

HOWARD LARAVEA

MAKING TRACKS WITH GRETCHEN WILSON

As keyboardist for country singer Gretchen Wilson, Howard Laravea had a front-row seat to one of the music industry's most spectacular phenomena: the explosion of a new star.

"When you're moving at that velocity, you don't even know if you're having fun or not!" laughs Howard. "Everybody's just trying to hold on. Watching all the cylinders of the music business engine firing at once is just amazing."

Wilson, who was recently named Female Vocalist of the Year at the CMA Awards, chose Laravea to play on her first tour in April 2004. It was business as usual—until her iconic song "Redneck Woman" rocketed up the charts.

"That's when everything changed," Laravea remembers. "We went from setting up our own gear to touring with semis and buses and in-house catering. The meteoric jump Gretchen made in those first nine months was just incredible."

Laravea was no stranger to the road before Gretchen came along. After hopping from coast to coast with his own band, CBS recording artists El Rocho, he played with bassist Rick Danko of The Band, then served two years with Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons before commencing a 12-year stint as musical director for '60s hitmakers Gary Puckett and the Union Gap.

Howard met Wilson while playing at a Nashville blues club. "She used to work there, so every once in a while she'd sit in and sing," he recalls. "She is a spectacular talent, of course, but I don't think anyone expected her to come up this fast. For the first four months of the tour, she was still locked into doing some shows that had been booked before anyone knew she was going to have a hit. So one night we'd play for 50,000 people, and the next night we'd do some little place in Kentucky where they were expecting 1,000 people at most. But 15,000 came, and they had to shut down the Interstate exit!"

Wilson's debut record, *Here for the Party*, went on to sell more than four million copies. "It's a phenomenal thing when a new artist hits that way," reflects Laravea. "It doesn't happen very often in any genre. The one song really kick-started it, but the integrity of the

whole record was what kept it going. And the band was good, and kept getting better—you have to do that, you're being tested every day." Apparently Howard passed the test. He was soon appointed bandleader and toured the world twice with Gretchen.

Laravea chose a Yamaha AW16G digital audio workstation to capture song ideas and cut demos on the road. "The great thing about a hardware piece like this is it's always ready to go," he says. "I found that I could set the whole thing up in two minutes. I'd set up in the back of the bus with just the AW16G, headphones and a microphone. I might do a keyboard part on top of one of the built-in drumbeats, and do a vocal part on top of that, and then get one of my buddies to come over and do a guitar part."

The beauty of the AW16G, Howard notes, lies in its flexibility as well as its ease of use. "You can burn an audio CD of your project or make CD data backups. You can even use it as a mixer if you want. You can record your band live on just two tracks, or spread everything over eight channels—it has 16 tracks total, plus lots of virtual tracks. You can do several takes and then choose the one you want. What a great piece—it just rips it up! Sonically, it's good enough to cut a whole record with."

After so many years on the road, Laravea has decided to give up the touring life in order to focus on sessions in his adopted home of Nashville. "I'm on the new Big & Rich record," he says. "I'm really proud of that! And I'm also on the live tracks of Gretchen Wilson's latest record, *All Jacked Up*." He also recently won the Blues Keyboard Player of the Year award from the Music City Blues Society.

"Here in Nashville, it's kind of unusual to do sessions and also go on the road," notes Howard. "The country scene is different from the rock scene in that regard. The road bands very rarely get to play on the artists' records, and there's a different set of chops for session players—you need to know how to read Nashville number charts, for example. Every producer tends to always work with the same team of musicians, guys he knows can deliver a hit. But, coming from the rock world, I don't get hung up on distinctions like that. I just love to play!"



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