

music). It almost felt like a parlor trick - the little kid gets onstage and plays. But it coincided with hitting wall after wall, roadblock after roadblock, not really having any success."

Preordained doesn't mean it's going to be easy. In spite of the hipster buzz on Urban and The Ranch, things hadn't gelled. Still there was no question; music was the only path.

"My dad was a dreamer," Urban remembered. "He'd play Don Williams records really loud at 6:30 in the morning. The low end was full, and he'd crank it up. Every one of those early Don Williams records, they're bone dry - simple, simple records. Nothing watered down, but the thump is just there."

So imprinted, Urban's quest was set. Striking out on his own as the century turned, he found No. 1 with "But For The Grace of God" and more importantly, the slightly churning, imminently clean "Where The Blacktop Ends" from his self-titled debut. Lean rock underscoring classic songwriting wasn't the norm in a world of big foot-stomping redneckery and javelin-throwing girl singers, but the path was cut.

The albums "Golden Road" and "Be Here" solidified his Eric Clapton-esque take. (Clapton, like Williams, had a hit with the low-impact shuffle "Tulsa Time" on country music.) It also ushered in an era of staggering intimacy: "Raining On Sunday," "Tonight I Wanna Cry," "Making Memories of Us," "You'll Think of Me" - and unerring positivity - "Somebody Like You," "Who Wouldn't Wanna Be Me," and "You Look Good in My Shirt."

Though none of those projects seem envelope-pushing now, they were then. And Urban has continued pushing the edges, whether it was bringing the ganjo, an electric guitar/banjo hybrid, to prominence as an earmark of his sound, working with diverse producers ranging from rock-leaning Dan Huff, pop-grounded Busbee or funk legend Nile Rodgers, or bringing Pitbull in for his current album's euphoric "Sun Don't Let Me Down."

"As a guitar player, I'd wanted to play in the studio with that guy," he says delightedly, of the prospect of engaging Rodgers, the man who produced Madonna, helped forge David Bowie's 'Serious Moonlight/Let's Dance' era and grounded disco institution Chic. He continues, "Play that funk guitar - and me on my ganjo?! Get a cool drum beat loop going, and see?"

His delight is palpable. An actual musical love connection? "We ended up in a studio in New York. We jammed for hours and hours. We probably had five or six songs. We had this song ('Sun Don't Let Me Down'), and that's the one that just worked."

But when you're open to life, and you're open to music, windows and doors have a way of opening. One day on the treadmill at the gym, an epiphany fell from the sound system. "In my gym, I listen to Pitbull's 'Globalization.' His tone, his timbre, the rhythm and his swagger - everything he sings, he has his

tongue in his cheek, but it's uber-sexy, uber-confident and so playful. We'd finished it, were recorded and done, but we had this section that built and doubled, and I went, 'Ohhhh...'

"I literally jumped off my treadmill, called Nile and said, 'Do you know Pitbull?' He said, 'Kinda...' I had a feeling, because Nile knows everyone in the world. He reached out." The response was typical of a busy artist. Give me a couple weeks. Urban, gracious to a fault, didn't expect much. Until a couple weeks later, an email arrived.

"I had no idea, because he gave me no notice. We'd sent the track, but you do that. When I downloaded the attachment, there it was - and it was crazy good. There was Pitbull in all his glory. It rocked the track to a whole new place."

Whole new places are Urban's deal. As an artist, he's willing to push back the cuticle. Cutting Sam Hunt's "Cop Car," he showed the awe of a young man falling for a wild child without pretense or machismo. With "Stupid Boy," he told the

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tale of a young woman mentally and emotionally beaten down by a man in her life - only to find the narrator was the now chastened guy.

"Sarah Buxton had put out an album, and I was listening on the bus. I said to Nic, 'I need a song like that.' She said, 'Why don't you just cut that?' And she was so clear (about it), 'You're the stupid boy. Sing the whole song, then at the end, put it out there.'"

Quietly, with ridiculous amounts of dignity, Urban said as much about emotional battery as any number of hotlines and late night PSAs. Letting the music do the heavy lifting is his gift. He is also a fierce advocate for women - writers, artists, executives - and isn't afraid to use his platform to make that point.

When he was tapped for the "CMT Honors" a few years ago, rather than doing the expected marketing boogie, Urban arranged to perform James Brown's "It's A Man's World." Only his version of the sweltering slow soul burner came with a twist. He had local string player-arranger Kris Wilkinson help pull together an all-female band to deliver the fraudtly taut classic.

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"When they asked me, I called Kris, who I've worked with on string sections over the years, and asked if she could put together a band of women players; bass, drums, horns, all of it. After that, I didn't really need to say anything. I let the music do the talking - because nothing speaks louder than a moment like that.

"I like to create something, then move on. People can respond to it any way they want. It's not meant to elicit any one response, but rather make people see and think and consider."

It's the quiet nudge instead of the shrieking crowd that often has the most impact. For Urban, who has faced rejection, addiction, high profile celebrity and the eternal quest for more and better music, it is simplicity that holds the answers.

"It's a short life, and we just have to enjoy it. I have a friend who says, 'Life is fired at pointblank range.' You have no control over most of it, so you really need to take control of how you respond to it."

Considering the highs and lows, Urban is quick to ground his responses. "If the sun is out and there's a blue sky - it's like that Kenny Chesney song "I'm Gonna Save it for a Rainy Day," All those things could bother you, but I'd much rather lean into the light because there is so much to love and enjoy."

Knowing, too, it isn't always that simple, the man who admits he spent a lot of time practicing as a young man, so he recognizes how active the choice may need to be. Pausing to consider what he's been saying, he allows, "I think we're all a product of our raising. There was a lot of volatility between my father and my brother, so I became the peacemaker. It was my nurture, but it was probably my nature, too - trying to keep the peace between people."

Keeping the peace, raising the consciousness and singing the change you wish to see in the world make Urban a somewhat unlikely country star. And yet, it's also what makes him a compelling presence on "American Idol," a sought after star for all-genre things like Eric Clapton's Crossroads Festival or co-host of the Country Music Hall of Fame's annual All for the Hall event.

As the 2005 Country Music Association Entertainer of the Year, he's never stopped striving, or encouraging. To him, all roads lead to answers. Not necessarily the expected or the desired, but it adds up.

"You have to try things," he says, "to know they may not all work. Sometimes it's just the wrong thing for that person. Or it's the right person, but the wrong time ... I'm always committed to trying, to scrap a lot of work and time to get where you need to be, it's how you find out.

"But sometimes," he finishes, "the magic is what's left."

Raindrops from above

by Michone Nettles

I heard a baby crying today, the tears that rolled down its face came from above when the sky opened up and cried too.

Soulfelt and in tune connected with spirits and souls that linger within. The innocence and openness are one with all and everything. Such is life and after life unknown, we guess about questions that can't be answered. Until our time comes we will get the answers! But until then we guess and wonder about mysteries that hide behind curtains with puppet masters that pull strings that move body parts, and lips! Soul searching we stand!

The Lost Ones

by Abraham Vinzant

There are some people that Will help as they can I thank them for my family and Myself.

There are others that give a little Again I am very thankful for What I am given because what My family and I would all be on the Street and my mom being 66 and my niece Being 14 I would do what It takes if it takes 6 out of 7 days a week To get what is needed to help them first Family always comes first