

SPOTLIGHT



JOE NICHOLS

Can a neo-traditionalist find his way in modern country? It's all good

SINCE HIS PLATINUM-SELLING DEBUT *Man With a Memory* in 2002, Joe Nichols' earthy baritone and easygoing charm have made him one of Nashville's most reliable neo-traditionalist singers. But the 35-year-old Arkansas native admits those talents were almost dimmed by personal drama at the beginning of his career. "I've had a lot of straightening up to do, and a lot of lessons to learn," says Nichols, who was successfully treated for substance abuse several years ago. "I'm OK with growing up now."

A renewed commitment to self-improvement informed his new album, *It's All Good*. The new album is his first since early 2011's *Greatest Hits*, which retraced career highlights such as "Brokenheartsville" and "The Impossible." The retrospective offered the Grammy-nominated singer an opportunity to reflect on his past. "I'm in a great place spiritually, emotionally and physically," says Nichols. "Now I'm ready to succeed, and I'm ready for failure."

It's All Good is also Nichols' first album of new material since his longtime record label went through a corporate merger in 2009. The transition has shown Nichols how

the music business can complicate matters of art. "I've had to learn how to trust some people," Nichols says. "With the record label it's been a real challenge. Their job is to make money, and it's not a simple equation. My job is to make a record by choosing the best songs available." Intent on making *It's All Good* a mature musical statement, he took pains picking tunes. "Writing has never been my strong suit, and the song selection process can be long, tedious and brutal," Nichols says with a chuckle. "Going into this album I thought that if it takes me a lot longer in the process I just have to stick with it."

Nichols is one of contemporary music's few singers still sticking up for old-school country—though he's felt pressure to conform to current trends. "The most important balance for me is appealing to the commercial side while making music," Nichols says. "You have to make music to where you can live with yourself. I've had my clashes with producers and record labels in the past. It's not a difficult struggle for me to be me. It's a difficult struggle to convince everybody not to tamper with what I do as an artist."

—Blake Boldt

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