

MATRACA BERG INTERVIEW PART TWO

0:00:00 Blackmon: So at sixteen is when you revealed to your family that you were doing music? How did that happen?

0:00:09 Berg: I just started writing songs like full — before I would do bits and pieces and they were mostly just melodies. All of a sudden, songs were coming to me, it was crazy. It was like two a day and I started pinging back in forth — like, you know when you have two cassette recorders, you'd layer background vocals and extra guitar or whatever — and I was making these little demos in this little walk-in closet. And I played, I got up the nerve to play one for my mom and she said oh, I was afraid you were going to do this. She knew it all along, she just was hoping I would change my mind. But when she heard the songs, she just thought, well, you obviously got — you're pretty good at this for a kid. And she helped me, she coached me. \

0:01:31 Blackmon: Then were you playing a bit go guitar at this point, at sixteen?

0:01:37 Berg: No, I could play like our basic three chords, but my whole thing was piano. But I would sing 'cause I didn't have a guitar — which is crazy because I'm from a musical family — but we didn't have a guitar. So I would just sing acapella and bounce these vocals back and forth and then I got my hands on a guitar not long after that because it's easier to say pass me that guitar than a piano. And that changed everything when I started playing guitar.

0:02:27 Blackmon: So at sixteen when you're making up the melodies, did you just kind of instinctively understand song forms or rhymes or just all that you absorbed it just kind of came out, cause you kind of absorbed it?

0:02:45 Berg: Yeah, yeah. It was, like I said, about music being math. There are patterns that emerged, and some people can see them more than others, and maybe that's what it was for me. I don't know, I'm a miserable math student.

0:03:20 Blackmon: Well, I gotta think growing up like that would be like a gospel singer growing up in church, you know the same kind of thing, a bluegrass kid growing up on the bluegrass circuit. what did, was there anybody at sixteen, you know, you're figuring out who you are, you're wiring songs just because it's something you like, were you trying o emulate anybody or were you just trying to do whatever, what was that like?

0:03:54 Berg: Well, emulate. Emulate anybody.

0:04:01 Blackmon: You know, when you just trying to — were you just making up whatever came to you, or were you —

0:04:05 Berg: Oh yeah, yeah. I was making up whatever came to me, it wasn't — I never really set out to emulate anybody, which is strange, and eventually, I did, I mean we all do. But at that

point, like I said, Bobby Gentry was so strong for me and Mickey Newbury was definitely part of that. He's probably my earliest influence, and then the people I grew up around like Red Lane and Sonny Throckmorton, they were my heroes. That's what — it was like moth to a flame, when they sat down and played and sang songs they wrote, I just was in awe. I think also just growing up around pickers and singers, nobody really writing, so that was just fascinating to me. That was exotic to me.

0:05:32 Blackmon: Was there a moment when like you had heard one of these legends' songs in your kitchen or living room, and then one day you heard somebody else sing it on the radio? Was there ever an a-ha moment where you're like, oh they're — that's what this does?

0:05:54 Berg: Much later, like I said, these songwriters were future Hall of Famers but they were broke back then.

0:06:05 Blackmon: I got you, I got you. Okay.

0:06:08 Berg: But there was one, Little Willie Rainsford, was a great demo singer, and Aunt Sue was singing on one of these demos and it was Elvira. This was years before it was a hit, but Aunt Studie loved it so much she got a reel-to-reel and brought it home. They played that sucker over and over and over again, and I remember how cool — I remember what a cool song that was and it was, it had to have been a decade later when it was a hit.

0:07:09 Blackmon: So it was a hit in your house.

0:07:12 Berg: It was a hit, it had been a hit for years in our house.

0:07:18 Blackmon: So you said when —

0:07:19 Berg: So that's an example for sure. I don't know.

0:07:25 Blackmon: Yeah, I think it's cool that there was — of course you knew that those were real jobs, just seeing your mom and aunt and uncle, music was a real job for you from the beginning. You said when your mom discovered you were writing songs and that you had a talent for it, you said she helped you. What did she do?

