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MUSIC PUBLISHING



Songwriters Take The Stage

writers nights are a nashville-networking necessity

BY VERNELL HACKETT

Nashville's music community may not have invented writers nights, but it certainly has perfected them.

Any night of the week will find a writer or group of writers performing their newest song or their latest no. 1 hit to an appreciative audience in almost any of Nashville's clubs. While new, unsigned writers in town would like to think there is a publisher or rep person at every table, reality is that's probably not the case.

Publishers, song pluggers, producers and A&R reps go out to writers night, but most often it is to see someone they already know. If an unknown writer is also on that showcase, then they might meet, a relationship form, and who knows what might happen on down the line?

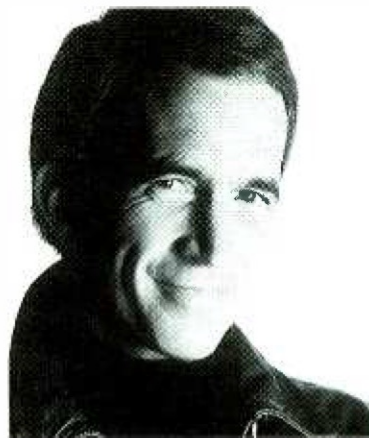
Woody Gomar, head of Little Big Town Music, says he rarely goes to writers nights, and, when he does, it is usually to see one of his writers. However... "Woody saw me with Kieren Kane, Harry Stinson, Kevin Welch and Mike Henderson in Austin, Texas, during the South by Southwest Music Conference, and he came up and asked who had my publishing," Tammy Rogers says. "At the time, I had my own publishing, but I went to talk to him and signed with Little Big Town, even though I was not in Nashville. That's a prime example of what can happen if you get out and play."

YOU NEVER KNOW

Peter Cronin, creative director at Bug Music, checks them out a couple nights a week. "I'll go to see my writers and see three or four other writers at the same time," he says. "And then there are nights I'll go out just to see new writers."

What motivates Cronin to investigate writers nights? "I think you can hit on something in this town that will blow you away. I remember the first time I saw Gillian Welch; she just blew me away. You never know what you're gonna see. Maybe you'll hear someone who is almost there."

Karen Conrad, VP of BMC Songs/Nashville, thinks writers nights are great and goes out two



Paul Craft

or three times a week. "One thing that does bug me are so many in-the-rounds," she says. "It's great if you're going out to be entertained, but as a publisher going to writers nights as an extension of my business, it takes a big chunk out of my evening. If I'm there to see only one writer, I have to wait through everyone else's songs to hear that writer's work."

"It's a great way for new writers to get out there and build up their confidence and hear other writers' songs and to network," adds Conrad.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Networking is a key reason for new writers to perform at writers nights. Songwriter Even Stevens describes the move to Nashville as being part of the freshman class. As you progress, you move up with the rest of the class.

Blake Shelton recently signed a

writing deal with Gosnell Music and a production deal with Sony/Trec. He says that some of the songs that helped him get those deals were songs he wrote with people he met at writers showcases. "I would absolutely recommend that new writers do writers nights," he says. "That's how I met the person I write the most with, Rachel Proctor."

Ryan Murphey, who has a writer/artist development deal with Still Working For The Man Music, says that, when he first



Tammy Rogers

came to Nashville, he did a lot of writers nights. He believes it was that, more than anything, that helped him find a publishing deal. "I got involved in a group called the Young Riders, which was sponsored by *American Songwriter* magazine," he says. "We did a lot of writers nights together, and that led me to do other writers nights

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and meet more people. The more people who hear your songs, the more people will talk about them and talk about you."

Shelton and Kosser concur on one writers-night dilemma. "If you have a song with a neat hook, you might not want to do it because you're afraid that someone may pick up on it," Shelton points out.

Kosser agrees, adding, "I think writers nights really are a valid part of the songwriter marketplace in Nashville, but they do entail risks on both sides."

Songwriter Jim McBride doesn't go to many writers nights as either a performer or observer, but his reason comes from the other side of the coin. "It's just so hard for me to find great ideas after [writ-



Jim McBride

the bottom line."

"I think I do it mostly for the fun of it and because I enjoy playing my songs in front of people and getting their reaction," says songwriter Paul Craft. "As far as people hearing my songs—A&R people or producers—I don't see them at writers nights. I've heard of it happening, though."

Songwriter Susan Longacre plans writers nights when she has new songs. "I think it's a great opportunity to share some of your new material and hopefully there will be producers or A&R people in the audience...there usually are," she says. "I also like to go because I think writers need to be aware of what other writers are

doing—it can be inspiring."

So is it good to do writers nights? The consensus is a resounding yes. Will they really help you get signed to a publishing deal or get a new song cut? The consensus is probably not. But in Nashville anything could happen.

"They are their own art form," concludes Murphey. "If you're a new songwriter, going to hear someone play all their hits is an incredible experience. I don't think you can know a song until you hear it played by the person who wrote it. It's so much more intimate, and you really understand where the song is coming from." ■



Peter Cronin



Karen Conrad

ing] this many years, and I won't write an idea that I've heard," he says. "I'd rather not eliminate the possibility that I may have come up with that title [heard at a writers night], so I just don't go."

OLD PROS

Many established writers enjoy writers nights, and their reasons are diverse. "I think probably the biggest reason is to try new songs," Rogers says. "Not that it's the final judgment, but it's nice to gauge reaction and see where you are with a song."

Songwriter Bob DiPiero has a



Blake Shelton

list of reasons for doing them. "The first is purely selfish," he says. "It's a pleasure for me to get to play with different musicians. I also do it just to keep myself sharp as a guitar player and singer."

"It's a good place to try stuff out, and that's still scary for me. Recently, I played a new song at the Bluebird, and, even though I knew it was going to be a single, I still had butterflies. You want the audience to like it—that's always

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