guys, I'm not a winner. We only throw in winners.'"

Lady A asked Bryan to join them onstage at the ACM All Star Jam, and the next time we hear from him, it's via Twitter: "OK everyone it's 6 o'clock in Vegas and I'm going to bed. Thanks for making this the best night of my life. Truly incredible. Love y'all."

"It was actually 6:10," Bryan admits, "but I rounded down."

And about those intervening hours? "It was a pretty crazy night," he admits. "We went out with some buddies and had a great time. Caroline is pregnant, but she trusts me with my buddies, so she said, 'Go out and make the most of it.'" He did. And if past performance is any indication of future success ... he will. **CAC**

