

‘Long Black Train’ brings Josh Turner fame

By Dan Naumovich

GateHouse News Service

Posted Aug 13, 2009 @ 12:48 PM

It’s amazing how far a guy can travel on a “Long Black Train.”

Josh Turner wrote the song while attending Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. He never suspected at the time that he had a career-making hit on his hands.

“I knew it was kind of old-fashioned and old-timey-sounding, and I didn’t think anybody would really care for the song, to be honest,” Turner said in a recent phone interview.

The 31-year-old singer-songwriter performs Sunday at the Illinois State Fair Grandstand with Jamey Johnson and Chuck Wicks. It is the first of two country shows at this year’s state fair.

At Belmont, Turner played “Long Black Train” for friends, who encouraged him to play it for other friends. The vocal performance major sang it for both his junior and senior recitals, and the song was just then picking up steam.

“It helped me get my publishing deal and helped me get my record deal. It was the first song I played at the Grand Ole Opry. It was the title track and first single from my first album (in 2003). And it helped me sell a million records,” Turner said.

“When I say it surprised me, it surprised me,” he added with a laugh.

Turner got a lot of mileage out of that one song, but he’s anything but a one-hit wonder.

His second album, “Your Man,” came out in 2006 and went to the top spot on the Billboard country album chart. “Everything is Fine” was released the next year and went to No. 3. Along the way, he’s had nine singles on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs, including two No. 1 singles. (“Your Man” and “Would You Go With Me”).

Turner says there’s no secret to his success or his songwriting, and that it’s fruitless to try to simplify it into a formula.

“You start thinking that since you’ve written hit songs before that you can just go sit down and write another one. But that’s not how it works. You really have to let the song write itself. Let it do what it’s going to do because if you start pushing too much it’s not going to turn out,” Turner said.

That’s not to say that every hit single has taken him by surprise.

“There are songs that you write that you know right then it’s a hit. When we wrote ‘Firecracker,’ I knew that day, before we even left the room, that we had written a big hit,” he said of his collaboration with two other songwriters.

The South Carolina native’s quick rise in country music — he’s one of the youngest members of the Grand Ole Opry — has come at a time when his personal life has taken off as well. He and his wife, Jennifer, married in 2003, and she gave birth to the couple’s second child this past June.

Turner gained a son — but lost a band mate, at least for now.

“Jennifer’s definitely still a member of my band, but she and the boys are at home. It’s a little too soon to be coming back out,” he said of his wife, who played keyboards and sang backup on previous tours.

Turner and his band are rehearsing the first single from his upcoming album, set for release in November. The song, “Why Don’t We Just Dance,” will be released later in August, and it’s not yet known whether it’ll be on Sunday’s set list.

Joining Turner at Sunday’s show will be Chuck Wicks and Jamey Johnson.

Wicks is a 30-year-old singer-songwriter who debuted with a Top 5 single — the heart-tugging ballad “Stealing Cinderella” — back in 2007. A versatile performer who gave up his dream of professional baseball to pursue a career in entertainment, Wicks landed a role on this year’s edition of “Dancing with the Stars.”

Johnson has penned No. 1 songs for legendary country stars George Strait and Trace Adkins. The 34-year-old has released three albums. And his single “In Color” was named song of the year at the 2009 Academy of Country Music Awards. The former Marine Corps reservist from Alabama was also nominated for three Grammy Awards this year.

More country at the fair

Country music returns to the Grandstand on Aug. 21, with Montgomery Gentry (“My Town,” “Hell Yeah”) headlining a bill that also includes Kellie Pickler, James Otto and Candy Coburn.

Eddie Montgomery and Troy Gentry are returning to the Springfield area for the fourth time in five years. The popular duo’s latest release, “For Our Heroes,” is a collection of past favorites and rarities that is being sold exclusively at Cracker Barrel restaurants. A portion of the proceeds from the album will benefit the Wounded Warrior Project, an organization dedicated to assisting injured veterans.

Pickler (“Red High Heels,” “I Wonder”) should be another familiar face. The North Carolina native burst onto the scene in 2006 when she finished sixth on “American Idol.” She’s since capitalized on that fame by releasing two albums, both of which debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard country album chart. The second single from Pickler’s current, self-titled album — “Best Days of Your Life,” which she co-wrote with Taylor Swift — recently broke into the Top 10 on the Billboard country charts.

Otto (“Just Got Started Lovin’ You”) moved to Nashville in 1998, where he hooked up with the MuzikMafia, a group of young songwriters that included Illinois native Gretchen Wilson. “Since You Brought It Up” is his most recent single, from a yet-to-be-released album. The Navy veteran also collaborated with Jamey Johnson on writing the award-winning single “In Color.”

Coburn is an operatically trained vocalist who followed her heart into country music. Her current single, "Pink Warriors," has become an anthem for Susan G. Komen for the Cure, an organization that raises money for breast cancer research and education.

Dan Naumovich is a freelance writer. He can be reached at dan@naumo.com.

Josh Turner, Jamey Johnson and Chuck Wicks

+ When: 8 p.m. Sunday

+ Tickets: \$20, \$17, \$15

Montgomery Gentry with Kellie Pickler, James Otto and Candy Coburn

+ When: 7 p.m. Aug. 21

+ Tickets: \$28, \$23, \$20

Purchase four tickets to one show at the lowest price and get an additional \$5 off per ticket and an Illinois State Fair t-shirt. Tickets are available at the Grandstand box office or by calling the box office at (217) 782-1979; and through Ticketmaster outlets by calling 800-745-3000 or online at www.ticketmaster.com.

Copyright © 2009 [GateHouse Media, Inc.](http://GateHouseMedia.com) Some Rights Reserved.