0:07:53 Berg: She wrote with me, just to, you know, she was really good at lyrically coaching me. Like pointing out where I go off the rails. When you lose the thread or if the thread is not clear enough or not impactful in the way it's put together. Also, hooks. Hook lines. What a musical hook is, what a lyrical hook is, just basic songwriting 101, and because she was a song plugger, she got it. She could zero right in on what I needed to learn.

0:09:05 Blackmon: It sounds like she was — because she was a song plugger, she was commercially minded, would that be correct? that she was helping you be commercially minded? That she was helping you be a commercial songwriter?

0:09:12 Berg: Yes, exactly.

0:09:15 Blackmon: And you were receptive to all the help?

0:09:18 Berg: Oh, yeah.

0:09:19 Blackmon: Okay.

0:09:20 Berg: Oh, yeah. I was — anything, I just wanted to learn everything I could and I think mom had me so young that we were more like sisters than a parent and a child.

0:09:40 Blackmon: How old was she when you were born?

0:09:43 Berg: She was twenty.

0:09:45 Blackmon: Okay. She always super close?

0:09:52 Berg: We were, yeah.

0:09:55 Blackmon: And so, sixteen through high school, are you pretty much writing with your mom and by yourself and learning how to play guitar in that time? What's all going on in high school?

0:10:08 Berg: Yep, that's pretty much it.

0:10:11 Blackmon: Did you have any other interests or were you on your path at that point?

0:10:17 Berg: I was on my path.

0:10:18 Blackmon: Okay.

0:10:20 Berg: And I had no plan B.

0:10:24 Blackmon: And did you start playing out during high school?

0:10:31 Berg: No. No, I suffered from terrible stage fright. Yeah, I didn't play in front of people for years, I think I was about 22 when I finally stuck my toe in the water, so to speak.

0:10:59 Blackmon: So when you're in high school and basically honing your craft and your mom's coaching you, did you start playing songs for some of these other people that were around your house, or getting any feedback from any other people in the music business?

0:11:21 Berg: Hold on, I'm sorry, Odie. Jeff is about to — sorry hon, I'm in the middle of it. He was talking on the phone and walking into the room.

0:11:40 Blackmon: I can totally edit that out, so it's no problem.

0:11:46 Berg: Okay, so where were we?

0:11:48 Blackmon: So did you, at this time, honing your craft with your mom, did you start to play your songs for any other people that were around that were in the music business?

0:12:01 Berg: My mom did. Dan Wilson was a creative in Tree Publishing and was also a family friend. Mom brought my songs to him and he was very sweet and very open and receptive. I didn't, nothing happened right away, but they knew who I was. When I was eighteen, I went to Tree and it was the end of the day, and I was with — I had a girlfriend with me, and you know, it sounds so crazy when you're saying okay, I was eighteen years old, and I just asked my buddy to go to Tree Publishing Company and hang out. But they were like family, there were people I knew, and mom — I skipped over this, sorry. She remarried Dave Kirby, who was a great songwriter, great picker, and wrote: "Is Anybody Going To San Antone."

0:13:37 Blackmon: How old were you when he came back into your life?

0:13:42 Berg: I was seventeen, when they got married I was eighteen, I think. So he was in the mix then too, and it was kind of a whirling romance, it happened pretty quickly, and he was also a writer at Tree, so it was all, you know, family. So Tree was like going to see my uncles. I think Red was there too, and Sonny, so it was just — as I was talking about, bringing my buddy over there, when I was eighteen I thought that sounds absurd.

0:14:37 Blackmon: Definitely different time. Different culture.

0:14:40 Berg: It was a different time, and it was the end of the day, and they were all getting out the beers and Dan's office was a fun place. These guys would drink a couple of beers and start playing songs, just passing around a guitar, and my friend Renee who was just the most gregarious, never met a stranger, wacky gal, and great singer, too. She thought I was just the greatest thing coming down the pipe and she said you gotta hear this new song Matraca wrote, you gotta hear it! And I had to play it in front of these people and I just remember my little voice shaking and playing this sketch string guitar and I somehow got the song out. Braddock was in the room, Bobby Braddock was in the room. It was like Bobby Braddock, I think Jamie O'Hara — I'm trying to remember, it's such a vivid memory. There was one other person. Anyway, and of course, it would grow as Dean Dillon would pop in — anyway, it sounds so absurd. But it was

