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EXCLUSIVE

CHIP ESTEN

The new season of Nashville, family, and more



STAND-UP GUY

AS *NASHVILLE* RETURNS TO ABC THIS MONTH, CHIP ESTEN REFLECTS ON HIS JOURNEY FROM IMPROV STAR TO MUSIC MAN.

BY KRISTIN LUNA
PHOTO BY CAMERON POWELL

It's hard to believe Charles Esten isn't from around here. "Chip," as his friends and colleagues call him, is as gracious as they come. He pauses several times throughout our interview to proclaim, "I don't know how I got so lucky to get to do this," as if a chance encounter instead of raw talent—not to mention nearly 25 years of acting—were responsible for getting him to where he is today. His manners are impeccable: He invites me into his Brentwood home in a quiet, leafy neighborhood and immediately offers up a beverage and healthy snack before suggesting we retreat to the back patio for a chat. We settle on the dining room instead, as Esten, ever a considerate host, fears the construction next door might bother me. Much like every songwriter I know, Esten's living room houses a hodgepodge of instruments, with worn sheet music and tattered, earmarked songbooks lying open on the piano. And he nails the easy affectation of a man born and bred in Tennessee in his role as Deacon Claybourne on ABC's primetime hit *Nashville*.

But courteous demeanor, Southern hospitality, and one impressive set of pipes are where the similarities between Esten and his TV likeness end. For one, the actor has been with the same woman, Patty, since his undergrad days after meeting as college juniors, while Deacon recycles through gal pals as he would pairs of jeans. For another, he's an extremely involved father to his trio of

teens, all of whom inherited their father's musical genes. And, of course, there's the obvious one: You won't find Esten out on a late-night bender; rather, when he's not shooting the show or attending one of his children's sporting events, he's out on the town with Patty at a new-to-him restaurant—Josephine being a recent favorite—or building up his solo career through performances at the Station Inn and other iconic local haunts.

But while music may have been his beginning—and the thing that ultimately brought him to Nashville—it wasn't always Esten's primary focus. At nine years old, the Pittsburgh-born talent moved to Virginia, where he'd live until his early 20s. As a sophomore at William & Mary, Esten joined a fraternity cover band that played "college radio-type stuff, like U2 and REM... Tom Petty and Talking Heads" and stuck around for an extra year after graduating because the band was doing well. "I bet all those guys went on to be doctors, lawyers—you know, regular jobs—but me, I knew I wanted to do something else," he says. "I was certain that I didn't want the highlight of my life to be [my college years]."

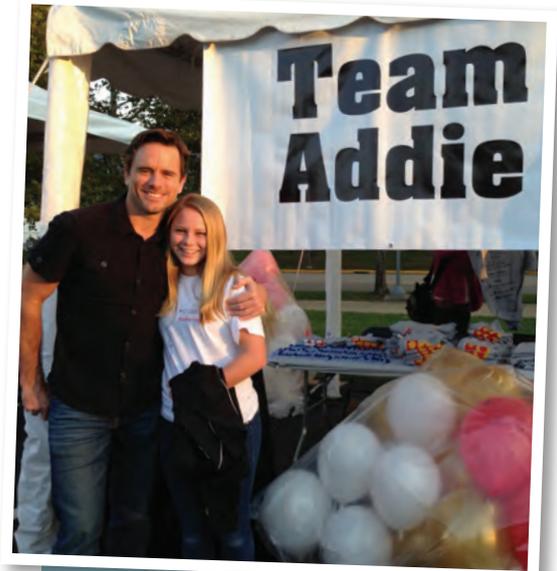
Esten decided to dive headfirst into acting, and music took a backseat. A friend had moved to Los Angeles and was making headway in his own career, and Esten decided to follow him out—for just three weeks. "After three weeks, I extended my ticket a week—you could do that back then," he says. "And then after another one, I ex-

tended a week. I did that for a long time until I finally just sold my ticket." While he had some savings, Esten worked carpentry and painting gigs by day, and by night, he found a new way to pass the time—and indulge his love for performing. "You can't just go be in TV or go be in a movie, but the one thing you can do is go do stand-up at an open-mic night," he explains.

As his money slowly started to run out, Esten sought new ways to get by. While flipping through newspaper ads, he spotted one for a trivia-style game show, *Sale of the Century*, which "at the time was like *Jeopardy*, but not as rigorous," Esten says. He made it onto the show, won for five days straight, and walked away with \$34,000 in cash and prizes. "What that meant was that I was able to stay," he says. "I came down to nothing until I won that. With the year that provided, I was able to start getting jobs."

While Esten enjoyed doing standup, he says it was too solitary for his personality; instead, he fell in love with improv and sketch comedy, a natural progression for the admitted funny guy. "I was always voted class clown or something like that," he recalls from his middle and high school days. "My mom was like, 'Wittiest? Why not most successful? Most likely to succeed?' I was the showoff, the class clown."

He landed a job at the legendary Groundlings comedy club doing everything from ticket sales to vacuuming, and he immersed himself in the world of improv. "I was blown away; it was like magic to me," he says. >>>



Family Matters

At first glance, you'd never know Charles Esten's daughter once battled cancer. When she was just two-and-a-half years old, Addie was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) but, thanks to treatment, made a solid recovery and is thriving today. A newly minted freshman, Addie, now 14, plays for the varsity soccer team at her Brentwood high school, travels for competitive club ball in the off-season, and participates in other extracurriculars, including playing music like her father.

Due to their personal connection to blood cancer, Esten and his family are avid supporters of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, which aims to find a cure for leukemia, lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, and myeloma while also improving the quality of life for patients and their loved ones. For the second straight year, the actor will serve as honorary chairperson for the annual Light the Night Walk in Nashville on Oct. 10 beginning at 5:30 p.m. at LP Field. In 2013, Esten represented the organization on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and made it all the way to the final question—becoming the first celebrity contestant to do so on the daytime version of the show and walking away with \$500,000 for his cause. —K.L.

