

## **MATRACA BERG INTERVIEW PART FOUR**

00:00 Blackmon: So can we talk about Trisha Yearwood's "XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)" and talk about how that came about?

00:08 Berg: Yes, I wrote it with Alice Randall, who is the songwriter and also a professor at Vanderbilt. She was also the first black woman to write a number-one country song. So, that's interesting and cool history. She wrote a television show and they needed a theme song for the pilot. They wanted it to be kind of like The Mary Tyler Moore Show theme, like, you're gonna make it, you're gonna be okay, girl. So we wrote the theme song and the show bombed, so there was no TV show for that song. Somehow it got to Trisha, can't remember how, but Tony and her thought it was a smash, and they recorded it. That was one of those where I just didn't see that coming. I just thought well, it's very much a women's empowerment theme show song.

01:24 Blackmon: Well, that's cool that's what you all were shooting for, kind of a Mary Tyler Moore theme song. I just saw something recently on Sonny Curtis and he talked about writing that song.

01:36 Berg: Oh man, Sonny. What a great, cool writer.

01:41 Blackmon: And what about — and Alice Randall too, what a wonderful person. I've kind of followed her career, and she's taught a course at Vanderbilt on country music and black history, which is very interesting. What about "Wild Angels" by Martina McBride?

02:07 Berg: I just had that title, really. I do this thing where I — things will pop into my head and I'll just write it down because it sounds cool like it sounds like it could be something. Then I'll come up with a piece of music and think it'll be perfect for this, and that's kind of what happened there. It was kind of a love song, Jeff, you know, after the honeymoon and settling in and you know, you're always in the process of meeting each other again or rediscovering each other. There was a bit of that in there too. I wrote it with Gary Harrison.

03:05 Blackmon: That's great to hear these stories of the inspiration and your career, how your life informs all of your songs. You've got a couple of drinking songs, "Nobody Drinks Alone" by Keith Urban and "You and Tequila" by — you probably have a lot of drinking songs, country writers do, but these two were big hits. Can you talk about the Keith Urban song first and then the Chesney and Grace Potter song?

03:39 Berg: "Nobody Drinks Alone," I think I heard it said in a movie or a TV show and I wrote it with Jim Collins and I just thought what a profoundly true thing — a lot of times you're drinking with ghosts. You know, things that haunt you, and it was kind of about that. It was supposed to be a single, but Keith had gone — he just got out of his second rehab, and he didn't want to release anything about drinking as a single at that point. So that was a bummer, and he got the lyric wrong in the second verse.

04:45 Blackmon: Ouch.

04:46 Berg: Yeah, I know, which made it kind of it not make sense — I guess it could make some kind of sense, I don't know. It just — that's not what the second verse is supposed to be.

04:59 Blackmon: That's gotta be hard as a writer.

05:02 Berg: Yeah, yeah, it was. I mean, it was kind of, I think they hold things pretty tightly, then — oh no, you gone again?

05:17 Blackmon: No, I'm right here, I'm just listening.

05:20 Berg: Oh, okay. It went “beep beep” and I thought you had been cut off. Yeah, I hope it's not me. So it was too late by the time I heard the lyric was wrong.

05:41 Blackmon: Sure. So then the Chesney song you wrote with Deana Carter.

05:47 Berg: Yes.

05:48 Blackmon: “You and Tequila.”

05:50 Berg: Yes.

05:51 Blackmon: Did you all write a lot?

05:54 Berg: No, no. I meant we've written several songs but over a period of a lot of years. We had a day to write that day and it was not long after Harlan Howard's memorial and there was a video montage of people who he mentored and who loved him and I was crying through most of what they recorded with me because I was still pretty upset. The only thing they kept is that he bought me my first shot of tequila.

06:44 Blackmon: That's what made the video.

