

nashville's "reluctant" producer

FOR A GUY WHO KNEW WHAT HE WANTED FROM LIFE AT a young age, Don Cook's career has taken some surprising twists.

"I don't know why I knew so early on that I wanted to write songs," says the affable Cook. "Maybe my parents dropped me on my head. I made my first song demo at age 14. I wish I had a copy of it now, just to have a laugh at it."

Young Don practically learned to use a demo studio before learning to use a razor. By the end of the '70s he'd penned hits for Barbara Mandrell, John Conlee, and others. But Cook's career attained critical mass when he teamed up with a pair of young unknowns named Brooks and Dunn. Cook proudly recalls the day he helped write the duo's breakthrough song, "Brand New Man". "We knew it was a magical piece of material as soon as we finished it and sat around my table singing it."

But Cook's collaborators threw him a curve by suggesting that he produce the new act. "I was perfectly happy being just a songwriter," says Cook. "I had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the world of production. Everyone said, 'Aw, Don, just do it once and see if you like it.' So I did it once, and we sold almost six million copies. So I was a bit motivated to do it again. And to be honest, I had no idea it would be so much fun."

In retrospect, Cook can make sense of the leap. "The demo studio is a great proving ground for producers," he says. "Songwriters have to become adept in the studio, and I'd been working in studios since I was a kid. I was always the sort of guy who could play the studio better than I could play any one instrument. I knew how to use it to make instruments, singers, and songs sound good. In fact, three of the demos I did for that first Brooks and Dunn record ended up on the album."

Cook, in short, takes his demos seriously. "The only difference between a demo and a master," he

insists, "is the amount of money you pay the musicians. I defy people to tell the difference between my demos and my records most of the time. Sure, it's not as automatic to go from demos to records in country music as in other genres, because we're less of a drum machine and synthesizer-oriented format. But sometimes it does work out that way. For example, we're starting to use loops a lot more in country, and it's getting easier to take things seamlessly from the demo studio to the master studio."

One tool that eases the transition is Don's PSR9000 high end MIDI portable keyboard. "It's perfect for a guy like me with limited keyboard skills, because it does so much of the work for me.

I start with a drum pattern, a groove, and a bass part on the keyboard, add a guitar part that I play myself, and then augment it with some pad or chordal texture. It all comes together so fast! And since I usually play in just two or three keys, I like the way the PSR9000 lets

me transpose so quickly. I haven't had it long enough to use the onboard sounds on my records, but I guarantee you those sounds will be there. And it only took me about two hours to learn how to use the thing."

Cook's life took another surprise turn in 1994 when he accepted a job as Chief Creative Officer & Senior Vice President of Nashville's Sony/ATV/Tree Music Publishing. "Seeing the songwriting business from the other side of the wall changed me as a writer," claims Cook. "It made me less impatient with others and more impatient with myself as a writer, which is the way it should be."

How does Cook find time to pursue three full-time jobs? "I have so many things to do during the day that I've learned to focus," he replies. "I can write anywhere—in a car, at a football game. And there are advantages in having to wear so many hats. When something isn't going as smoothly as I'd like, I just take off one hat and put on another."

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