so cool. So I played this song and it was one of my more — it was something my mother would never play for them that I wrote. Braddock was just blown away by it, and I was — didn't know what to think except say thank you. Then whenever I started hanging out with these kids who, we all ended up in the music business, it was Bryan Rollins and Sam Ramage, and Doug Crider. We had this little pact that we ran in and we had an obsession with Bobby Braddock and that's when "He Stopped Loving Her Today" was just, had just blown everything out of the water. We used to buy him drinks whenever we'd go out, it was a small town, so running into each other was pretty easy. We used to buy him drinks whenever we'd see him in a restaurant or at a bar or whatever and he invited us to a party he was having one night and he had this long, ranch-style house in Green Hills. The main party was going on in the main part of the house, but there was this — his music room was way on the other end of the house, and I was just wandering around, and I saw that piano in his music room and I hadn't been around in a piano in a while so I sat down and started playing it. He walked in and said that's cool, what is that? I said I don't know, it's this play-on-words thing I've got called "Faking Love." He sat down next to me and we wrote "Faking Love" in like twenty minutes. I didn't think anything of it after that until he called me and said I'm doing a demo, I want to demo our song. I was like, yeah? And he said I want you to sing it, and I had never sung in a recording studio before. So I sang the demo and that was really fun, and then I get a call a couple of weeks later that T.G. Shepperd recorded it. Then everything after that, it was just like a huge door that swung open and it was so, it felt so almost accidental.

0:19:57 Blackmon: Were you nineteen at that point when it went number one?

0:19:58 Berg: I was eighteen.

0:20:00 Blackmon: Eighteen when it went number one. Well, from the time that you played that song and Bobby heard you at Tree — at Sony, or Tree, sorry — to the party where you all co-wrote, how much time was in between that, do you think?

0:20:26 Berg: Say that again? Sorry,

0:20:27 Blackmon: Like timeframe, from the time from the first time he heard you play at Tree to when you guys co-wrote that song at his house. How much time span was that?

0:20:39 Berg: About six months.

0:20:41 Blackmon: Had you cowritten anything before you sat down with him?

0:20:46 Berg: Well, with my mom.

0:20:47 Blackmon: Just with your mom only, okay. So that was kind of your first co-write besides your mom? Incredible. And so a couple of weeks later you hear it's gonna be a single? Was that after you demoed?

0:21:01 Berg: Yeah. It was — might have been a month.

0:21:06 Blackmon: Were you out of high school at this point?

0:21:08 Berg: Yeah.

0:21:10 Blackmon: Okay. So how did you take all that?

0:21:18 Berg: Well, I mean I was thrilled, my mother was thrilled, obviously. But because I wrote it with Bobby Braddock it didn't feel really like it was mine. I knew that I wasn't quite there yet and I knew that it was just an incredible gift, but it was a little early in the game. So I didn't walk around thinking I was a big hit songwriter. I was just the right place, right time, I was lucky. But it was fabulous and it got my foot in the door.

0:22:22 Blackmon: And did you sign a publishing deal, I'm assuming?

0:22:28 Berg: Yeah, but it was just because people didn't take it seriously, they thought me and Bobby were dating and they didn't understand that was just kind of an organic thing that happened, it wasn't like he was grooming me to be anything. So they gave me a year contract with a little bit of an advance but it wasn't a real deal.

0:22:59 Blackmon: Tree did?

0:23:00 Berg: Yeah. I don't think they took it very seriously.

0:23:08 Blackmon: Let me ask you this because talking about going into Tree and playing for those guys at the end of the day and they're getting their beers out. Obviously, it was very much the time of the good 'ol boy club, for lack of better term in Nashville. What was it like for a young lady, I mean it seemed like they were — because they knew you or your mom, step-dad that they were open to hearing you — but what was it like as a young lady interested in breaking into the music business?

0:24:42 Berg: It was very much a mixed bag. You weren't taken very seriously as a woman, especially a child and I was basically a kid. I did have the advantage of having all these great uncles that kind of stood guard and protected me, you know, I always felt like there was this shield around me because of who I grew up around, so I think that was a blessing. I didn't - there were no me too moments for me in the business, and I really do think it was because who was standing around me and somebody would get killed. So it was the credibility problem, I just was not taken very seriously for a long time.

