
AT HOME WITH LUKE BRYAN

WITH HIS HIGH-OCTANE HITS AND SEXY-COOL STAGE SHOW, HE'S COUNTRY MUSIC'S HOTTEST STAR. NOW THE SINGER OPENS UP ABOUT THE PRIVATE HEARTBREAK BEHIND HIS SUCCESS AND THE DEVOTION TO FAITH, FAMILY—AND FUN—THAT GOT HIM THROUGH

BY EILEEN FINAN ★ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MACPHERSON



"Being me right now is amazing," says Bryan (jamming at home with sons Bo, 5, and Tate, 3). "I married the girl of my dreams, I have two beautiful children, and I have the career of my dreams."

IN THE GARAGE

at Luke Bryan's Brentwood, Tenn., home, where a shiny black Maserati shares space with two strollers, a well-worn tricycle and a collection of kids' sports equipment, the man of the moment is mugging for the camera—blowing kisses, flexing his biceps and, yes, shaking it. The early numbers for his *Crash My Party* album have just come in: more than half a million copies sold—making it the third biggest album debut of the year (behind just Justin Timberlake and Jay Z) and the best first-week showing for a male country artist since Tim McGraw's 2004 *Live Like You Were Dying*. The good news has left the singer plain giddy. "Who would have thought that a few songs about shaking your ass would lead to all this?" he says, flashing his gleaming white smile.

In fact, viral videos showcasing his own posterior's signature wiggle have racked up more than a million hits on YouTube, while not one but *three* fan accounts have been set up on Twitter in its honor. Still, it's more than just sex appeal that has transformed the 37-year-old Georgia native into a superstar with a platinum touch. To date, two of his albums and six singles have sold a million plus. And he bested the likes of Taylor Swift and Blake Shelton to win the fan-voted Entertainer of the Year honor at April's Academy of Country Music Awards. Now in the midst of his annual sold-out Farm Tour playing small-town fields to fund college scholarships for farm families, Bryan has been greeted with deafening shrieks from audiences every time he steps onstage. "People freak out—it's like Elvis walked in," says longtime songwriting pal Dallas Davidson. "Guys want to act like Luke, and girls want to be married to him. He's been able to capture both sides."

At the home he shares with wife Caroline and sons, Bo, 5, and Tate, 3, that celebrity is decidedly not on display. A Thomas the Tank Engine play table serves as the coffee table in the living room (a makeshift replacement for the glass one

the boys broke recently), and with kid art on the walls and scattered ninja turtles and fire trucks on the floor, the kitchen is more playroom than showcase.

In a corner of the living room, a hand-drawn poster reading "ACM Entertainer of the Year!" hangs across two trees strewn with tinsel—a surprise for Luke when he came home from the awards show that's been left up ever since—but watch the singer at home for any length of time and you'll need no reminder of his ACM crown. Sitting on the living room couch, Bryan snaps up Tate as the toddler walks by and plants a smooch on the boy's cheek, playfully chiding him, "Give me sugars! Give me a kiss!"—much to Tate's delight. "He's just as goofy at home as he is onstage—he's not putting on an act," says Caroline, 33. "I have tons of films of him in the kitchen dancing around in a silly outfit."

Those who've known him longest say it's always been that way. "People have always flocked to Luke," says Davidson, who met Bryan in college. "It's his big ol' goofy laugh, his smile. He's just a charming man and a nice guy." Even when times were difficult. The deaths of his brother Chris in a car accident in 1996 and his sister Kelly in 2007 tested his faith but ultimately affirmed his natural optimism. "I do understand life is fragile," he says. "But all I can do is keep my brain in a positive space in this lifetime and be a light for my family and for people dealing with similar things in their lives."

