

Almo's Strong Lead In Jefferson

Artist, Label Focus On Long-Term Radio Setup

This article was prepared by Phyllis Stark, managing editor of Country Airplay Monitor.

NASHVILLE—To launch a new country act in today's competitive environment, it is becoming increasingly necessary to throw all possible resources toward winning over radio. For Almo Sounds debut artist Paul Jefferson, that meant a grueling 13½-week radio tour that involved playing acoustically in station conference rooms as often as four times a day.

He visited more than 160 outlets on that tour, which started in February, and is scheduled to hit the road again short-

ly to visit additional stations in the West and Midwest. Jefferson could also be found in recent months playing wherever country programmers were gathered, including Country Radio Seminar in Nashville and the Gavin Country Seminar in Los Angeles.

Jefferson says the radio tour had its high and low points. "Some of the radio meetings were real easy," he says. "They had already heard the song ['Check Please'], and they loved [it] before we got there. The tough ones are the ones where you walk in and they look at their watch. There were a couple where we didn't make it, but [at] most of them we won them over."



JEFFERSON

One of the more successful visits was at KFKF Kansas City, Mo. After Jefferson played the single for various staffers three separate times, PD Dale Carter took the artist into the studio and had him play it live on the air. "It got such a wonderful response from our own staff . . . that I said, 'We've got to get this guy on the air right now,'" Carter says.

For Almo Sounds, the goal of the tour was not only to introduce Jefferson, but the label and its newly hired promotion staff. "There's no better way of introducing the label than bringing the first artist around," says Larry Pareigis, director of national promotion for Almo. The Gavin date was particularly key, Pareigis says, because Jefferson played for radio and the rest of the industry. "Every label was in attendance, and they saw how serious we were as a label and how serious we are about this artist," he says.

Because it began assembling its promotion staff and working on the marketing plan for Jefferson last fall but didn't release the first single, "Check Please," until May 6, Almo Sounds has been widely credited in the industry with having one the best setups for an artist in recent memory. The single, for example, was serviced to radio in an attention-grabbing green-leather restaurant check holder with "Almo Sounds Cafe" printed on the front and a Jefferson button, pen, bio, and lyric sheet inside. That setup seems to be paying off. "Check Please"

debuted on Hot Country Singles & Tracks at No. 68 May 18 and is No. 54 this week, and radio seems to be responding favorably.

"The single's great," says KMLE Phoenix music director Gwen Foster. "Immediately when we heard it, it just grabbed our attention. I've been playing it, and the phones are great on it. Like it grabbed us, it's grabbing the listeners."

Pareigis says the single, not the setup, is driving the record's early success. "None of it would have mattered if the music hadn't been right," he says. "You can have all the setup time in the world [with] flawed product, and it wouldn't [work]."

Being the label's debut, and so far sole, artist has been a mixed blessing for Jefferson. Although he is under some pressure to make a splash, he also has the benefit of the label's undivided attention. Garth Fundis, director of Nashville operations for Almo Sounds, says Jefferson is "in a very enviable position for an artist, having a record company throwing all of its resources and time behind him. We have to break him before we can go with another one . . . We're in the fray, in the starting gate, and it's hand-to-hand combat now."

Jefferson says he has faith in the label's ability to break him. "They're going to put as much into me as they possibly can and not give up on me," he says. "You have to admire their philosophy. They don't sign a bunch of acts and see if one sticks."

Fundis, who signed Jefferson and produced his self-titled album, which is due out July 16, says Jefferson was a perfect choice for a debut artist. "This is the kind of first act everyone should be able to have," Fundis says. "He has something to say musically and personally and is a great asset to the business."

"The first thing that knocked me out was the songs and then just his musical delivery," Fundis continues. "Then I met him, and it was a done deal. He is likeable, talented, and accessible musically . . . He's just got the whole thing. He writes, he sings great, and his success on the radio tour is a tribute to his personality and his ability to communicate with people."

Jefferson's background is quite different for country. He was raised in the Bay

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Area town of Woodside, Calif., where being into country music was considered odd. He holds a degree in biomedical engineering from the University of California at Berkeley, is a pilot, and worked as a flight instructor before moving to Nashville almost four years ago. "I gave up everything to move here and do this, but I was pretty confident, I guess, that something was going to happen," he says.

He first gained attention here as a songwriter and co-wrote the No. 1 Aaron Tippin hit "That's As Close As I'll Get To Loving You." He has publishing deals with Almo Irving Music and Bugle Publishing Group and is booked by Creative Artists Agency.

Although initially, Jefferson says, "I got a lot more interest in my songwriting than my artistry," his goal was to be both a writer and an artist, so he kept plugging away, performing at showcas-

es and at Nashville tourist attraction the Broadway Dinner Train, and generated some early interest from Giant, Asylum, Sony, and MCA. Deals with those labels didn't pan out, however, leaving the way clear for Almo Sounds to sign him.

He is managed by Anastasia Pruitt at Firststars Management, owned by manager Miles Copeland. Jefferson says both Copeland and Pruitt have been assets to his career. "Miles' name can get you through a door because people are interesting in what he's doing . . . It's pretty clear he means business, but it's really Anastasia who's really worked the hardest," he says. "If I get to a certain level in my career, [Copeland] may be able to kick in harder because he knows people like David Letterman. [but] Anastasia was down in the trenches doing all the work."

His association with Copeland has got-

ten him invited for the last several years to a two-week annual songwriter retreat Copeland hosts at his castle east of Bordeaux, France. Attendees this year included Lari White, Beth Nielsen Chapman, and Carole King, but it was Jefferson who took center stage when he was "knighted" by Copeland in a ceremony honoring him as the first writer to compose a No. 1 song (the aforementioned Tippin hit) during the retreat.

Jefferson co-wrote all of the songs on his debut album, principally with friends who have no publishing deals of their own. "It's really fun to write with these people because they all have new ideas," he says. "It's really fresh."

The album is full of relationship ballads and well-crafted story/songs, including the Civil War-themed "Common Ground," the uptempo anthem "Missouri," and "Unconditionally," a song that, on the surface, sounds like a love

song but is actually about God. Jefferson says he wrote "Unconditionally," which Wynonna had on hold for a while, for his mother: "I was thinking about how God has a divine, perfect love, and most humans don't succeed in trying to attain that," he says. "The closest thing [to that] is the mother/child relationship."

Another of the album's cuts, "I Just Might Make It," is about an artist poised on the brink of success, and it includes the telling line "I'll remember you if I get famous if you remember me if I don't."

Jefferson admits to struggling with the concept of fame. "This business of making an act successful requires that you make them bigger than life," he says. "Personally, I don't think anybody is worth that except maybe Jesus Christ. But to have that kind of success you have to be an icon, a hero to people. I'll play the part as best I can, but it's not really who I am . . . People come up to you that

you don't know and say they love you. I'll accept that and appreciate that, but you can't let it go to your head . . . It's like a drug to go out there and have people screaming for you. You've just got to remember how hard you worked to get there and how quickly it can all go away.

"There were a few times even on this radio tour that I started to feel out of control," he continues. "So many people are pulling you so many ways that [it's tempting] to start acting like a real sensitive artist or just blow [your] top."

What keeps Jefferson grounded in reality, however, are his songwriting and playing live. "The whole reason I got in this business and the reason I can't get out—and I've tried—is because I just love singing my songs for people and watching them react to [them]," he says. "I want to write the kinds of songs that every person alive can listen to and say, 'Man, I've been there.'"