0:23:17 Blackmon: Were there any — did you have any role models besides your mom at that age that were in the music business?

0:25:29 Berg: At that age, no. Tanya Tucker, I don't know.

0:25:35 Blackmon: But in your world, like around those publishing companies, did anybody that you had interaction with — was there anybody you could look up to that was in that world besides your mom and aunt?

0:25:54 Berg: Deborah Allen, we were pals, her and Ray, and I thought she was such a great singer and so beautiful and so just, I love her writing. But no, there weren't that many. Dolly Parton, but I didn't know her.

0:26:26 Blackmon: Were you even aware that it was kind of a man's world in the publishing?

0:26:35 Berg: Oh, absolutely. I did have — there was a friend of mom's and aunt's, Marie Wilson, who was a songwriter, and she sort of, she had some hits, and then she just sort of went and did other things. At that time she wasn't writing — I mean I knew that there were these great women writing songs, just not at that time there weren't a whole lot — Kye Fleming, but I didn't know her.

0:27:32 Blackmon: Did you — were you around Felice and Boudreaux (??) [0:27:36] at all?

0:27:37 Berg: No, no.

0:27:40 Blackmon: So you have this number one hit “Faking Love” that you wrote with Bobby Braddock and you get signed to a year deal. How do things go?

0:27:53 Berg: Well they don't, they don't go. I really had no — I was out of my depth, and I ran off to Louisiana and joined a band. (*Laughing*)

0:28:10 Blackmon: Um, how did that happen?

0:28:16 Berg: I met a boy. I think I was looking for an escape, I was pretty terrified — like I said, I knew I was out of my depth and just gotta be a real something to go to Louisiana and play in a band. I fell in love with this boy too.

0:28:46 Blackmon: Were you overwhelmed by the fast success of the first song?

0:28:52 Berg: Yes, I was pretty lost. I just, you know, I knew nobody was going to take that very seriously and I just left town.

0:29:19 Blackmon: Was that still when you were in your year deal with Tree or was that after?

0:29:23 Berg: After.

0:29:24 Blackmon: So during that year deal with Tree before you left, did you solo write mostly, or did you co-write with people?

0:29:31 Berg: Both, I did a little of both. I wrote with my step-father too and mom and Dave Kirby, Dave's son, we wrote some songs too. It was such a — there was so much going on in that time, everything was so — it was a densely packed time in my life, so stringing it all together, I'm sorry if I'm jumping all over the place, a lot happened. Stringing it together is something I've not really done.

0:30:24 Blackmon: That's okay, that's why I'm asking questions. During that year, and you co-wrote with some people, do you feel like you grew as a writer or was it — where were you in your head that you had that first publishing deal? Were you growing by co-writing and being in the pub deal?

0:30:48 Berg: No, no. I think I had to take a step back from it. I needed to grow up, I don't — you know. I was writing, I could do the mechanics, but I knew there was more to it than what I was doing. I mean, I knew the difference between a meaningful song and just a radio ditty.

0:31:24 Blackmon: Yeah. And at that age already and cause of the music you came up on, were you already aspiring to write more than a radio ditty at that age?

0:31:36 Berg: Yeah, that's why I went to Louisiana because there was — I just thought there's gotta be more, there has to be more to what I'm doing than this. I just thought this could be an interesting experience, you know. I've always had a — my dad took me to New Orleans on a business trip one time and I never forgot it, I just fell in love with New Orleans, so the lore of Louisiana was — the pull was really strong. Also, just working with the band and standing on a stage, I had not done that, so I thought that would be some good experience. So that was kind of my gap year, going to see different parts of the world and new experiences.

0:32:50 Blackmon: Was the band based out of the New Orleans area?

0:32:53 Berg: Right outside New Orleans.

0:32:55 Blackmon: And what kind of music were you playing in the band?

0:32:58 Berg: They were just a cover band, just a — they were a very popular top 40 band in that region and not top 40 like currents, but it was mostly funk, believe it or not. And some pop hits, but it was mostly a funk band, and they did a little bit of arena rock stuff, too.

