



FROM PRODIGY TO PRO

When he was nine, little Jimmy Nichols sat down at his father's piano and started playing — and he hasn't stopped since. Now one of Nashville's top session and touring keyboardists, Jimmy has recorded with such country greats as Carrie Underwood, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Mindy McCready. He's one of the few artists to play piano on an Elton John track. He's been a musical director for top-flight acts like Reba McEntire and Faith Hill. Yet he still finds time to play demo sessions for new and developing artists.

"I love doing demos," he says. "I don't ever want to stop! It keeps me in the loop on what's being cut, who's doing what, what's being pitched. And in Nashville, the process is so fast: You're cutting five or six songs in three hours, so it really keeps your chops up."

Jimmy's nonstop approach to music dates back decades. In the early 1970s, shortly after his musician father's untimely death from cancer, he joined his three older brothers onstage as the Nichols Brothers, a band that supported the family for the next 23 years.



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The brothers began performing locally in the Columbus, Ohio area, including a six-night-a-week gig at a friend's bar. "As I got older and graduated from school, we started touring as well," Jimmy recalls. "We opened for everyone from the Mandrells and Eddie Rabbitt to the Osmond Brothers and Willie Nelson."

In 1993 the Nichols Brothers came to Nashville in search of a record deal. "I was working on that project when I met David Malloy, a GRAMMY® Award-winning producer who co-owned the studio I was working at," says Jimmy. "He asked if I'd play on some songs for an artist named Daryle Singletary."

When that record yielded two top five country hits, Jimmy's second musical career took off. "It was life-altering, going from living out of a motor home to working with the biggest artists in the business," he says. "Breaking up the band was tough, but they're proud of what I've accomplished."

One of Jimmy's most impressive achievements has been acting as musical director for two top country artists — at the same time. And he's done it twice: first when an engagement with Reba McEntire overlapped with Faith Hill's initial dates in 2005, and again the following year, when he became MD on the highest-grossing country tour of all time: the Soul2Soul II tour featuring Faith Hill and Tim McGraw, with 118 performances in 2006 and 2007.

"Touring was always in my blood," Jimmy says. "I always consider myself an entertainer because of all those years I spent with the Brothers. When I get onstage, I hold nothing back. As a keyboard player, I try to be as entertaining and visual as I can."

Another of Jimmy's assets is his dedication to the latest and best musical technology. "I decided I would carve my own niche by being a cutting-edge player," he explains. "I was one of the few people in town doing the Yamaha MIDI Grand thing when those interfaces came out. And I think that's what helped get my foot in the door."

At the top of Jimmy's current go-to keyboard list is the Yamaha Motif. He has several, including a Motif Rack, a Motif XS8, and his latest, the Motif XF8.

"They really refined the Motif series with the XF8," Jimmy says. "I used it on the last Carrie Underwood dates, and when I did the CMAs. Yamaha has done a great job of coming up with a flexible, powerful keyboard that you just want to sit down and play all day. It cuts through so well on recordings and live as well."

The Motif's multiple outputs give Jimmy the ability to process individual sounds in different ways. "I also love the way they implemented the ability to use the Motif as a controller," he adds. "With Yamaha's proprietary MIDI drivers, I just go right in via USB to my computer and it's there. On tour, I used to bring duplicates of some of my gear, but with the Motif it's just the one unit, because it never fails. You power it up, it works. That's a big plus for me as well."

After decades on the road, Jimmy knows all about Yamaha's reliability. During one Nichols Brothers show in the 1980s, the club burned down around them. "My Yamaha CP70 was onstage with fire all around it," he remembers. "We cleaned it up, and for the last five years of its life it smelled like smoke, but it worked every night. That's the reliability of Yamaha. That's when I realized this is serious gear."

As he looks forward to more sessions, more top records, and more touring — including MD duties for Hill and McGraw — Jimmy never forgets the long road to his current musical success. "I wouldn't be where I am without the Brothers, so I owe them a great deal," he says. "I feel like I'm doing this for them as well. It's made me grateful for where I'm at, and it keeps me excited about what's next. Hopefully my best stuff is yet to come!"

MOTIF XF8