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EXCLUSIVE WITH

STEVEN TYLER

On his Music City favorites, career shift, and upcoming country album

HE'S GONE COUNTRY

Steven Tyler has conquered the world of rock 'n' roll, racking up countless awards and accolades throughout his four decades behind the mic. Now the lead singer for Aerosmith is here to tackle Nashville, put out his first solo record, and add his own sweet emotions to the ever-evolving world of country music.

BY KRISTIN LUNA. PHOTOS BY ZACK WHITFORD.





At 67 years old, many career men are setting their sights on retirement, if they haven't gotten there already. But if you're Steven Tyler—vibrantly youthful and growing more energetic with age—you're contemplating the next phase in your career.

In 2013, Tyler nearly broke the Internet—at least in Nashville circles—when he showed up unannounced at the Bluebird Café and made a surprise appearance during a writers' round to perform two of his biggest Aerosmith hits, "Jaded" and "Dream On," for the 90-seat crowd. That night would set the stage for his pivotal switch from rock to country, and from group member to solo artist, because songwriter Lindsey Lee was there, too; she crooned "Love Is Your Name," which she cowrote with country artist Eric Paslay and which would go on to become Tyler's debut country single.

But Tyler didn't hear the ballad again until more than a year later, when he was dabbling with the idea of his solo album and going over songs with writer-producer Marti Frederiksen that the duo had started but never completed.

"He played ['Love'] for me, and I said, 'Wait, is that one of ours?'" Tyler recalls. "And he said, 'No, no, no. That's one Lindsey and Eric wrote.' I called them both up right away and asked if I could cut it."

Around the same time, Scott Borchetta, CEO of Big Machine Label Group, had begun courting Tyler, but the singer didn't want to sign until he had "a few songs written and felt good about them." He got Nashville act Loving Mary's demo of Lee and Paslay's song, put his vocals on it, and knew immediately it was going to be "the one."

"I listened back and thought, This is the type of album that if I was doing a country record at all I would like to do," he says. "It's not pretentious. It's not like a rock singer singing with a lot of banjo and violin and fiddle on it. It's just a good song with a country feel."

Tyler took the cut to Borchetta during his second week in Nashville and told him that he had his first single. The two made the partnership official when Tyler signed with BMLG's Dot Records in April, and "Love" debuted a month later on the season finale of *American Idol*, a show on which Tyler had previously served as a judge. As the song moved up Billboard's Hot 100 chart, hard-core Aerosmith fans and critics alike publicly questioned the big-voiced rocker's decision to go country. Tyler, on the other hand,



"Even though Nashville's a big town, it's still got a small town attitude. Everybody's real nice and kind of says hello to each other. I grew up in a town of 1,200 people in New Hampshire, and back in my formative years in the early '60s, you knew everybody in town. And Nashville's kind of like that—especially the music community."

points out that it was a pretty obvious career transgression.

"Everybody asks me, 'What's it like doing a country album?' And I say, 'I grew up country,'" he explains. "Even though Nashville's a big town, it's still got a small town attitude. Everybody's real nice and kind of says hello to each other. I grew up in a town of 1,200 people in New Hampshire, and back in my formative years in the early '60s, you knew everybody in town. And Nashville's kind of like that—especially the music community."

And though he's from up North, Tyler is no newcomer to the songwriting community. He's cowritten dozens of songs over the past two decades, including "Jaded" (with Frederiksen, who also co-produced one of Aerosmith's albums) and the 1993 hit "Cryin'" (with Nashville native Taylor Rhodes)—so he jumped right in like he'd been here all along. His country cowrites, a series of blind dates with fellow songwriters, read like a "Who's Who in Music City": Nathan and Cary

Barlowe, Brett James, Jaren Johnston, Hillary Lindsey, the Warren Brothers, David Hodges, Chris DeStefano, Rhett Akins. And there are still plenty of others in the area he's itching to collaborate with, like one legendary rock pioneer.

"I recently rubbed noses with Jack White—I fell in love with that guy," Tyler says of the founder of Third Man Records. "It's like we were best friends when we were kids and we hadn't seen each other in 30 years. He is a true mad man; he's a musical genius. Every time he gets a big idea, he moves on it. He reminds me of Scott Borchetta—they're both really committed, and they both have such a passion for the musical genre."

Tyler has been renting a place in Belle Meade ever since his arrival earlier this year, though he's toying with the idea of buying property. He didn't waste any time embracing all facets of the city, from taking his pair of pups on walks around Percy Warner, Radnor Lake, and Fontanel to becoming a fixture at shows around town. He likes



to sneak in the back, he says, so as to not create a commotion, and among his favorite haunts are 3rd and Lindsley, Silver Dollar Saloon, Mercy Lounge, Exit/In, Marathon Village, and, of course, the Bluebird. The relative ease of getting around town—not to mention Tennessee’s distinct seasons—are two bonuses of moving here, he adds.

“There’s nothing that ain’t five minutes away,” he declares. “It’s been so great going from winter to summer. When I decided to do a solo project and picked Nashville, I thought, if I could be there and write during the winter and record during the spring, it would be very much like birthing and giving myself the joy of watching spring *spring*. I love spring—on my bucket list is getting on a jet and chasing spring around for a year!”

Tyler saw the best of a Nashville spring—in the form of a mother fox birthing six cubs in his backyard—before taking a hiatus for the summer to go on a two-month national tour with Aerosmith. He returns this month to hit the studio and record his album, slated for a winter release—a move that more or less surprised his bandmates.

“I think they were shocked. I’ve been telling them for years that I was going to do a solo album,” Tyler says. “Joe [Perry]’s done six, Brad [Whitford] did one—but because I come up with the artsy-fartsy part of songs, it takes me a little bit longer than the rest of the guys when the band’s writing an album. I’ve got to spend night after night after night trying to fine-tune the lyrics and come up with the melody. I’ve always told the band I wanted to do a solo record, I just didn’t have the time before.”

And while he’s adopted a new home and band in Nashville for the time being—Loving Mary, comprising Frederiksen, Suzie McNeil, Rebecca Lynn Howard, Elisha Hoffman, Andrew Mactaggart, and Sarah Tomek, backs him up on many of his new songs—Tyler says his old family has no need to worry.

“There’s no way I would ever leave Aerosmith,” he insists. “It’s one of the greatest joys of my life to be on stage with that band.”



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