

JAMES WESLEY

Biography

“I’ve always been a big believer in tradition,” declares James Wesley. “A lot of the old ways are the best ways: family, God, treating people right, doing what you’re supposed to do. I think it’s time to come back to what’s real. That’s what country music is about.”

James Wesley puts those core values into his music with a whiskey-smooth voice and a timelessly winning way with a great country song. Wesley sings directly to real people about real things that profoundly affect real lives—and from his small-town upbringing to his blue-collar work ethic, he has a deep understanding of what those folks are longing to hear.

“I know there’s more people out there than just me who want to hear something that grabs you and makes you go, ‘Wow, that’s *me*—that’s how I feel, that’s my day, that’s my family,’” he says. “When you swing a hammer every day, when you’re out there doing what you have to do, you learn a lot of compassion for the people that do it day in and day out.”

Wesley grew up in tiny Mound Valley, a community of about 200 people in Southeastern Kansas. He first discovered country music via his grandmother’s record collection, which included heaping helpings of classic crooners like Marty Robbins, George Jones and Ray Price. “We’d go over there on the weekends,” he recalls. “She’d have the console set up and the records stacked up and we’d listen to them as they dropped. Those guys back then, they could *sing*. I thought, ‘That’s what I want to do.’”

His mother was the first to notice Wesley’s own talent for singing when she overheard him belting out his favorite songs behind his bedroom door. “I thought if I shut my door I blocked everybody out, but evidently I didn’t block Mom out,” he says with a chuckle. “She heard me and said, ‘I’d love to have you sing in church.’ So that’s what I did.” Soon he taught himself to play guitar on an old Stella practice model. “I’ve got it to this day,” he says. “You can still see where I wore down the D, C and G chords on the fretboard.” By his late teens he was singing in local nightclubs and beginning to think about making music his life. “I’d sit in my bedroom and stare out of the window and dream of being out there, getting to see the world,” he remembers. His first move in that direction was to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where he performed in a nightly music and variety show.

There he met his wife, Mindee, with whom he now has two young children—and finally set his sights on Nashville. “I could have stayed in Eureka Springs for the rest of my life, but I just had to chase the dream,” he says. “I had to follow my gut.”

He and Mindee sold their house and almost everything in it, rented a moving truck and headed for Music City. Once there, Wesley took a construction job to make ends meet and began learning the ropes of the Nashville music business. He met hit songwriter Rodney Clawson and producer Dan Frizzell, and the three began recording together. Their work caught the attention of Broken Bow Records, which signed Wesley in December and quickly released the very first song on his original demo, “Jackson Hole,” as his debut single. The tune (penned by Clawson and Monty Criswell) immediately began racing up the charts, driven by listeners who loved its vivid story of fleeting love in a snowy setting. “Jackson Hole” offered fans an upfront introduction to the more vulnerable aspects of Wesley’s personality. “Growing up with three sisters, I’ve got a sensitive side too,” he says with a smile. “But I’m proud that I have that side, that I’m not callous. The only thing calloused about me is my hands.”

The breakout success of “Jackson Hole” instantly validated the enormous risk Wesley took in uprooting his family from Eureka Springs for an uncertain future in Nashville was worth it. “My family has seen all the ups and downs,” he says. “There’s been a lot of hard work. There’s been times it wasn’t easy, and they’ve been there the whole time. They’re great.” It also meant that Wesley’s days of construction work were over. “Thank God I get to put the hammer down, at least for a while,” he says with a laugh. “It’s nice to be able to do what I love to do.”

James Wesley hopes to do what he loves to do for a long time to come. “I want to be in it for the long haul,” he says. “I want to do those songs that everybody wants to hear, and that everybody can *feel*. I want to be the guy who tells the stories, and tells it like it is.”