After a year, just as his Groundlings career began to gain traction, he nabbed a role playing Buddy Holly in a stage production in London and relocated to England. While there, in 1992, the producers of the U.K.'s *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (the original version) asked Esten to audition and promptly hired him. For years—and nearly 200 episodes in both the U.S. and U.K. versions—the show's flexible filming schedule and steady paycheck allowed Esten to spend ample time with his family, which was always his top priority, while also appearing in arcs on hit TV series like *Party of Five*, *ER*, *The Office*, and *Big Love*. "I had always passed on roles that would take me out of town," he says. "We always said maybe it will happen when we are older and the kids are older, maybe there will be a show when it's right to move on, when it's worth it."

Meanwhile, after the turn of the millennium, Esten began dabbling in music again—this time, his primary focus was country. "I started thinking if I got a show on the air, I'd be so happy, it would feel really great," he says. "But if I got a cut as a songwriter, on country radio, just having the type of song that everybody knew—I thought I'd pull over and cry." Esten took this realization as a sign that he should immerse himself in his passion once more. He started writing with the likes of Jane Bach (among her credits is Reba McEntire's "The Last One to Know"), who asked Esten on more than one occasion to join her in Nashville for a writers' round at the Bluebird Café. "Twice I had a ticket, and twice I had to cancel because I got work back in L.A.," he says. "I said, 'When am I ever going to get to Nashville? It's never going to happen.'"

Esten learned to never say never; soon after

his failed attempts at a Music City sojourn, he was called in to read for the role of a lifetime: the smooth-talking, guitar-toting Deacon Claybourne. "It was only because [music and acting] both were required for the role that I even had a shot at it," he says.

The rest is (fairly recent) history. Esten got the job and moved to Nashville, where he lived solo for the first season; his family, including their dog, Blue—who played Deacon's pup, Sue, on the show—followed a year later. And while he initially may have been nervous about uprooting his kids from the stable life they knew, Esten says they acclimated quickly. "For the most part, they grew up in one house, one school system, one group of friends," he says. "But they didn't make [the move] hard on me at all. Family comes first for all of us...and our family bond is unbreakable. All I had in my hip pocket to offer was what a great town I knew this was and how great the people were, how great a place it was to grow up as a kid, all the opportunities we have here. There was a part of me that was glad to disabuse the notion that there's only one place to be happy."

While his middle child, Chase, 16, plays bass in a band, it's the oldest, Taylor, who could be the next family member to see her name up in lights. The 18-year-old singer-songwriter is a skilled pianist who frequently accompanies her dad at gigs—from Graceland to CMA Music Fest to the Opry at the Ryman, where she played on her most recent birthday—and recently enrolled as a freshman in Belmont University's music business program.

"I always knew you couldn't force music with kids," Esten says of his children's shared love of

performing. "But what I figured was I'd just have a room where the instruments were always out, the piano was always open, the guitar was always sitting there ready to be played, [I] bought a bass and a bass amp that I just left out—and they were all slowly enticed by the fun of it."

The family of five frequently sees live music together, with Elvis Costello and Weezer shows at the Ryman being two of Esten's favorite recent acts. "It's amazing to me how everybody comes through here, but even when there's not a tour, going to the Opry or even 3rd and Lindsley is just incredible," he says. "Every single night here, what I've noticed is that it doesn't matter how good the show you went to was—you missed two amazing shows." And Esten takes on his fair share of side gigs, as well, having spent much of his summer break touring with costar Clare Bowen and opening for Jennifer Nettles and Alan Jackson.

The beauty of a show like *Nashville*—which premieres at 9 p.m. on Sept. 24—is that while it allows budding, unknown musicians a start, it also provides a stage for seasoned artists like Esten to flourish and achieve widespread recognition among a whole new demographic—likely the ones who were too young to ever have heard of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* And while the newfound fame may mean the TV star can no longer hit up Robert's Western World (his favorite spot on Lower Broad) without a dozen eager fans waiting to snap a photo with him, this gracious Southern man—who may not originally be from around here, but has quickly made Nashville his home—is taking it all in stride.

Behind the Scenes



As season two of *Nashville* wrapped in May, many fans were left with unanswered questions: Will Layla and Will's personal life be aired for the world to see? Will he finally be free to be himself (and pursue his dreamy trainer)? Is Zoey going to fly the coop and head out on tour, leaving beau Gunnar behind? Which proposal will Rayna accept: that of the smooth-talking, headlining megastar Luke or the rough-and-tumble, backup singer and guitarist Deacon, with whom she already has a child? What's to become of Juliette and Avery's relationship? And how exactly will the producers hide Hayden Panettiere's real life pregnancy?

While the fate of so many characters is still unknown, here's what we have gathered about the new season, premiering on Sept. 24: Rayna will befriend an up-and-coming country artist, Sadie Stone (played by Laura Benanti).

Deacon will continue to grow his relationship with daughter Maddie, learning the boundaries between father and friend by trial-and-error; in turn, she and sister Daphne will see more screen—and stage—time (unconfirmed, but that's what we're hoping). Juliette will find out she's pregnant—but by whom? Guess you'll just have to wait and see...

And the premiere will feature not one but two live performances. That's right: Chris Carmack (Will) is set to tackle The Striking Matches' "If It's Love" and Chip Esten (Deacon) will perform an original, "I Know How to Love You Now," that he co-wrote with Deana Carter, live from the Bluebird Café set stage—once for the East Coast airing and once for the West Coast. Fans will be able to purchase the live recording or studio rendition on iTunes immediately following the episode.