

MUSICIAN



Jim Wright

VINCE GILL

A country guitar slinger takes his craft all the way back home

By Chris Neal

WHEN VINCE GILL WAS PUTTING THE FINAL TOUCHES on the newly built studio in his Nashville-area home, he had an unlikely burst of inspiration. He needed something to cut down on the amount of sunlight streaming through the tall windows of the room, and he knew just what material had the color and texture he wanted: the tweed from the front of a vintage Fender amplifier. So he placed what must have been one of the most unusual queries the company has ever received. "I said, 'Is there any way you guys could hook me up with a bunch of tweed?'" he recalls. "They said, 'How much?'" I said, "Well, enough to fill two rooms."

It's only right that even the windows of Gill's studio should be covered in something musical. Gill has been singing, writing songs and playing guitar (among other instruments) since his teen years, when he began performing with bluegrass acts in his native Oklahoma. He launched a solo country career in the early 1980s,

and since then has built an astonishing body of work under his own name while lending his voice and guitar to albums by a staggering number of fellow artists—and his productivity has only increased since building the studio, a project he's been working on for two years.

His first solo album recorded there is the new *Guitar Slinger*—the title indicating which of his many talents Gill has chosen to hone lately. The seemingly endless number of guitars that line the walls and cabinets in the studio testify to his longtime axe addiction. "What you're looking at is a sickness," jokes Gill, who lost several instruments in a devastating flood that submerged a Nashville storage facility last year. "I've never gotten rid of a guitar in my life. I've bought a lot of guitars, but I'm not a seller. I'm not looking to turn 'em around. Each one of them has its own life, its own story." We sat down with Gill, 54, inside his comfortably Fender tweed-shaded studio to talk about his lifelong obsession with music.



'The greatest musicianship is in being willing to edit and say the most with the least.'

Why build the studio?

I didn't believe I would have ever put a studio in my house, but this stretch of life feels different from years past. Obviously the technology has changed so much that you don't need as much real estate space to make quality recordings. I also thought it would be neat to have all my guitars at home. I've got this great collection I never get to play and never get to see, and I get called to do an awful lot of other people's records. With the technology today they can just send me the files, I do my deal within the comforts of my own home and send it back—I can even be barefooted. So away we went.

How'd you get started?

This was an obvious space to do it. There was a crawl space underneath, so we decided to tear all that out and build the floor lower to give us more ceiling space. We just closed it all up, built an overdub room and went full tilt. But it seems like everything we did,

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we eventually tore it out and did something else. It probably wasn't very cost-effective or smart, but I didn't mind.

What are the other benefits?

You're surrounded by windows, so you can look out and see trees and blue skies. It's not a commercial space. It doesn't feel like you're locked in an empty place surrounded by four walls. The environment here has been fantastic and the sounds are spectacular. You don't feel rushed and you don't feel hurried. Sometimes in the past I did. Economics has dictated how records have to be done, when they have to be finished, how you have to record them. You don't have to worry about that here. I plan to do a good bit of music here over the next 20 or 30 years, whatever they give me.

Why do you still agree to play on so many records by others?

I think a lot of people assumed that if I'd had some success I wouldn't do it anymore. But I always aspired to be thought of well enough as a singer and musician that people would want to hire me to play on their records. As

I started to succeed on my own, it meant even more to me that people wanted me to work on their records. Why not, you know? Why hoard yourself for yourself? That doesn't seem like a fun way to live. So I've been playing on a bunch of off-the-wall stuff lately—an Alice Cooper record, a Johnny Winter record, a Joe Bonamassa record, a Jimmy Webb record. I couldn't have dreamed it up.

What was your aim for this album?

Just to improve. I've always felt like the only reason to do it is to try to get better at it. The first record I ever made was when I was 16, and I'm still trying to do better. I listen to those old records and laugh my head off. Sometimes the improvement is in such subtle ways that people might not pick up on it, but I know. It's about having 15 notes and thinking, "Which three or four notes do I really need?" You spend time trying to massage that. The greatest musicianship, singing or even songwriting is in being willing to edit it and say the most with the least.

Why focus more on guitar?

It just happened. Most people have heard me sing for 30 years or more and not play so much guitar. Now they're going, "Hey, his guitar playing is a little better than I might have thought." Still, no matter what, all I can be is the result of the songs that I show up with. I hope that those get better, and this seems like a good bunch.

How do you usually start a song?