0:33:29 Blackmon: And were you fronting the band?

0:33:32 Berg: Nope, nope, I was playing keyboards and singing background and I would sing a couple of songs, but mostly backgrounds.

0:33:44 Blackmon: And how many nights a week would the band play? Like was it a full-on job?

0:33:48 Berg: It was a full-on job, yeah.

0:33:51 Blackmon: So that really was a really good experience for you.

0:33:55 Berg: Yeah, yeah, I'd say.

0:33:58 Blackmon: And how long did that last?

0:34:02 Berg: About a year.

0:34:05 Blackmon: Did you continue to write while you were in Louisiana?

0:34:10 Berg: Mhm.

0:34:11 Blackmon: And were you sending anything back to Nashville or were you just kind of doing your thing? Sending songs back, I mean.

0:34:21 Berg: Yeah, I mean, I didn't have anywhere to send them, but I did have a couple of things, I did record a couple of things. And still just trying to figure it out, you know.

0:34:35 Blackmon: Yeah, that's a really, really young age to be doing anything professionally, really. So then you - what happened then after you were playing with the band?

0:34:49 Berg: Well, I came back to Nashville and my mother got sick. She was gravely — she was four-stage lymphoma, and this just happened really fast. You know, she thought she had bronchitis 'cause her chest was really tight. Then she fainted, and then she went to emergency and they found it. She didn't even live a year after that.

0:35:48 Blackmon: And you're nineteen.

0:35:40 Berg: That was my — that was my year, was mom being ill.

0:35:47 Blackmon: So you were taking care of your mom for the next year.

0:35:52 Berg: Yeah, I mean, off and on, I didn't live there but I was very much in it.

0:36:05 Blackmon: So, I'm assuming that the music business just kind of went by the wayside and it's such a cool thing that your mom saw your dreams come true.

0:36:25 Berg: It's, it's — it was, that's another one of those memories that I'll never — that's just so vivid. First time we heard "Faking Love" on the radio, both of us, we were — mom had this

little truck, you know those little mini trucks back then, and we were going over a bridge, I think it was in Gallatin, we were in Gallatin. We were going over a bridge and the song came on and we were squealing and we had to get to the other side of the bridge for mom to pull over. She pulled over and after the song was over, she was just grinning, beautiful, big, toothy smile of hers. She asked, how does it feel? And I would've given anything to give her that feeling, that moment.

0:37:44 Blackmon: The — to lose your mother at such a young age and you being so close, it must've impacted your life, and creativity being so tied into your emotions and feelings, I'm assuming that that took a huge toll on everything you were doing in life. How did you move forward at such a young age?

0:38:25 Berg: It was — I was a little lost for a while, but I was also — I got this laser focus after she died when I came out from under the grief or began to. I felt like, I felt her presence — I know it sounds lou lou and all that — I kind of felt her presence around me, like pushing me forward, and maybe it was because of legacy, like I wanted her to be, because I was her legacy, and my career was her legacy, and I didn't want to screw that up. So things came into focus about a year after she passed away.

0:39:44 Blackmon: Was music and songwriting a part of your healing?

0:39:50 Berg: Absolutely. Absolutely.

0:39:54 Blackmon: And how did you, how did you approach after you — when you started to come out of grief and you're back in Nashville where you kind of left and wanted to, were looking for something more, you said. How did you approach songwriting then, after being in such huge life events and where were you at that point? How did you approach songwriting and the music business, kind of starting over in more than one way?

0:40:33 Berg: Yeah. I had to — I made friends with this gal from New York, Jane Mariash. She was, you'd be a songwriter and she somehow would do her — I met a lot of people at Warner Chapell and we were also roommates, me and her. I remember, she was cooking dinner and I was playing piano, it was kind of the same thing with Bobby, she sat down and said what is that? And we wrote, "The Last One To Know."

0:41:40 Blackmon: And you didn't have a pub deal at this time, right?

0:41:43 Berg: No, no I didn't. I didn't, I had like a song-by-song deal with Merit Music, which was this publishing company that came in with way too much money. And they were just burning through it and they gave me 125 bucks a song which was great because I could write songs all day long.

