

# MICHAELS STORY GIVES HOPE

## A Risky Writer On His Way Up

By Kendal Franceschi

**I** really like this guy Jon Michaels. He played me a new song he wrote and the very first word of the song was 'Stupid.' I know it may be hard to see that as the beginning of a masterpiece, but buddy, this thing is. You'll hear it someday soon I'd wager. Jon's story gives hope to writers who think the industry overlooks writers and artists who are a little outside the commercial box.

It's not often one gets to be there at the magic moment — the moment when an artist or writer is suddenly discovered and the plans begin to be formulated to take him or her to that next level in the music industry. I've seen the "hey gimme a call sometime and let's talk" moment, I've seen writers and/or artists being told they had possibilities. I've been there in the studio watching them record that first song. But the "moment of conception," so to speak, is very special and usually seen only by the people involved.

Barnes & Noble bookstore is probably a rather unlikely place for a Songwriters Night, but that's precisely where this story begins. Two of my publishers, the illustrious publisher of this fine periodical you're now reading, Jim Sharp, and my music publisher, the legendary Buddy Killen, were on a music business discussion panel at Barnes & Noble. After the panel was finished there was a little writers night kind of thing and a few songwriters got up and did three songs each. One of the writers was Jon Michaels.

Jon had moved to Nashville from Southern California in 1992 and had been doing the usual Writers Nights and writing and pitching, doing gigs on the weekends anywhere he could get them and trying to break down the formidable music industry barriers. That night at Barnes & Noble I was sitting next to Buddy when Jon sang a song he had written with Jimbeau Hinson and Kim Tribble called "Stones." Buddy glanced over at me and I knew he was hearing what I was hearing, perhaps one of the most well written songs we'd heard in many a day. I leaned over and whispered to Buddy, "This kid is a great writer!" He nodded and indicated he definitely agreed. This wasn't, however the "magic moment."

After the show I found Jon and told him I thought he was terrific and asked if he'd like to co-write. He said he'd love to and gave me and Buddy a CD he'd done.

One day Jon and I were at Killen Music Group getting ready to

write and Buddy comes in to say hi. Jon asks if he has a minute to listen to some of his new stuff and Buddy says "sure." Jon grabs his guitar and sings a few songs. Buddy just smiles at him and says "You know, Jon, I've listened to that CD you gave me a bunch of times." Jon is almost shocked. "You have?" he says, "Heck yes, I think it's great and I think these songs you just played me are great and you sing them great." He then inquired how long Jon had been in town. When told that Jon had been here since '92 Buddy was a bit surprised. "How come you've never been recorded?" he asked.

Jon replied simply, "A lot of people just didn't know where I'd fit musically. Didn't know what to do with me because I'm not exactly country."

Buddy just looked square into Jon's eyes and said, "Well, I'll record you. I love the way you sing and I can get you a deal pretty quick."

Jon was stunned. "You mean it?" he asked. Buddy smiled and said "Jon, I never say anything I don't mean. You don't sound like anybody else out there and you don't write like anybody else. You're different and you sing and write from the heart. That's just

the kind of artist I want to work with and I'd love to work with you."

At that point he reached over and held out his hand. Jon grasped it. That, my friends, was the "magic moment." I remember thinking how incredible this must all seem to a writer like Jon Michaels. How exciting that somebody like Buddy Killen was looking at Jon and seeing that whatever differences this writer/artist may have with the "normal"

Nashville music makers were not negatives but positives.

Jon Michaels and Buddy Killen both want to make great music. You'd think that would be a given in the music industry, but it isn't. Making great music has seemingly taken a back seat to making only commercial music, only radio-friendly music.

Jon Michaels is a risky writer/artist. Buddy Killen is a risky publisher/producer. Neither one of them is interested in re-doing what's already been done over and over. They want to do something new. Something of quality. Something that'll last.

The magic happens in the blink of an eye, in that moment in time when talent is clearly recognized and hands are clasped. Jon, aside from being a real talent, is also a really nice guy. See? Sometimes nice guys do finish first, especially when they write and sing as well as Jon Michaels. □



Photo by Kendal Franceschi

Buddy Killen and Jon Michaels

Kendal Franceschi and Quinten Powers co-wrote the Reba McEntire hit, "Whoever's In New England." Kendal is also chairman of the Nashville Steering Committee for the Songwriters Guild of America.

