



PAISLEY'S KEY PLAYER

Some people do country just a little differently—like keyboardist and banjo player Kendal Marcy, who has performed and recorded with Brad Paisley and his band, the Drama Kings, for the past 13 years. With multiple instruments at his command and a musical background that includes both a concert pianist mother and a boogie-woogie piano-playing dad, Marcy and his diverse musical talents offer Paisley plenty of bandwidth to convey his distinctive musical personality.

“It’s a complementary thing,” Kendal says. “Brad gets to realize his vision, and I’m learning the crooked way he thinks. I guess I just have a different outlook, with the classical thing, the rock-and-roll thing, and the bluegrass banjo thing, so I’m capable of expressing something that maybe he would if he played piano.”

Kendal was racking up hits long before he joined Paisley. As one of the Marcy Brothers, he charted in the US Country Top 100 six times between 1988 and 1991. But he’s also had his share of near misses—for example, the Marcy Brothers’ 1991 recording of the song, “Don’t Tell My Heart,” which was re-recorded less than a year later by Billy Ray Cyrus as “Achy Breaky Heart,” one of the biggest country hits of all time.

“It was kind of weird,” Marcy recalls. “We felt a little bit like, ‘What went on here?’ It was really the beginning of the end for our group when that went down.”

The brothers disbanded, but Kendal kept going musically, both in his own project studio and with other acts. “I had a background in audio engineering, and I was also running live sound for various people,” he says. “Actually, when I hooked up with Brad, his front-of-house guy was finishing up another gig, so I ended up running front-of-house for Brad for four months. Then I ran monitors for him for a year, and then I started playing in the band. And now I’m his bandleader.”

Marcy’s gig offers him an enviable range of creative opportunities. Paisley records and tours with the same band—an atypical approach for Nashville-based acts, which usually rely on different players for live and studio work—and his genre-bending music provides plenty of room for experimentation.

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"Brad liked the fact that I was a multi-instrumentalist," Kendal says. "The main reason he brought me into the band was my ability to play not just piano, but banjo and mandolin. I also play guitar, though I don't really need to in this band. But he lets me pretty much do whatever I want to do creatively."

Kendal has expanded his skills in other ways as well. "I do a lot of things on the business side with Brad," Marcy says. "If there's something that I want to take on, he's more than happy to let me try. I love the different aspects of what I get to do in addition to playing. We're in the studio doing overdubs now, and I'm engineering it. When we do TV shows, if there's any kind of post-production involved, I'm the guy that does it. I've also done TV mixes for various specials. It's really cool."

Kendal lost his entire keyboard rig in the May 2010 Nashville flood, including a cherished Yamaha P250. But he's replaced it with something even better: a Yamaha CP5 Stage Piano.

"The CP5 is my go-to piano sound," he says. "I love that thing. It's got everything I need right there, and it's convenient and light. With Brad's music, I've got to have the best-sounding piano I can possibly have, and it delivers with flying colors. And there are all these other sounds—the '71 rhodes is fantastic, and the wurlie. There's just so many good sounds, I don't have a favorite."

The Yamaha Motif XS8 is another essential. "Brad insisted that I have the Motif in the studio," Kendal says. "I also use it a lot to trigger samples live. But I don't program at all, and I don't have to. I love that about Yamaha. I never have to worry if I can find a sound."

For the past year, Paisley and his band have been recording whenever they're not on the road. Their next release—with Marcy as associate producer—is due out in April. "It's been a long process this time, just because Brad wanted to toss the salad a little bit," says Marcy. "Our current single is called 'Southern Comfort Zone,' and it's kind of about getting out of the usual. That's one of the things we're doing on this record. We're trying to leave that comfort zone, so we're doing a lot of cool stuff."

And that's where the Motif comes in, he says: "It's all over our upcoming record. I'm able to use a lot of different sounds and textures that normally we wouldn't even consider for a country record. It's been a lot of fun!"