0:42:22 Blackmon: So, back then, they would give you a single song deal, 125 bucks for all the publishing? Is that how it worked?

0:42:30 Berg: Oh yeah, it was so stupid.

0:42:35 Blackmon: But 125 bucks at that age —

0:42:36 Berg: It was a lot!

0:42:36 Blackmon: Yeah.

0:42:39 Berg: Yeah, no, I was rolling in it. Or in my world, I was rolling in it. And that was in that little catalog and then a little while later somebody found it and pitched it to Reba. It was a bit hit. So something good came out of all of that.

0:43:14 Blackmon: And then at that point, did you sign somewhere as a full-time writer — it sounds like you were pursuing this, you had this — you said you had a laser focus, it sounds like you were full-on chasing the songwriting thing, did you sign somewhere after the Reba number one?

0:43:37 Berg: Yeah, I went to Warner Chapell. By then I'd kind of fallen in with that crowd. The, you know, **Tim (??) [0:43:51]**, and the writers there at the time, Wood Newton and **Mike (??) [0:43:57]**.

0:44:00 Blackmon: So you would've been —

0:44:05 Berg: It was a fun bunch.

0:44:06 Blackmon: Were you around 21, 22, or?

0:44:08 Berg: Yeah, I was about 21.

0:44:10 Blackmon: Okay. And, so then, did more cuts start coming pretty quickly after that?

0:44:20 Berg: It took a minute and what happened was Pat Higdon went to work in Warner Chappell, about a year into my deal maybe. I'd been writing songs all along and Pat was just getting familiar with what was going on over there and he started listening to my demos and he, he got me — oh god, I can't remember how many cuts I got in one year when Pat got there, think it was six, seven — I mean, it was fast. When Pat Higdon came into my life, everything changed, because I wasn't writing, just my songs were a little different.

0:45:58 Blackmon: And he got it.

0:45:29 Berg: He got it. I was kind of languishing a little bit there, and then he got there and was like hell, I can get this cut. And he did.

0:45:42 Blackmon: In this time when you were, pre-Reba “The Last One To Know”, and during this era, you know, you obviously had to have been influenced and learned something by playing funk music and arena rock and pop with the band in Louisiana and then, were there any other influence that came into your life that you were paying attention to that informed — you know, everybody absorbs things, I’m just curious if there are any other people that you loved.

0:46:16 Berg: I was fascinated with Dean Dillon. He was just so style, even then, so young. When we would do the “pass the guitar around”, every time that guitar ended up with Dean it was just, but you know, nobody was going to follow that. I was fascinated by — his songs were just so — the melodies were so, they seemed so country, but they were deceptively almost like jazz songs, his chords, his melody lines, and then his heart, those lyrics were just — it was, nobody was doing that. Nobody. So he had quite an impact on me, just how lean and beautiful those songs were, are. I mean, still are. He's just, he raised the bar for a lot of us, and Rosanne Cash was also, I was also a huge Rosanne Cash fan — I didn’t know her, but I was still a fan.

0:48:05 Blackmon: That makes a lot of sense. Both of those. While we’re talking about this era, can you just talk about from when you first started at Tree to signing with Warner Chappell, the culture of Music Row during this era where you were coming up. Do you have any memories about — you mentioned going to Tree and passing the guitar around, but I think it’s, you know, Nashville and the Row have changed so much that a lot of people don’t know what it was like.

0:48:48 Berg: Yeah. And like, I would give anything to give that experience to some of these kids. I think it does exist, I think it probably exists more in the East Nashville music scene, that’s what Nashville was more like then, you know. All that moved to East Nashville. But, it’s — yeah, when the money got big, things changed. It was almost like, I call it — it’s like BC, there’s BG: before Garth. Because you know when that happened, everything just went into hyperdrive. I, you know, money changed everything.

0:50:02 Blackmon: I guess I’m interested in how the culture was in the business. While East Nashville has got a community vibe, you mentioned Jamie O’Hara earlier and he had mentioned to me that Tree didn’t shut down, it was all night long, people up there writing, producers, hearing songs, partying, whatever. I’m just kind of interested in how much of that you were aware of — I mean, growing up in it maybe you didn’t notice it, but hearing about that compared to other businesses seems kind of crazy, how they got business back then.