# MICHAELS STORY GIVES HOPE

## A Risky Writer On His Way Up

By Kendal Franceschi

I really like this guy Jon Michaels. He played me a new song he wrote and the very first word of the song was 'Stupid.' I know it may be hard to see that as the beginning of a masterpiece, but buddy, this thing is. You'll hear it someday soon I'd wager. Jon's story gives hope to writers who think the industry overlooks writers and artists who are a little outside the commercial box.

It's not often one gets to be there at the magic moment — the moment when an artist or writer is suddenly discovered and the plans begin to be formulated to take him or her to that next level in the music industry. I've seen the "hey gimme a call sometime and let's talk" moment, I've seen writers and/or artists being told they had possibilities. I've been there in the studio watching them record that first song. But the "moment of conception," so to speak, is very special and usually seen only by the people involved.

Barnes & Noble bookstore is probably a rather unlikely place for a Songwriters Night, but that's precisely where this story begins. Two of my publishers, the illustrious publisher of this fine periodical you're now reading, Jim Sharp, and my music publisher, the legendary Buddy Killen, were on a music business discussion panel at Barnes & Noble. After the panel was finished there was a little writers night kind of thing and a few songwriters got up and did three songs each. One of the writers was Jon Michaels.

Jon had moved to Nashville from Southern California in 1992 and had been doing the usual Writers Nights and writing and pitching, doing gigs on the weekends anywhere he could get them and trying to break down the formidable music industry barriers. That night at Barnes & Noble I was sitting next to Buddy when Jon sang a song he had written with Jimbeau Hinson and Kim Tribble called "Stones." Buddy glanced over at me and I knew he was hearing what I was hearing, perhaps one of the most well written songs we'd heard in many a day. I leaned over and whispered to Buddy, "This kid is a great writer!" He nodded and indicated he definitely agreed. This wasn't, however the "magic moment."

After the show I found Jon and told him I thought he was terrific and asked if he'd like to co-write. He said he'd love to and gave me and Buddy a CD he'd done.

One day Jon and I were at Killen Music Group getting ready to

write and Buddy comes in to say hi. Jon asks if he has a minute to listen to some of his new stuff and Buddy says "sure." Jon grabs his guitar and sings a few songs. Buddy just smiles at him and says "You know, Jon, I've listened to that CD you gave me a bunch of times." Jon is almost shocked. "You have?" he says, "Heck yes, I think it's great and I think these songs you just played me are great and you sing them great." He then inquired how long Jon had been in town. When told that Jon had been here since '92 Buddy was a bit surprised. "How come you've never been recorded?" he asked.

Jon replied simply, "A lot of people just didn't know where I'd fit musically. Didn't know what to do with me because I'm not exactly country."

Buddy just looked square into Jon's eyes and said, "Well, I'll record you. I love the way you sing and I can get you a deal pretty quick."

Jon was stunned. "You mean it?" he asked. Buddy smiled and said "Jon, I never say anything I don't mean. You don't sound like anybody else out there and you don't write like anybody else. You're different and you sing and write from the heart. That's just

the kind of artist I want to work with and I'd love to work with you."

At that point he reached over and held out his hand. Jon grasped it. That, my friends, was the "magic moment." I remember thinking how incredible this must all seem to a writer like Jon Michaels. How exciting that somebody like Buddy Killen was looking at Jon and seeing that whatever differences this writer/artist may have with the "normal"

Nashville music makers were not negatives but positives.

Jon Michaels and Buddy Killen both want to make great music. You'd think that would be a given in the music industry, but it isn't. Making great music has seemingly taken a back seat to making only commercial music, only radio-friendly music.

Jon Michaels is a risky writer/artist. Buddy Killen is a risky publisher/producer. Neither one of them is interested in re-doing what's already been done over and over. They want to do something new. Something of quality. Something that'll last.

The magic happens in the blink of an eye, in that moment in time when talent is clearly recognized and hands are clasped. Jon, aside from being a real talent, is also a really nice guy. See? Sometimes nice guys do finish first, especially when they write and sing as well as Jon Michaels. □



Photo by Kendal Franceschi

Buddy Killen and Jon Michaels

Kendal Franceschi and Quinten Powers co-wrote the Reba McEntire hit, "Whoever's In New England." Kendal is also chairman of the Nashville Steering Committee for the Songwriters Guild of America.