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Phil Vassar



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The Music Man of Country

If you were lucky enough to attend the recent C2C event at the O2 Arena, there was a chance you might have ventured into the Brooklyn Bowl and come across a performance by one of the leading talents in Country music. Phil Vassar gave one of the outstanding shows of the whole weekend, ranging through a powerful array of his hits, each one delivered with energy, style and sublime musicianship.

I recently spoke with Phil in his Nashville home following his appearance at the C2C festival in London and discussed his reaction to the whole experience.

He told me it was still vivid in his memory and he just hoped that in future he can come back to the main stage and show thousands of fans his distinctive songs.

'It was just awesome the way the audience listened and were so attentive', he enthused. 'They are with you in every song and they really appreciate what it is all about.' He also paid tribute to the British musicians, drummer Lee Guyler and bassist Tony Hornsby who supported him. 'What phenomenal musicians', he declared. 'You know, we only had time to rehearse once in a warehouse the night before and on the day they were simply outstanding, just great musicians.'

by Alan Perkins



Phil Vassar

UC June 2016

Phil



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Vassar

Phil Vassar began life in Lynchburg, Virginia and was part of a musical family. 'There was lots of music in my life and I think I always wanted to be a singer/songwriter. I had one sister who was into real heavy rock, the likes of Def Leppard and Iron Maiden and another who listened to classic Country, including the songs of George Strait, so I got everything coming at me. My father was a musician too so that added to the mix.'

When I asked who he enjoyed listening to, Phil's list was all encompassing. 'I love hearing the songs of people like Elton John, Billy Joel, Tom Petty, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard.' He added that he loved listening to the likes of Earth, Wind & Fire and the Beatles. 'I guess I really wanted to be Paul McCartney.'

He had told me from the outset he was more into writers of songs than the performers. 'I would always look at the record labels for the names of the writers because that was important to me.'

We then moved on to talk about how he developed as a piano player and at this point Phil moved into his recording studio and sat down at his piano and played the opening bars of Easy like Sunday Morning. He asked: 'Do you remember this song ... I heard that on the radio one day and thought "Holy IIII", I've got to play like that some day'.

At this point in his life chance took a hand. Phil said that his family were starting a piano for a family member in their basement and he was able to go down and pick around on the keys. 'I found I had an immediate affinity for the instrument and decided I wanted to be a piano player just like I'd heard, so I practised as much as I could and developed my own playing style.'

We then discussed his playing style and how it became so individual. 'I started playing bars and small clubs and so I had to fill out the sound because I was playing solo and had to learn how to make a fuller sound. I learned to play bass (at this point Phil broke off and played a great bass riff on his piano for me to hear) and make the sound percussive. So I became the drummer, the bass player and lead all rolled

into one.'

He continued: 'My style is very percussive and I tend to beat on the piano. Most of my pianos take a real beating from me.' I suggested his style was reminiscent of Jerry Lee Lewis and he did say there was an influence there. 'I remember seeing him when I was a kid and thinking that is so

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different. Most people think of a piano player as a balladeer but when I saw Jerry Lee Lewis and his piano on fire I thought that was just awesome.'

With regards to his songwriting, Phil describes the way his writing ran in parallel with his playing. 'When I was in high school I wrote a song for graduation. At that time I was into American football and track athletics and none of the guys had any idea I was a musician. When I played the song on stage all the guys in the teams

asked "What are you doing up there?" and were really surprised'. I suppose I was a bit of a closet piano player in those early years.'

Many of his songs are themed around family and life in general and Just Another Day In Paradise was meant to be a reflection on true life and all the things that go on in the day to day existence of happy families. Then I mentioned some of his quirky songs such as Bobbi With An I. He told me that he tried to write from true life wherever possible and Bobbi was a case in point. 'It is a true story about a trucker friend of mine who saw the sign advertising free drinks for ladies at a bar, so as a joke he dressed up as a lady to get the drinks', adding 'some criticised the song saying I was having a go at the transgender community but it was nothing of the sort, I was just writing a fun song about something that really happened.'

