

billboard Country Update

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BILLBOARD COUNTRY UPDATE

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Chase Bryant Turns The Page On Tragedy With An Ingratiating Debut Album

Chase Bryant released a pair of top 10 singles on *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart in 2014 and 2015, yet he only released his first full album, *Upbringing*, on July 16 — and neither of those years-old hits is on it.

Upbringing is a reboot of a promising career that went off the rails, with Bryant ultimately attempting suicide. That endeavor failed — one of the six chambers in his .357 was mistakenly empty, and the gun simply clicked when he pulled the trigger — so he got a second chance at life, and at pursuing his musical passions.

Upbringing is one of the results, an album filled with drama and attitude, built with the kind of creative abandon that accompanies soul-level renewal and a focus on living in the moment.

"This record could be the biggest thing ever for me, or it could be the biggest flop for me," says Bryant. "But I learned so much in the process of making it."

Working with producer **Jon Randall** (**Dierks Bentley**, **Parker McCollum**), he cut the project at Arlyn Studios in Austin with celebrated guitarist **Charlie Sexton** (**Bob Dylan**, **Lucinda Williams**) and drummer **J.J. Johnson** (**Gary Clark Jr.**, **Midland**), carving out live foundational tracks, then overdubbing most of the additional parts himself.

Bryant learned mostly to trust his own instincts, difficult as that is in a creative field. Another instrument can always be added, or subtracted, from a production. Another line can always be rewritten in a song. Another track can be penned to replace an existing one.

One of the biggest challenges for any artist is knowing when a project is finished, and knowing when to trust his or her voice instead of the input from allies.

"I drove home last night, turned [the album] on and two songs in, I was like, 'Oh, shit. You know, I think we did something good here,'" says Bryant. "There are things that I wished I would have done differently — I wish I wouldn't have been influenced by this one microphone for this one guitar part — but I have this OK feeling with it. I think because obviously I had gone through so much stuff in a number of years

that that emotion just needed to be captured in a totally raw moment and kind of taken care of. It's like, 'Let's get this out and be done and then we'll move on.'"

Bryant isn't just moving on from the difficult part of his story. He's also moving away from his previous artistic direction. Those hit singles, recorded for BBR Music Group's Red Bow label, had a pop-country sheen that reached its extreme



BRYANT

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apex with 2016's "Room To Breathe," a disco-flavored recording loaded with sexual messaging and synthetic elements. It's energetic and infectious, and plenty of artists would have been thrilled with such a well-crafted song.

Bryant, however, was unhappy with the path he was taking and didn't quite have the emotional tools at age 24 to stop the train. He didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings and didn't want to risk losing his deal, so he stayed on a journey that didn't particularly suit him.

"I never pushed back," he admits, recognizing it was his inability to speak up that left him disconnected from the music he was performing and promoting. "I have realized over time, they were telling me what to do because that was their job. You know what I mean? They were trying to be successful, too."

Bryant always had creative potential, gifted with a hard-edged voice and significant guitar chops. He played loud-and-proud anthemic solos during showcases in his early years, though that aspect of his artistry was generally underplayed on his singles, geared toward a radio marketplace that, at the time, frowned on instrumental passages that lasted more than a couple of bars.

Upbringing reconnects him with the influences behind that part of his skill set. He name-checks **John Mellencamp**, **Pat Green** and **Tom Petty** over the course of 12 songs and references "Jack and Diane," "Free Bird" and "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)." There's an additional line — "dancing through the dark," in the chorus of "Somewhere in a Bar" — that provides an unintended nod to **Bruce Springsteen's** "Dancing in the Dark."

The textures in the set range from the **AC/DC**-like stabbing guitar riffs in "Cold Beer" to the campfire country of the closing "High, Drunk, and Heart-broke." Meanwhile, the undeniable hooks in "Red Light," "Drinking in My Car" and the title track demonstrate his innate commerciality.

"**Jack Ingram** has become like a brother to me, a kind of mentor, and he can be a very good and bad mentor," says Bryant. "But he said, 'Man, you kind of just can't take the commercial side out of what you do, just because that's what you know.' That's pretty true."

What all of this means for Bryant's future is uncertain. But he's still just 28 years old, entering his prime years and more in touch with his priorities than at any point in his life. Working outside of the label system, he effectively blended his Texas blues/rock roots with his mainstream instincts for *Upbringing*, repositioning himself for the next phase of his career. Balancing those competing tastes in his work and reprioritizing the demands of his personal life will be key to turning his recent near-tragic past into the building blocks for a fruitful future. He's aware of the challenge, and seems as if he's ready for it.

"I want to get back to shows, and I want it to be fun, and I want it to feel like you're going to see the freaking **Beatles**," he says. "But there's something about me playing that guitar now by myself in front of some people who are actually listening to what I'm doing, and [savoring that] response. As long as I carry that with me every day, as long as I carry that kid with me, then I think I'm going to be all right." ●



Niko Moon (center) dropped by WGH Newport News-Norfolk-Virginia Beach, Va., prior to an in-market performance on July 14. He's joined by WGH music director Karen West and Max Media/Norfolk vp operations and programming Eddie Haskell.



Carly Pearce formally received a plaque from her label after the RIAA certified current single "Next Girl" gold on July 1. She's flanked by Big Machine Label Group founder/president Scott Borchetta (left) and Big Machine GM Clay Hunnicutt.

ALEXA CAMPBELL



KRTY San Jose, Calif., presented four new artists during a July 6 concert at Clos La Chance Winery in San Martin, Calif. Surrounding KRTY GM Nate Deaton in the middle are (from left) artists Drew Baldrige, Chris Bandi, George Birge and Matt Stillwell.

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