

The soulful, searching simplicity of Keith Urban

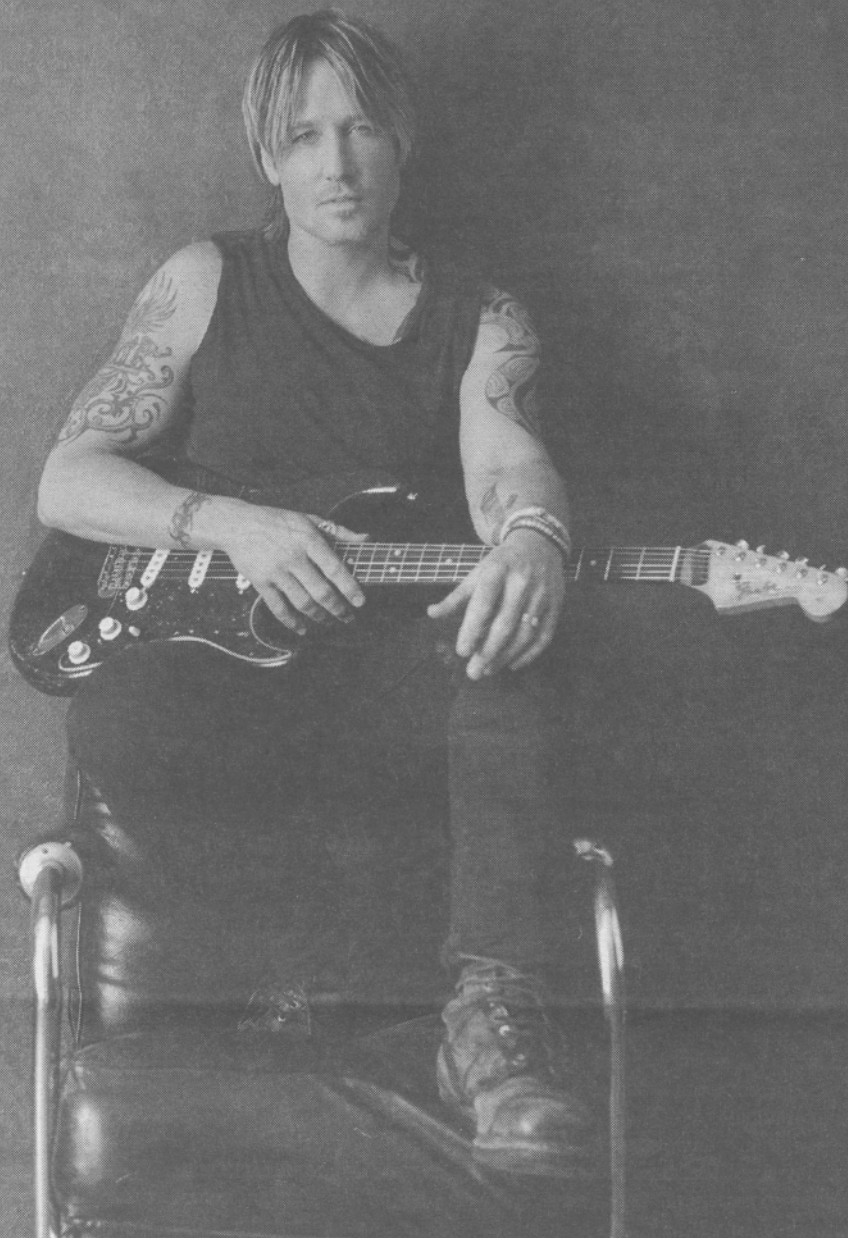


PHOTO BY RUSS HARRINGTON

The reluctant golden boy of country music has faced rejection, addiction, high-profile celebrity without losing his eternal quest for more and better music

BY HOLLY GLEESON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

“People, especially women, talk about being thick-skinned, and I want to say, ‘I’m so sorry. What happened?’” Keith Urban said, discussing the undercurrent of humanism in his songs. “To be raw and vulnerable, that’s the beauty of it.”

“I love Joseph Campbell,” he added. “He talks a lot about the women power movement, how the whole thing got so extreme – and women got very hardened over by it. The pressure of it all made women tough, and I want to support the purity and beauty of women, that feminine piece of it, so the beauty doesn’t become hardened into something that paves over what’s special.”

It certainly runs through songs like the free-spirit celebrating “Cop Car,” the girl in a smothering relationship in “Stupid Boy,” and his recent No. 1 with Carrie Underwood, “The Fighter.” In the latter,

especially, Urban affirms and embraces being there for someone so hurt by love, so closed down that it’s hard to make the kind of connection that matters, or establish the real trust required. With a few lines, he distills the essence of how the Australian with the startling musicianship looks at the state of humanity around him.

“A lot of those really simple tough lines in ‘The Fighter’ are straight from early in my relationship with Nic (wife Nicole Kidman). I had such a learning curve in our marriage. When she’d get scared, I’d think she was angry – then I’d get defensive ... and that’s when it all gets pear-shaped. What she needs, and it’s all in the song, is for me to stay, to be close, to hear her.”

“Get Closer” – that album title alone was from this new awareness I had with this reality of how to react. When things are tough or upsetting, it’s about pulling her close. I had to learn it.”

Urban has always been one of country music’s seemingly more evolved males.

With the good hair and the kind smile, not to mention the razor sharp guitar-playing and the voice that glows with warmth and sunshine, he’s almost custom-crafted to be a rock star.

Born in New Zealand and raised in Australia, he was well on his way to a successful career, but Urban’s wild heart needed more. Having released a few albums – and charted a few singles in his homeland – he packed up his things and moved to Nashville where he played guitar and formed a band called The Ranch, though nothing quite clicked. But it was never about clicking, it was about the music.

“I never made a conscious decision to make this my job,” he said. “I say it’s like a kid crawling, and saying, ‘I think I’m going to walk.’ It’s an instinct, a need. That’s how music is for me.”

Not that those walls he was banging into didn’t leave bruises. Laughing, he admits, “There was a time early on in Nashville where I lost a bit of passion for (the