

# NASHVILLE

LIFESTYLES

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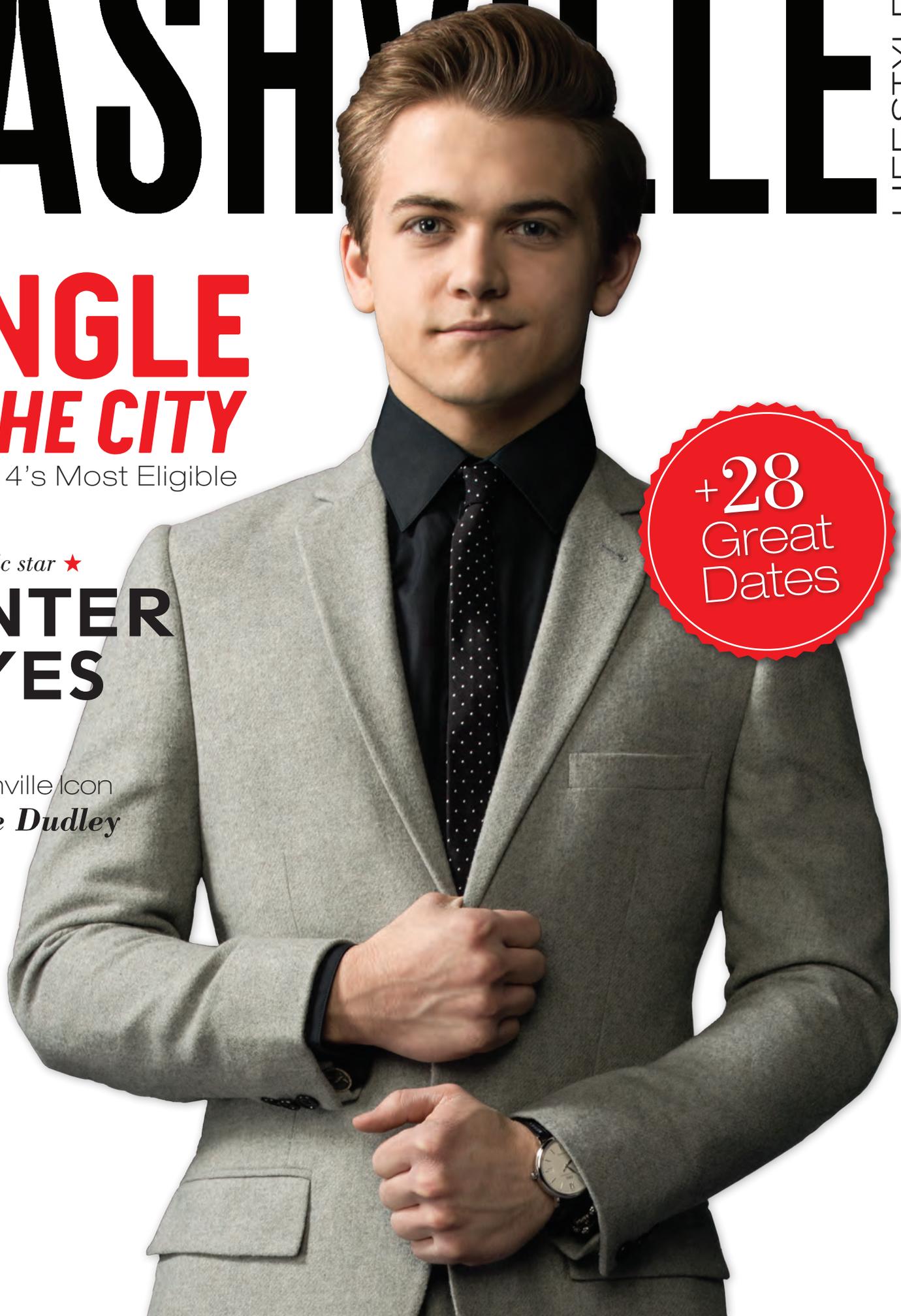
Meet 2014's Most Eligible

country music star ★

## HUNTER HAYES

+28  
Great  
Dates

+ Nashville Icon  
*Jane Dudley*





# MAN OF MANY WORDS

AT 22, HUNTER HAYES HAS HAD A REMARKABLE CAREER—AND HE'S JUST GETTING STARTED.

BY KRISTIN LUNA

There's no denying that 2013 was the Year of Hunter. The 22-year-old country music artist racked up three Grammy nominations (and another in 2014 for "I Want Crazy"), headlined a major CMT tour, collaborated with icons like Stevie Wonder, and was named a CMT Artist of the Year. He also re-released his self-titled debut, *Hunter Hayes (Encore)*, with new tracks, and the result was a platinum-selling album and his third No. 1 single. How do you top that? Hayes has a few ideas.

