

WHO'S NEXT

JOEL CROUSE

HOMETOWN: Holland, Mass.
INFLUENCES: Waylon Jennings, Keith Urban, Tom Petty
ALBUM: *Even the River Runs*, out now
WEBSITE: joelcrouse.com

A PASTOR'S SON FROM A SMALL FARMING TOWN OUTSIDE Boston, Crouse started singing in church at an early age. At 13, his Alabama-bred grandfather gave him his first guitar and introduced him to such legendary artists as Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Three years later he was playing original songs on street corners in Nashville, a path that led to a record deal when he was just 19.

Now 22, Crouse has opened for the likes of Taylor Swift, Toby Keith and the Band Perry—and has released his debut album, *Even the River Runs*. "Lyrically, I'm inspired by people who take chances with their music and show that raw nerve," he says. "It doesn't matter what genre it is as long as the song moves me." Because of that, *Even the River Runs*, produced by Jamie Houston (Jessica Simpson, Michael Bolton, Santana), features everything from honky-tonk barn burners to bluesy ballads to classic rock-influenced arena anthems.

Staying true to himself is important to Crouse, who insisted on having a hand in writing all 10 tracks on the record. "My songs are honest because I'm the one telling my story—and country music is all about the story." Those stories include tracks about friends deployed to Afghanistan and his own relationship commitment issues. However, working with such influential Nashville tunesmiths as Luke Laird and Craig Wiseman allowed Crouse to grow as a writer—which sometimes meant bucking the trend of party-oriented, radio-friendly hits in favor of more substantial material. "You might bond with those kind of songs on a Friday night," he says, "but what songs are you bonding with Monday through Friday, when it's just you in your car? Those moments by yourself, where you just want to relate to someone—those are the songs I want to write."