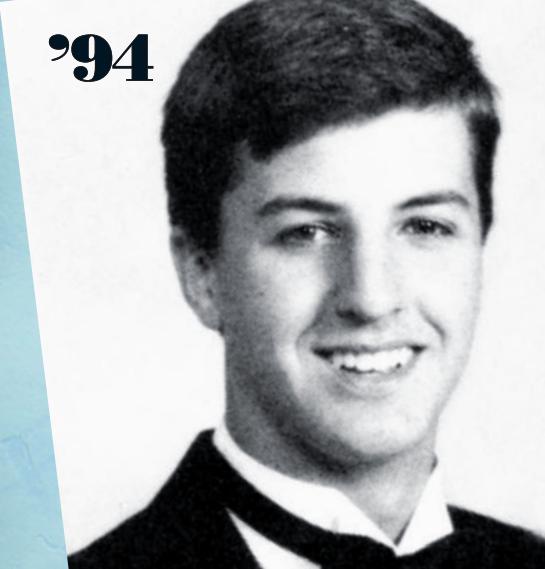
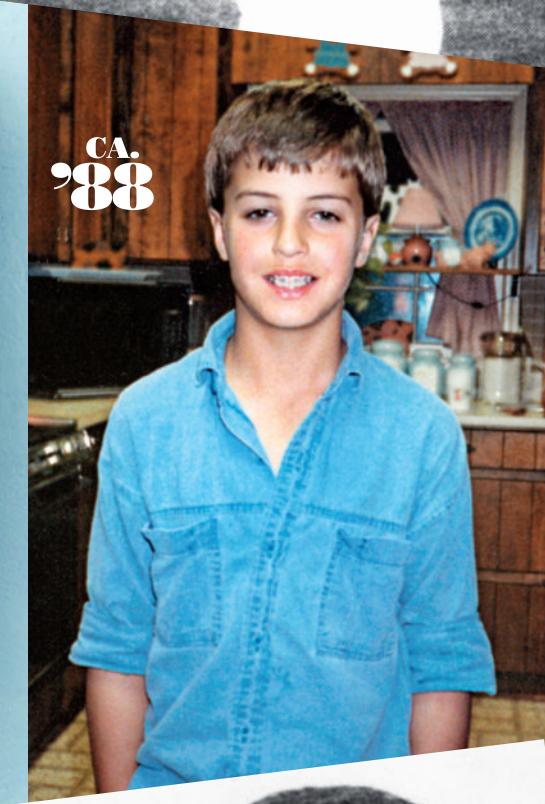
Before Bryan rode his charm to the top of country music, he was just a "little ol' southern kid" who preferred baseball, hunting and fishing to school. "I was never a troublemaker, but I wasn't a great student," he says. His father earned a good



FARMHANDS

"As a kid I'd pick peas and cantaloupe and drive my dad's peanut wagon," says Bryan (at age 9 with his dad and brother). "I want my boys to grow something and see the process."

(INSETS) FROM TOP: SETH POPE/PEOPLE/YEARBOOK ARCHIVE; COURTESY LUKE BRYAN; SETH POPE/PEOPLE/YEARBOOK ARCHIVE





SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

"Caroline caught Luke's eye from the get-go," says pal Michael Carter. "He still gets fired up about her." Clockwise from top left: At their 2006 wedding; holding Bo in 2008; at home in August; with Tate in 2010.

living as a fertilizer salesman (Mom worked at the local public utility in his south Georgia hometown of Leesburg), though there were some lean years when he started his own fertilizer business: "Daddy put a lot on the line. He had to pawn a bunch of guns so my sister could get married."

The baby of the family—Luke was nine years younger than his sister Kelly and six years behind his brother Chris—"I was loved on like crazy as a kid," he says. Being the youngest also meant Luke soaked up the early '80s music his siblings loved (Lionel Richie, Michael Jackson, Foreigner), along with the sounds of Conway Twitty, Kenny Rogers and Alabama that played on his parents' car radios. He didn't discover his own musical talent until later, however. At 14, he took a Greyhound bus to Louisiana to stay with a friend, and the two boys visited a local church where a fellow teen was performing on guitar. "I saw girls swooning over him," he says. "When I got back to Georgia, I wanted a guitar."

By 17, he'd formed a band that played a beer joint in town called Skinnlers. "They'd quarantine a little area off for high school kids to sit, and we'd play three or four hours," Bryan recalls. "We'd have traffic backed up along the roads." By his sophomore year at nearby Darton State College, the group, then dubbed Neyami Road, were regulars. "They have this incriminating mural on the wall of the way we looked back then," says Bryan's bandmate Michael Carter, who still plays guitar with him today. "Cowboy hats and all!"

Hat act or not, Bryan's reputation as a vocalist and performer was growing—"He played a guitar back then but still did all kinds of crazy stuff," Carter says. "He did a version of the butt shake, but he's perfected that over the years!"—and by November 1996, he had an apartment picked out in Nashville. But just five days before he was to leave, his brother Chris was killed in a car accident at age 26. "It tore Luke up pretty good," Carter says. "It forever altered the track of what he planned." Immediately, the Nashville move was off. "I was never convinced I'd get back to Nashville, but I didn't spend time on 'Should I go or should I not?'" Bryan says. "It was just 'Not going.' Your mother had just lost a child. At that point her youngest son was not going to leave the house. Chris's dying got me a little more mature."

He picked up his grades and transferred to Georgia Southern University, where he joined a fraternity, earned a degree in business and met a freshman named Caroline. On Thursday nights the couple would dance into the wee hours at a club near campus—cultivating those now-famous hip swinging moves—and on the weekends he ruled the campus stages with Neyami Road.