To keep up the momentum this Nashville resident has spent the past two years building, Hayes plans to do a lot more touring this spring and summer, likely in Australia, Asia, and Europe, he says. He'll also release a new album in May, right smack in the middle of his next run on the road. "We've gotten to play this record [*Hunter Hayes*] all the way through on the 'Crazy' tour," he says. "What I like about this coming year is I'm literally calling it a restart. It's a from-scratch, brand-new chapter. We'll do songs from the old record, but I'm focusing more on new music for all the shows in this new year."

Since details of the new album have been kept hush-hush, what should listeners expect? Hayes says he's still writing about things he's going through in his life but that, musically, his sophomore effort will be quite different

than his first. "I'm finding I'm closer to home than I've ever been. There's a lot more digging deep, a lot more references to three-part harmonies, a lot more bluegrass tones that I love," he says. "I went out and bought a mandolin and a reso [guitar] and a specific acoustic because I wanted to replicate the sound of a three-piece bluegrass band on this one song. Things like that are showing up in the sonic nature of this record."

Another component in keeping the Hunter Hayes buzz alive is making sure the album's debut single is something people are going to talk about. In order to do just that, the songwriter penned an emotional and dynamic soliloquy about his own insecurities. "Invisible," which was just released, details Hayes' feelings of inferiority in high school, and he calls it "the most introspective and retrospective song" he's ever written.

Though he wasn't comfortable writing the song at first he says it's a topic anyone can relate to and that the underlying theme evolved organically during the initial session with his co-writers. "We started talking about our lives as the people who didn't really fit in and, in some places, still don't. As a result of that, we found what it is we loved and what we're very passionate about, because that's all we had for a while—and at some point in the future, it's probably all we'll have, too," he says. >>>

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“Everybody has those moments. We all identify with the same message, and that’s that at some point in your life you don’t fit in,” he adds. “You need the perspective of someone else talking to you, saying, ‘There is absolutely a silver lining. There’s a good side to the story, too, and I know right now you can’t find your way and you feel alone. But the good thing is that’s going to bring you to a totally different place that you would not have found had you not had to find it.’

**T**hose painful high school years he writes about on “Invisible” occurred in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, where Hayes was born and raised. Like many country music artists with promise, he had the support of his parents, who opted to move to Nashville in 2008 in hopes of furthering their only child’s musical career. Prior to relocating, it was a Hayes family tradition to journey to Music City each summer for the annual CMA Music Festival (previously Fan Fair).

Despite growing up in the spotlight—he performed with Hank Williams, Jr. at age four and was making regular TV appearances by age six—Hayes might be the most



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normal country music artist in Nashville. He loves hanging out in The Gulch and dining at the various M Street restaurants, he gets starstruck seeing Alan Jackson and George Strait play a live duet, and he often runs into his dad at random (even at the Apple store in Green Hills just minutes before this interview).

He moved into his first place (“somewhere near Music Row”) a little more than a year ago and gets giddy seeing his famous neighbors riding the elevator—as if he weren’t a recognizable face just like every one of them. And he lights up when he talks about Music City’s food scene (he considers himself a burger connoisseur) and hot chicken (Whiskey Kitchen makes his favorite). It’s all just a small part of what makes Hayes so endearing.

**B**efore headlining his first major tour, Hayes opened for the likes of Taylor Swift, Rascal Flatts, and Carrie Underwood. He names many artists past and present as the driving forces behind his own sound; a few of his icons are Bryan White, Diamond Rio, and, of course, Garth Brooks. “I’ve always wanted someone to come up to me after a show and say ‘You must be a Garth fan,’” he laughs.

But he doesn’t draw the line at country or bluegrass, which he cites as a favorite genre due to his passion for that three-part harmony. Hayes seeks inspiration from pop music, too: “I love Train’s Pat Monahan, and I’m tearing through some Coldplay lately,” he says.

Whereas the multifaceted musician put out his first album predominantly on his own—he sang all the vocals, co-wrote all the tracks, co-produced the record, and played more than 30 instruments on it—Hayes’ focus has shifted to collaborations. “The thing is when you love what you do, why do it alone? That’s the fun part about music [when it’s] live: You get to share it with everybody. So why should the studio be any different? The collaborating part of music is the kind I’d never really done until after the first record,” he says. >>>



It would be impossible to single out one artist as his dream collaborator, he admits, though he came pretty close with his Stevie Wonder duet during the 2013 ACM Awards. “Let’s be real: Being on stage with Stevie was a definite highlight,” he says. “The coolest thing about that was that it wasn’t just a performance. I got a phone call from him a week later where he personally invited me to another show of his, and he wanted me to be a part of it. I *hope* I can get him to come into the studio at some point in the future, because I would love to work with him in a studio format. I feel like that would be the time to truly explore the collaboration. Live performances are fun, but they’re over in three minutes, and you’re immediately begging for more time with somebody like Stevie.”

While Hayes doesn’t know if that will happen on this album, he adds, “the stage has been set, and it’s only a matter of time. If it works out, it works out, and if not, I still got to work with my hero—so no complaints.” 

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