I continued by asking about another of his songs, Joe And Rosalita, which again is a different story song. 'Again', he said, 'totally true story! When I was 16 at high school I set up a date. We hung out with a girl who had just moved to the school. I told her I had a great date for her to meet but they were total opposites, he was a big Country type guy and she was a beautiful refined girl. I don't know why I did it but they met and they've been married ever since!'

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He then surprised me by describing some of the current writing in the Country movement as being quite shallow. 'It's all about drinking and partying', he said, adding 'if all songs are about getting drunk ... what are we raising, a bunch of drunk people?'. When we talked about the current crop of songs he felt that many of them would come and go quickly. 'The real songs we gravitate towards are the ones that people have to listen to, that grab them and have some emotional response, so many of the others are just a flash in the pan and I want to write songs that will last for a long, long

time.'

In his early years as a performer many of Phil's songs were recorded by other artists such as Jo Dee Messina, Tim McGraw, Alan Jackson and Kenny Chesney. I wondered whether he had set out for this to happen or if it had been some kind of happy accident. He told me it was the latter.

'I arrived in town (Nashville) the same time as Kenny, Garth, Alan and the others but they all got record deals before me so when they asked if they could record my songs I'd really no other option but they all did a great job of them so I was really pleased.' He added, 'I was very lucky because the songs these guys did really put me on the map. When you get great writers like Alan Jackson who cuts one of your songs like Right On The Money, how great a testament is that to the songs.' As to the present, he told me that the reason he was in the studio was to start recording some of his new songs for an album. 'I hope we will have an album with 10 to 15 new songs ready for release in the UK later in the year.' As to the style, he described it as a mix of songs that are reminiscent of previous times and on the other hand newer stuff moving him forward as a writer. 'Artists can't stand still, they have to keep pushing forward to try out new things and new sounds.'

He has more freedom to do this, as he explained. 'I record and produce all my material in my home studio so I can play around and do things I might not be able to if it wasn't my place so I guess I can move things on with more freedom. Although that doesn't mean I won't continue to write songs that are still full of meaning and emotion.'

Then when we looked at current artists he admitted, Phil was very clear about what he likes. 'My 17 year old daughter plays all the latest singer/songwriters and keeps me up to date on what is out there. I have to say I really love the stuff that Ed Sheerin is doing right now.'

Currently, in addition to writing new material, Phil is touring and playing regularly. 'I love performing and playing my music', he told me. 'Last night I did two gigs. I played a songwriters night at the Bluebird Cafe to raise funds for a benefit charity and then went on to another gig with Jay DeMarcus (Rascal Flatts) to play at another Make A Wish charity night. I just love being out there performing.' So when I asked about touring in this country he was equally enthusiastic. 'Absolutely, I want to be there. We are even talking about coming over again in October to break the new record. We are then coming back to the States for the rest of the tour.' When I said it sounded like he enjoyed touring he enthused 'I really do love it and I'm so looking forward to coming to the UK in the summer to build and cultivate our audience and wait 'til you

see us on a big stage. We really do enjoy ourselves then. The bigger the stage the bigger the show!'

He says that whilst in this country he will be using Lee and Tony again because they were so outstanding and he really wants to keep his band to four or five. 'Even when we are touring here in the States I only use a small band. We can make the sound we really want and keep control of everything when it is a tight combination.'

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It is true to say that Phil Vassar is currently one of the great singer/songwriters in Country music and his style has made him stand out from the crowd in so many ways. In addition, his live performance is a revelation and, from our conversations, it is clear his passion for music is immense. We are fortunate that he is one of the top American stars who sees no problems in coming to this country and the rest of Europe and can only hope he pays us many more visits in the future and that next year he is one of the leading lights on the main stage at the O2 for the C2C to show us just how good a musician he really is.



Phil Vassar