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ZAC BROWN

The unconventional country star talks about his percussive nylon-string style and his roots in classical and bluegrass.

BY CRAIG HAVIGHURST

On the cover of his hit album *The Foundation*, Zac Brown defies the groomed and scrubbed-clean stereotype of contemporary country music. Burly and bearded, his denim shirt, face, and hands are smeared in genuine red Georgia clay, as if he'd just risen up out of the very ground of his home state. The music has a similar regional grit, with echoes of several artists who have Georgia connections, like the Allman Brothers Band and Charlie Daniels, and a few, like Bob Marley, who don't.

In many ways, Brown's rise to headlining status feels more earthy than the typical Music Row male vocalist. Thirty-one years old, he's been playing live for a living for 13 years, logging his 3,000th show in early 2009 and selling more than 30,000 CDs independently before landing his current record deal. As one of the very rare artists who's played both jam and roots festivals like Bonnaroo and Telluride Bluegrass and country music's CMA Music Festival, Brown is riding that enviable line where grassroots integrity overlaps with commercial success.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Brown's prominent place on country radio might be that he's brought the nylon-string guitar back to the mainstream in a way it hasn't been since the days of Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed. Most of the songs on *The Foundation* kick off with melodic riffs fingerpicked on his neoclassical Taylor. While he'll don any number of electric and acoustic guitars during his shows, his arsenal is anchored with the nuanced tone and texture of nylon. And as he displayed in his performance at the 2010 Grammys, where his band won the award for Best New Artist, Brown is as likely to tear off ripping flatpicking solos on the instrument as he is to accompany himself with fingernails and a percussive attack.

Raised in Dahlonega, Georgia, Brown is the son of a restaurant-owning father, who was also a musician with a host of guitars around the house. Brown can't remember not being smitten with the guitar. "I've been in love with guitars since I was little," he says. "I carried a guitar to school with me every day of middle school, high school, college. I was the guy who had the guitar, playing it every chance I got—every lunch break, after school, after football practice."

Tell us about your first guitars.

BROWN My dad had an old Martin D-28S—a 1965—which I have now. He gave it to me. And he had a '52 00-18. My mom had an old 00-style Takamine from the '70s, back when they were copying the Martins. [Guitars] were always around, and I would pick on them. And every other weekend we'd go to deer-hunting camp. My dad and his buddies would sit around and play guitar. And my brother, who's a dentist and 21 years older than me, he played bluegrass.

When I turned seven, my mom and dad got me a ½-size classical guitar, and I started studying classical. Having that structure really helped. And then I started studying bluegrass, but I was listening to James Taylor, Jim Croce, Dan Fogelberg, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young—music that centered on the acoustic guitar. I was wearing out James Taylor's *Greatest Hits*. I played that tape totally thin, 'til it broke three times. I learned to love older music from my parents and my siblings.

Then I tried to figure out how to play and sing at the same time—I think "Blackbird" by the Beatles was one of the first. I started realizing that I could do that if I practiced, and practicing was something I loved to do. Even

now after a show we'll get on the bus and sit around and play. That's my favorite—the wind-down time for three or four hours after a big show. We ride to the next city writing a song and picking.

How did you negotiate what you wanted to do as a fingerstylist and as a flatpicker?

BROWN The first discipline I had was in classical, so I was reading notation and learning *p-i-m-a* [thumb, index, middle, and ring finger picking technique] and [the proper] position of my left hand. And I was playing some pretty advanced stuff, playing Segovia's arrangement of "Malagueña" top to bottom, but I didn't know what a chord was. So at summer camp I was running around with my classical guitar asking other kids to show me what a D chord was. It was sort of backward. I was playing difficult stuff those kids couldn't do, but I wanted to know how to just sit down and create on guitar.

So you played nylon-string from the beginning as a singer-songwriter?

BROWN I played steel-string for a while. I started touring when I was 18, playing steel-string and breaking a couple strings every night. I got my first Taylor guitar when I was 14—an 810—and that was like the Holy Grail. I got it for $1,400 at Atlanta Discount Music. Two years later, my steel string was messed up and a guy at a bar sold me an Ibanez nylon-string guitar that had a pickup in it. I used it for the gig, and it just felt like coming home again. I didn't break strings anymore. And it was my own kind of thing. And I'm a huge Willie Nelson fan.

Were there other reasons the nylon-string guitar became your main instrument?

BROWN I really like the tone of it. We've got a mandolin and a violin [in the band]. There's a lot of that frequency going on that a steel-string provides. The nylon is just a little bit different placement in the frequencies. The way that it cuts through is a little different. I'm a very percussive player, and I beat on [the strings] hard, and I like the kind of rap you get off a set of nylon strings. It's got a toned-down thing from a steel-string. When I

saw on a steel-string the way I do on my nylon, I usually break strings, and it doesn't sound as cool as a percussion instrument.

Then what about your flatpicking on the nylon-string? How is that evolving?

BROWN My luthier Donald Dunlavey in Jonesboro, Georgia, is a hell of a player. I've been picking with him, and my fluidity in changing speeds has gotten better. I had a hole in my speed flatpicking. I could pick super fast or kind of slow. There was really no in-between, because I was anchoring with my pinky on my right hand. He's been working with me in picking my pinky up and learning how not to anchor. So even though I've been playing for 24 years, I'm still evolving. It's a never-ending quest to try to get better.