Somebody you're working with has an idea, or you plunk around on the guitar and find something that you feel like you haven't done. There are only so many chords and so many notes, and it's hard to make them be different. It's how you bend up to that note. You can bend up to that note quickly or you can bend up to that note very slowly. Which way is the most compelling? What's coming next and what comes before? I feel like the playing has to tell the same story that the words do. It has to have a beginning, a middle and an end. It has to go somewhere.

This is an especially dark record.

It is, in spots. I've always been drawn to that. I don't want happy songs. They don't do much for me, never have.

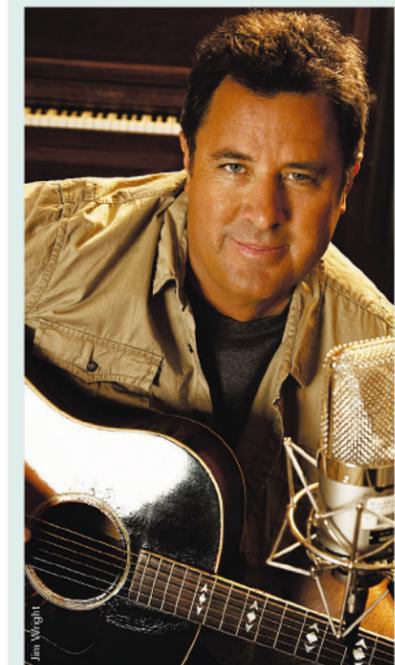
Yet you seem well-adjusted.

I am! Nobody has as much fun as I do. I'm happy, easy-going and friendly. I don't have a dark personality. Maybe it was all that bluegrass at a young age—learning songs

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Vince Gill used a variety of the many instruments in his collection to record *Guitar Slinger*. "I always try to use the guitar that I think is going to sound right for what I'm trying to convey," he says. "What you're looking for is not the perfect tone, but the right tone for what it is that you're doing." That said, at least two of the featured guitars had particular sentimental value.

Friend Will Owsley, longtime touring guitarist for Gill's wife, singer Amy Grant, wrote "When Lonely Comes Around" with Gill and Grant before taking his own life in April 2010. Gill played the solo on a Fender Telecaster he had bought from Owsley when the latter fell upon hard times. "I said, 'You can always have it back if you want it back,'" Gill recalls. "I wound up playing it on the song we wrote. That's something I'll never forget." And one of the axes he turned to most often while making *Guitar Slinger* was a Stratocaster bought new in the 1950s by



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one of Gill's heroes, Duane Eddy. "He never played a Strat, there was no future for him and a Stratocaster," Gill says of Eddy, long associated with Guild, Gretsch and Gibson. "So he gave that guitar to his son. His son asked if I'd be interested in buying it, and it's turned out to be the best-sounding Strat I've ever had. It just has a little sizzle and sing to it that the rest of them don't."

MUSICIAN



Onstage at the 2010 Country Music Association Awards, Nashville

'I think music is something our bodies crave on a cellular level. I'm that nuts about it!'

like "The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake" and "Knoxville Girl," songs about mayhem, murder and death. My dad used to sing a song that just would destroy me, "Little Kid Sister of Mine": "She was only 7 when she was called to heaven, that little kid sister of mine." That stuff is real. I don't want music to try to trick me. The best music comes from the blues, always has and always will.

What still draws you to music?

I think music is something our bodies crave on a cellular level. I can't help it, I want music to move me. I'm that nuts about it. Most people like music, but I hang on every word, every note and every part.

Do you have a goal now?

I'm just trying to write better songs, trying to play the guitar better, trying to sing better. There's nothing like experience to teach you what not to do. It's funny how you spend your whole childhood and young adulthood like a sponge, trying to learn to do as many things as you can, and you spend the rest of your life trying to weed them all out: "What do I not need here?" I learned a lesson a million years ago in the studio. I was playing for somebody and when my time came to play, I did my thing. They came back and said, "OK, now just play me half of what you know." The object is to serve the song.

WOMEN OF THE HOUSE

Several of the voices heard harmonizing with Gill on *Guitar Slinger* belong to members of his immediate family. Wife Amy Grant sings on and co-wrote the duet "True Love," and contributes background vocals alongside her daughter, Sarah Chapman; Gill's daughter Jenny sings backup throughout the record; and their daughter together, 10-year-old Corrina Grant Gill, makes her recorded debut singing on "Billy Paul," which Gill wrote about a friend of that name who killed his lover and then himself. "It's a good suicide ballad," Gill says with a laugh, "and every 9-year-old should be exposed to a song like that." The singer made certain the family cameos wouldn't be distracting for the average listener. "It's in very small doses, and if you're not listening for it you wouldn't know it," he says. "So it's not like all of a sudden I'm making a Partridge Family record."

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