

JON VEZNER:

TURNING OUT THE HITS

Nashville songwriter/producer Jon Vezner is a consummate musical craftsman whose songs have been recorded by such artists as Faith Hill, Patti Page, Martina McBride, and Vezner's wife, Grammy-winning singer Kathy Mattea. But when we caught up with him, he was on his way to pick up supplies for a different kind of craft: woodturning.

SO, IS THERE A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKING WITH SONGS AND working with wood?

"Absolutely," says Vezner. "In both cases, you just have to get out of the way! I haven't been doing woodturning for very long, but I've learned you have to let the wood speak for itself. I might have a general idea of the shape, if I'm making a lamp or a bowl or something like that. But it's the same as writing a song—you just need to let it go where it wants to go. You can't force it."

Jon has been amply rewarded for his patience in letting his songs be what they want to be. He recalls one challenging—but ultimately triumphant—example: "There's a song I wrote called 'Ashes in the Wind,' which Kathy [Mattea] recorded on her 2002 album, *Roses*. It's gotten a lot of attention, and I think it's one of the best things I've written. But I tried to write that song for ten years! Every so often I'd get a little piece, a line or two. It just took that long to come out the way it did."

Vezner's educational background also factors into the songwriting process. "I was a music theory and composition major, so I have always thought in terms of arrangement," he explains. "I'll write the songs, then I'll go into a mode where I arrange them. I do compartmentalize to some extent, but then again I think of arrangement all the time when I'm writing."

In addition to writing songs, Jon has been busy as a producer in recent years. He's produced three Patti Page albums: *Brand New Tennessee Waltz*, the recently released *Sweet Sounds of Christmas*, and a new children's record, *Child of Mine*. And he's working on a new songwriter album of his own—his first since 1994's *Who's Gonna Know*—which can be previewed on his website, www.jonvezner.com.

Despite his success, Vezner sometimes considers his work to be a bit outside the standard Nashville format. "I do what serves the song, not what I think someone might want to hear," he says. "For example, when Don Henry and I wrote 'Where've You Been,' I sent him some

ideas, like we should do this with classical guitar and cello. So that's the way we demoed it. It definitely wasn't the typical instrumentation for a demo."

Yet Vezner has no regrets about such independent thinking. "I don't get a lot of cuts on records," he notes, "but I get nice cuts, including a lot of singles. The way I look at it, if everybody else gives a producer something that's painted red, and I give them something that's painted blue, it's not going to blend in. It either makes it to the record and it's a single, or they love it but they can't make it fit. A lot of times I'll end up having the last single—they've established the record already, so they can afford to go with something a little different. But then sometimes they'll end up selling records with that single."

Vezner considers his Yamaha PSR keyboards essential tools for writing and arranging. "I love them," he says. "I started with a PSR100 and a 150, and then I got an 8000 and a 9000. I basically build tracks on my PSRs. They're great for working out arrangements—I've done complete demos with them. For example, Michael McDonald and I wrote a track called 'There You Are,' where we built the whole song except the guitars on the PSR. It's a great-sounding track. I've also done songs where I've written an arrangement on my PSR and exported the MIDI files to a sequencing program, then played it back on Michael McDonald's Yamaha Disklavier and recorded it live. Then I built up the tracks on top of that initial piano track."

Sometimes, says Jon, the PSR's onboard sounds can blur the lines between songwriting, production, and arrangement: "Those things can become very intertwined. And that's what's so good about the PSR. A lot of times, the work tape I do when we're writing a song gets translated straight into the finished demo, where I'll lay out tracks and bang—it's done."



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