But after graduation, performing took a backseat and

Bryan began working at his dad's business. After a year it was clear to both men that he was miserable. The elder Bryan told his son it was time he pursued his dream. "His dad kind of pushed him out of the nest," says Caroline. "Luke's such a family guy, he probably would have just stayed there."

With his father's blessing, Bryan finally made it to Music City in 2001. In just a few years, he scored a publishing deal, cowrote a No. 1 song (Billy Currington's "Good Directions") and signed a contract with a major label. Then, in May 2007, three months before Bryan's debut was released, his sister Kelly, a teacher in Leesburg, collapsed suddenly and died. "She was home with her 3-year-old and it was like someone turned the lights out," Bryan says. "They never determined what happened—the autopsies, the coroner, no one could figure it out. I mean, a 39-year-old girl? That doesn't happen. It was just...abnormally tragic."

His family was left reeling from yet another loss. "You question God at moments like that," Bryan says. "I think my mother still does, and I don't blame her. But I've come to a peace. I don't like it. I don't like that my sons are missing that side of my family. But someone else is deciding things." That strong faith pulled him through, says Caroline: "He still hurts but he knows God has a reason for everything. Luke says it's not our job to understand. It's our job to accept."

Surviving the pain of losing his siblings made last April's ACM win all the more meaningful. "I think he knows his brother and sister are in heaven cheering for him,"

Davidson says. Bryan was overcome with emotion during his acceptance speech, and when he went backstage to his family—Caroline, his parents (now divorced), his sister's widowed husband and his new girlfriend—"we cried for an hour," Bryan says. "With all the stuff with my family, I felt like I was the positive thing to outweigh the negative. There's such a level of dream-achieving to that. Without a shadow of a doubt, no one's been more appreciative or humbled by it."

To be sure, Bryan has his detractors—defenders of "real" country who cringe when Bryan hick-hops his way through "That's My Kind of Night" or delivers another ode to the spring-break ethos—but they're hard to hear over the roar of his fans. "I know a song like 'Country Girl (Shake It for Me)' is not what purists want," Bryan says. "But I'm putting out fun songs because I choose to stand onstage and sing stuff to make people have fun."

In the coming months, Bryan's family will be enjoying the fruits of that lighthearted labor even more, moving to their 169-acre farmland property south of Nashville. The main house—a five-bedroom, 10,000-sq.-ft. structure—is still under construction (the family will stay in the 1,400-sq.-ft.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TROPICALIMAGING; KAREN PEARSON; ANDREW MACPHERSON; MELANIE DUNEA

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★★★★★

guest house until it's complete), but with a trout stream, garden and the bass lake he's building, the spread represents yet another wish granted for Bryan. It's where he'll teach his boys to hunt and fish (Bo already has a knack for casting a rod) and tend a garden. "I'd love for them to grow cantaloupes, load them up on trucks and run them down to a farmers' market and learn how to sell them," says Bryan, who, later in the evening, pulls out a pot to cook up a pile of okra and tomatoes picked on his property that day.

Now that Bryan has crossed a certain threshold of fame, the privacy the land offers is not just a luxury. "Someone was knocking on the door last night at 3 a.m., and that happens all the time," Caroline says of their current home, located in a suburban development. "I've seen people go through our trash. It's time for us to be behind a gate."

While fame is sure to change their lifestyle, the couple are careful to keep it from eroding their relationship. "Girls have gone crazy for him since college, so now it's kind of the norm," says Caroline, who married Luke in 2006. "He's a beautiful man and girls are going to see that, and that's just how it is. It's honestly never bothered me."

But they are painfully aware that marriages—like that of

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Bryan's hunting buddy Jason Aldean—can crumble under the pressure. "We've seen dear friends go through rough spots," says Caroline. "Things are changing, but we talk a lot, and as long as we stay on the same page and change together, I don't have trouble sleeping." A little PDA doesn't hurt either, they say. "Because of my family's past, we're aware of the importance of being affectionate," Bryan says, recounting a story of Bo's recent visit to the zoo. "He saw two elephants holding trunks and went, 'Look, there's a mommy and daddy!'" Caroline asked him how he knew. "'Cause they're kissing each other!" Bo declared. "It was the greatest compliment we ever got," Bryan says. Adds Caroline: "We want them to know Mom and Dad are happy, and that's what a marriage should be."

With so many of his dreams fulfilled, Bryan admits it's a little tough to take in all the happiness that's come his way. "I used to ride around and listen to country music and just love it," Bryan says. "And now I'm making it. And I chuckle, because deep down I can't believe it." ●



FAMILY TIME

"I don't realize I kiss on them as much as I do, but I don't think you can go wrong being a truly loving, affectionate person," says Bryan of his boys.