

SPOTLIGHT



Michael Wilson

SHAWN MULLINS

How crossing the divide between Atlanta and Nashville lit up his world

A DOZEN YEARS AGO, THE TOP 10 hit "Lullaby" and platinum album *Soul's Core* catapulted Atlanta-born singer and songwriter Shawn Mullins into the limelight. Before long he found himself opening arena shows for the likes of 'N Sync, the Backstreet Boys and Destiny's Child—and becoming increasingly uncomfortable with his place in that overblown pop world. "I told myself, 'Man, you've always wanted to be on Americana radio and play good listening rooms. It doesn't matter if it's 100 seats,'" he recalls. "So I had to get back to that. But in the process I closed myself off for a while." Over the last several years he has reversed that process, opening himself up to more artistic collaboration. "I've looked for a new horizon, to find community," he says. "That's really what it's been about."

The first conspicuous byproduct of his new philosophy was "Toes," the 2009 No. 1 country hit Mullins helped pen for the Zac Brown Band. "For years I would never have co-written," he says. "I would have said, 'You're not a strong enough writer if you have to co-write a song—you should write one by yourself.'" His thinking has since evolved, and he began working with a variety of writers

on his new album, *Light You Up*, including veteran Nashville songwriter Chuck Cannon. "I feel like I'm a really strong melodist—decent little melodies that people can hum back," says Mullins. "But I have to work real hard at the lyrics. And as fast as a melody can come to me, song lyrics come to Chuck—like entire quatrains and stanzas, just blow-your-mind kind of lyrics. And he's opened the doors of Nashville to me, in a way."

Cannon introduced the Music City newbie to one of his songwriting heroes, Rodney Crowell, who offered valuable encouragement when Mullins encountered a case of writer's block. "I was saying, 'Man, I haven't written anything in months. How am I gonna do this?'" he remembers. "And Rodney said, 'Man, you're a great songwriter. *Soul's Core* is one of my favorite records! When that caliber of writer has nice things to say, it scoots you along if you're having a bad bout of not being able to write." And so the once go-it-alone Mullins now feels perfectly at home in a songwriting world where collaboration is prized above all. "They're real cool in Nashville," he says. "If you're a good guy, you're welcome."

—Bob Cannon

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