

# PHIL VASSAR'S songs and energy to spare

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IT'S A GOOD THING THAT PHIL VASSAR WAS AN ACE college athlete—the workout he undergoes at a typical gig falls just a few calories short of a decathlon. "I don't just sit behind the piano," says the Nashville-based singer/songwriter. "I get up. I run around. I spend a lot of time on top of the piano, actually."

Vassar developed his hyperkinetic performing style during his hardscrabble club years, back before his songs became hits for Alan Jackson, Collin Raye, Tim McGraw, Blackhawk, Jo Dee Messina, and others. "Clubs are the great training grounds for entertainers," says Phil. "I don't know how you could become one without playing clubs. You learn how to deal with big audiences, or with no audiences at all. And as a songwriter, you learn what works and what doesn't. You're constantly educating yourself. It's hard, but hey, it's fun too."

Performing has remained Vassar's strongest musical passion. In fact, to hear Phil tell it, writing hits for others was largely a matter of necessity. "It was hard to get a record deal because I'm a piano player, so I tried to get my songs recorded by other artists. But to this day I always write first as an artist. I never start a song thinking, 'This is for Alan Jackson.' I just decide what I want to write about and then do it. But while I sometimes suspect that no one can interpret a song as well as the writer, it's cool to hear someone else perform your songs, especially when you're as lucky as I've been. I've never been disappointed by a recording of one of my songs."

Listeners can judge for themselves whether the writer's renditions are best by checking out Phil's debut album, *Phil Vassar*. The prolific Vassar had no difficulty coming up with 11 new tunes for the disc. "I have more songs than I could ever record," he says. "The hardest part of making this album was deciding which ones to cut."

One reason Vassar's songs connect with so many listeners is that they all have strong story lines. "I'm just drawn to storytelling songs that

have a beginning, a middle, and an end," he says. "Most of mine are true stories. I might change the names, but that's about it. For example, I wrote 'I'm Alright' on my way to visit an old high school friend I was really psyched to see. I pulled it out of the air and wrote it on a pad somewhere out on the middle of Interstate 40. And 'Joe and Rosalita' is about a high school couple that I set up on a date when we were all 16."

Lately Phil has been assembling songs on a Yamaha PSR9000 high-end MIDI portable keyboard. "I keep mine in the back of my bus," he says. "When I turn it on and fire up some grooves, it really inspires me. For the first time, if someone asks me whether I write on guitar or piano, I can honestly say 'both.' The guitar sounds are so good that my guitar players freak out. The keyboard patches are great too, particularly the pad sounds. The 9000 makes the songwriting process inspiring because it feels like you're in a studio with a band. I swear, I could write ten songs a day on that thing."

Was it difficult to master? "Let me answer this way," says Phil. "I'm a piano player, not a programmer. In fact, I'm probably the least technical guy on the planet. I don't even have e-mail, and I still record all my songs on a \$14 boom box. But it didn't take me long to get going on this thing. In fact, I wrote two songs the day I got it."

Vassar says the hardest part of becoming a successful songwriter is learning to follow your heart rather than the trends. "My advice for aspiring writers is to write a song you like, not what you think somebody else is going to like. I chased my tail for years trying to write songs like everyone else was writing. But one day I decided to just be myself, and only then did I start getting somewhere. People weren't too keen on some of the things I came up with at first, but four or five years later some of those songs made it to #1. I guess you just have to trust your own instincts—not somebody else's."