

## JOE NICHOLS

### Recharging his sound with a mix of modern and traditional country

WEIGHED DOWN BY LABEL POLITICS AND DWINDLING record sales, Joe Nichols went through a rough patch following the release of his 2011 album, *It's All Good*. But after splitting with his label last year, he felt rejuvenated and refreshed as he embarked upon free agency.

"I was completely energized and free to go into the studio at will with my own budget," he says. "They were all my ideas, with no strings and no supervision. There weren't any deadlines to meet. I had the chance to knock it out and try something different. And that came with a feeling of confidence and comfort."



Ann-Marie Henley

On his latest album, *Crickets*, Nichols wanted to marry his traditional sensibilities with a contemporary sound. Now signed with Broken Bow Records imprint Red Bow, he aimed for mass appeal while stretching his wings artistically. "It's a constant challenge to appease myself and the audience," he says. "Some of the traditional fans expect a certain thing from me. On a lot of these songs, the track is more progressive, but it's still a country vocal."

So far, the reviews have been glowing. "Sunny and 75," the album's first single, became his first Top 10 in nearly four years. "The balance between the commercial and the artistic side is always tough," says the Arkansas native. "If I ever made the album I wanted to do artistically, it would be all ballads and hardcore country."

Leaning on his team, Nichols, 36, was able to relax and let the music be his guide. "I can take little credit for the song selection," he says. "[Broken Bow founder] Benny Brown tries to find the right

song for me. He's always able to find these hidden gems in the woodwork." Meanwhile producers Derek George and Mickey Jack Cones urged Nichols to stretch beyond his comfort zone. "There were a lot of resources I would've never envisioned," he says. "This approach of playing a country vocal and hooking it up with a fresh, modern sound was a good blend for radio."

Nichols has also experienced some big changes closer to home. He and wife Heather welcomed a daughter last year, which offered perspective with his career.

"If I were to change the model from the beginning of my career, I'd be a little more patient," he admits. "I've since learned to trust my instincts more. When you get busy on the road and you're constantly involved, you just keep trying to push yourself further. But in the end, you need to be your own biggest champion."

—Blake Boldt