0:50:45 Berg: I know, I know. It was a lot of play going on, and that’s a whole other conversation. Let’s just say that the street value of the carpet in those publishing companies is probably astounding.

0:51:05 Blackmon: Okay, I've never heard it put that way before, that's good. So Pat Higdon comes into your life and he gets you, which is probably the most important thing a young writer can have, is that champion.

0:51:20 Berg: That one person, yeah.

0:51:23 Blackmon: And so he gets you six or seven cuts in a year, and are there any hits in that or how do things go from there?

0:51:30 Berg: It took a while for the hits, it started out with just a bunch of album cuts, but I was like, you know, super happy I was getting the cuts. Just not a lot of — it was a couple of years before hits started.

0:51:54 Blackmon: And were you — was it a lot of solo writes? Or are the co-writes? How is that?

0:52:02 Berg: Mostly co-writes, I was, yeah. That was when I started writing with Ronnie Somoset a bunch, so I think when — me and Ronnie just had a, just great chemistry, like the stuff we wrote together was like nothing either one of us wrote by ourselves or with other people. So it really was just me and Ronnie that Pat kind of took off with. I wrote most of my first record with Ronnie.

0:52:42 Blackmon: You — talk about y'all's relationship as songwriters, because you dint find that with just everybody when you really click. What was it about your relationship and what did you all bring to the table that complimented each other?

0:53:01 Berg: I think we were both a little, you know, not taken very seriously and so we shared that love of songs, and we were also both kind of green. You know, still kind of working it out. I don't know, Ronnie was always like a brother, we just had a kinship that was immediate and I don't know what — it was so weird, it was almost like songs just kind of plopped down on our heads.

0:53:58 Blackmon: Did you all have a common say, record collections, did you have a lot of music in common, or were you opposites or in different ways?

0:54:06 Berg: Oh, it was very different, very different. For some reason, I've always written well with crusty dudes. Like real manly dudes, just the most dude of dude. Just good 'ol boys, that seems to be my magic dust.

0:54:36 Blackmon: Interesting. Why do you think that it is?

0:54:38 Berg: I don't know, it's so crazy, I think part of it is part of that good 'ol boy who's a poet in his heart, maybe I spotted that more than other people would.

0:54:54 Blackmon: I wonder if it has anything to do with the dudes that you grew up around, seeing —

0:54:59 Berg: You know, I think you're catching on something there.

0:55:05 Blackmon: So, it's about that time where you get your first record deal.

0:55:11 Berg: Yeah, yeah, that was — it was a pitching session, pitching songs to Joe Galante. It was one of those group pitches where a bunch of publishers come and play songs in a room. I just, he had a demo of mine and he played it — Galante just turned around and said I don't have anybody that does that. And he offered me a deal, it was crazy.

0:55:51 Blackmon: Just like that?

0:55:53 Berg: Just like that. I'm sure Pat had designed on getting me a record deal, but I just never really thought that was going to happen.

0:56:08 Blackmon: So you weren't necessarily pursuing the artist thing as much as it came to you?

0:56:17 Berg: Yeah, I mean, yeah. To me, performing, playing a song, especially at a writer's night was kind of a means to an end, somebody had to do it to get it across. And like I said, I was so terrified to perform, I was fine in the studio, but in front of people it was any kind of — my comfort zone was very small, so. Yeah, and I literally — (??) [0:56:59] loves to tell this story, and of course, he embellishes it a little bit, but he does a pretty good impression of me. He took me to lunch and you know, said what do you think about signing with RCA? I said I don't think, I don't know if I'm ready, Joe. And he just got the biggest kick out of that, that this cheeky gal just tells him he's not sure he's ready. But I did, I mean I went ahead and signed.

0:57:59 Blackmon: And how was that? I know you said that you were kind of doing something different that it took Pat to get as a publisher, to get your writing, and then Joe said nobody's doing this and he signed you. What was it like doing your thing that before say, wasn't like anybody else when a whole label's involved then? And you know, what was that experiment like? Who produced and how did you pick your songs? How did all that happen?