A lot of your songs kick off with a nylon-string guitar figure. Does that imply something about the way you write?

BROWN It does. In a song, what you remember is a melody hook. When I'm writing, like on "Chicken Fried" [for a transcription, go to page 62], I try to mimic the melody of the hook itself with a fingerstyle part and put in an alternating bass line as well, kind of like a Merle Travis or Chet Atkins style, so I could accompany myself. The song is really just me and my guitar until it's taken into the room with a band and arranged. So I write the arrangement in my head as I'm working on my guitar and try to make the guitar mimic the movements of the band.

painting a picture with song

"Be as descriptive as you can—make it simple," Zac Brown says. "Write about real things that people can relate to. You've got to paint a picture with the words, because they have to see what you're singing about. At the same time, I love more complicated songs that tell a story where the melody and subject matter intertwine in a way you don't expect—songs like 'Vincent' by Don McLean. Songs that are incredibly melodic and the story in them really drives it home and you get chills. That's how I know a great song a lot of times. The chill bumps don't lie. That's always the goal—to make people feel what you're feeling and do it in a cunning way where it's not cliché or the same way that everybody else does."

PRANK SADLER

It's more than just the nylon-string guitar sound that makes your band unique on country radio. How do you make sense of how different you are versus how successful you've become this year?

BROWN Once you get past the suits who are running around scared saying, "You can't do that," and the music gets to the people, the way the people react is the key. We've held out long enough. I turned down record deals six years ago because they were telling me what to be and how to sound and act. And that's hell to me. I'd rather be hustling gigs on my own and being free and playing the music I want to play and dressing like I want. We've had some business people believe in us and help us. And once the suits in the building realized that the people were reacting and that was going to sell records [we were fine].

There's been a loss of individualism in country music. If you don't know who you are when you go to Nashville, you'll be pumped out the other side with crazy frosted hair, trying to be part of the herd. It's OK to be yourself if you dedicate your life to the music and you can entertain people and get people to sing along and get them to be involved. We pulled it off with a lot of hard work. It was a blue-collar approach.

When and why did you start writing your own songs?

BROWN I started writing stuff in notebooks at the end of middle school, just jotting down ideas. And then I started keeping them in one journal when I was 17. It was made out of handmade paper, so it was real tough and I carried it around with me everywhere I went. And every time I had an idea I'd write it down. That's a big part of songwriting. When those ideas hit you, they're fleeting, and if you don't write them down, you won't remember them. So I worked on the discipline of that.

And how did you hone your craft and push yourself to learn?

BROWN I think the best way to hone your craft is to be around people who are better than you. The first time I saw Shawn Mullins play, it was in a little coffee house in Dahlonega. I opened for him, and I realized then that this was what I wanted to be and hopefully one day be on that level. Shawn's been a great influence and a great friend.

So then how and when and where do you write nowadays?

BROWN It's never a structured thing. Normally my wife goes to bed earlier than I do, and I've got a little writing studio where all my acoustic guitars are set up behind my house. So if I can't sleep, I'll go sit for two or three hours a night and work on bits and pieces of songs. I've got a folder with 109 songs that need little bits and pieces to be finished. You never know when a song's going to hit. There's no set way to it. Some of them you sit down and write them back-to-back in 30 minutes. And some of them take five years.

"Highway 20 Ride" is a wonderful song. What's it rooted in?

BROWN I grew up as the kid in the story, going to see my dad every other weekend. And the guy I wrote the song with, Wyatt Durrette, is a bartender here in Atlanta. He's the dad in the story. He's got a little boy he only gets to see every other weekend. When we wrote the song, his son was four or five years old. And we started talking about how well we know I-20, because I had my farm in east Georgia, and I was driving in and out of town to Atlanta three or four times a week and going to other places in the South [to play]. So I told Wyatt, "Man, we're getting to know that Highway 20 ride," and that sparked the idea.

"Chicken Fried" is your biggest single to date. What's its history? Why do you think it gets such a reaction?

BROWN It's human nature not appreciating being well until we're sick. The center of that song is just to be a reminder of those little things you can take for granted that make life real. It was our anthem in a way. I recorded it in 2003, but I'd been playing it out live since 2001. We knew every night when we played that song the reaction the crowd would have, and we'd usually close the show with it. It's still going strong. **AG**

Craig Havighurst *lives in Nashville, Tennessee, and is the author of* Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City.

what he plays

- **GUITARS:** Taylor NS72ce with rosewood back and sides and cedar top. 2008 Collings Winfield Mahogany Adirondack Sunburst. Brown's main electrics are a '59 reissue Gibson Les Paul and a new Collings I-35. He also plays a Stratocaster-style guitar that was built by luthier Donald Dunlavey.
- **STRINGS:** Nylon: Savarez high-tension. Steel: Ernie Ball or Curt Mangan.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Brown runs his Taylor's stock Fishman pickup through Taylor K4 and Avalon U6 preamps.
- **PICKS:** Dunlop Rhino 1.14 mm, both triangle and teardrop style, plus an old tortoiseshell pick for steel-string playing.