0:58:34 Berg: Well, Mary Martin was A&R, then she was my A&R person. And Mary Martin is a legend, she signed Emmylou Harris, she was — she picked the songs for me and I was just fine with that because she was flawless. I went in with Wendy Waldman and Josh Leo, two west coast people, I think Josh just had — I mean, it was just off of fishing in the dark, I think. Anyway, we're in the studio with two young west coast producers and we flew Danny Dugmore to play steel guitar because I wanted Linda Ronstadt's anything.

1:00:00 Blackmon: That is great. Was that Dan's introduction to Nashville?

1:00:05 Berg: Yeah.

1:00:08 Blackmon: So you are responsible for all of us that love Dan Dugmore have you to thank.

1:00:14 Berg: Well, Wendy and Josh definitely. And Joe Galante, just looking at the budget, a steel guitar player flown in from Los Angeles. And he said, you've got a ticket for Dan Dugmore, put him in a hotel — he said, isn't this kind of like flying a whore to Vegas?

1:00:50 Blackmon: Yeah, I can see where a label president would think that you couldn't find a steel guitar player in Nashville, Tennessee. That's good.

1:00:58 Berg: Yeah, I had to have him. So, and you know, we got a lot of freedom on that first record and I remember us being so proud of it and playing it for the staff and the radio guys and I've never seen — it was like the most depressing listening party ever. I mean, you could just see the radio guys go pale. They just didn't get it at all.

1:01:46 Blackmon: They weren't even faking it, they were just —

1:01:48 Berg: No, they weren't faking it at all. And they were just, you know —

1:01:56 Blackmon: That must've been a little soul-crushing.

1:01:58 Berg: It was soul-crushing, yeah. It really was and then this one (??) [1:02:04] he loved it, and he got me like 70 ads right out of the box that — and we thought we were off and running but that was it. It had marginal success, it was just, I don't know, I don't know if it was not focused enough or I was too green as a performer, I don't know. It just didn't really take off.

1:02:28 Blackmon: Well it takes a lot of work to make an album. How did you balance that with songwriting during that time? I mean not only a lot of work making the album but then promoting it and photos and all of that. How did you do all of that?

1:03:05 Berg: I was young. When you're in your twenties, it's not a lot of work, it's just fun.

1:03:16 Blackmon: Did you — did time spent songwriting suffer from all the other things that came out? Or were you still laser-focused on songwriting too?

1:03:28 Berg: I, yeah. No, it never impacted my songwriting. In fact, I think it helped, because —

1:03:35 Blackmon: Because you had something to write for?

1:03:41 Berg: Yeah, but even after making my first record, I got to see and connect songs that 9i wrote with how people responded and that focused me as a writer more than I was before, you know. I just didn't, you know with the exception of a few Bluebird things here and there, I just couldn't get my nerve up to do much singing around people and connecting with any kind of audience. So, in a way I was kind of detached from that part, that responds — the call and response part of a song, a song's life. How people feel when they hear that song. When you're playing to people and you see and you feel that energy going back to you, it also gives you an idea of what you're doing right and what you're doing wrong. Which is a wonderful education and that's one that I hadn't had yet. No, that's it.

1:05:26 Blackmon: And with that first record, did you do the radio tour?

1:05:31 Berg: No (??) [1:05:31].

1:05:33 Blackmon: And so you went out for the disc jockeys and program directors all over the country and got to see how things went over with them as well, right?

1:05:47 Berg: Yeah, yeah. But that wasn't really an education, that was just a lesson in humility.

1:06:08 Blackmon: It was promotion. Well, maybe this is a good place to stop today because we covered a lot of ground, a lot of great ground, and then we can pick up tomorrow with the run of songs that start getting cut if that sounds good to you. It seems like if I keep them at these hour and a half marks, people don't get — I don't wear people out, and gives me time to think too. So is that okay?

1:06:40 Berg: Yeah, that's great.

1:06:42 Blackmon: This is awesome, thank you, Matraca.

1:06:45 Berg: Thank you, Odie.

1:06:46 Blackmon: I'll see you tomorrow.

1:06:47 Berg: I'll talk to you tomorrow.

1:06:48 Blackmon: Bye.

1:06:48 Berg: Bye.