06:48 Berg: That's what made the memorial video. And you know, it got a good laugh, and it's a true story. It was back in the (??) [06:58] courtyard days. The tables were very large and much afternoon drinking was done. So after the memorial, everybody went to Tootsie's for a party and his kids kept sending me shots of tequila, you know, in memory of Harlan. I just felt like I had to oblige, and I was — I had a two-day hangover after that, yeah. Deana was on the second day. I told her I wasn't sure how good I was gonna be that day because — and I started talking about it, and somehow between the two of us we came up with that title. The rest of the story was about when Deana had moved to Los Angeles, we have a mutual friend who lives on Mulholland Drive. We used to meet up at her house, just a great classic California house looking over the valley so the view's beautiful, and we drink wine and Deana would have romance problems and

it kind of came from our own experience, we were just laughing about those nights on Mulholland and super true. She's so fun to write with, she's such a cool girl.

09:18 Blackmon: I like how, in everything we've talked about how even if you had a title like "Wild Angels" kind of hanging around, it hung around until you found a way to use the story of your life or your life ties in and forms these songs, and I think that's important. When reading about Kristofferson and his publisher — Mary talked about what he had gotten into the night before a relationship he was in and then it's so much more than just coming up with something catchy, the kind of songs that you write that I'm a fan of. Will you talk about Harlan a little bit, what he meant to you, what lessons you took from him in his songs or career? That's somebody that I feel lucky I got to spend time with him through Kostas, but young people don't even know who he is.

10:29 Berg: Well they know what he's done.

10:31 Blackmon: Some do, yeah.

10:33 Berg: More than just some, really. Well, they need schooling.

10:40 Blackmon: That's why we're doing this.

10:42 Berg: Yeah (*laughing*). Truth. Well, you know, Harlan was such a prolific and strong writer, and his version of songwriting was catchy, and was very straightforward and just hooky. He was, his work ethic was astounding. The first time I wrote with Harlan I was so young and showed up at his house — I think he was living on Hillsboro road then — at seven o'clock in the morning, and I was like, seven o'clock in the morning, really?

11:47 Blackmon: That's when he wanted to write?

11:49 Berg: Yeah, that's when he was writing and I think that was when (??) [11:54] was still a toddler so I think he was getting up pretty early most days. I was just petrified, and I had an idea and he just took that idea and freaking wrote that whole song, it was me sitting there with my thumb up my nose. I left with my tail between my legs but he was very kind to me and I think he understood what was going on, I think that had to happen many times to him because he's a pretty intimidating figure — when you're that legendary. I didn't really know him well then, but through the years, we got to know each other and I kind of got my writing legs under me a little bit more and we started writing songs again. He was just my pal, you know. I just — I loved hanging out with him. Everybody loved hanging out with him, because the words, his witness were in our legendary — I remember him telling me one time because I was starting to get, I was in my 30s, and I was starting to get a little burnt out partly because I'd been doing it since I was 18 years old, so. I was thinking about taking a little time off and he said yeah, I thought I was gonna do that once too. I said, well, did you? He said well, I went away for a while and you know what? Nobody missed me. So he was always chucking little humor in there with a lesson.

Did you ever hear that sort about that kid, one of Harlan's watering holes, this guy was complaining about the music business and how everything sucked, and people weren't cutting his songs and they were cutting shitty songs and blah blah blah. After a while, Harlan got tired of it and he said, kid, nobody sent for you.

14:45 Blackmon: You know what's interesting — I'm sorry, go ahead.

14:48 Berg: No (*laughing*), I miss him so much.

14:52 Blackmon: What's interesting about his career is the way he, you know, came in and out of fashion many times. He did what he did and he stuck to it and it's come back around to him again.

15:08 Berg: Yeah and (??) [15:09] said — I remember him calling me, he said, I want to write a song for Trisha Yearwood and I'm like, okay? He said I want to write one of those pop-sounding ones like you write, you know? And I was like, pop-sounding? I mean, so we wrote one, and she recorded it. He — his style never changed but he would adapt. He would call a kid like me for whatever pop-sounding melodies and put his meat and potatoes lyrics in there. They were always good, and they were always on point. He just, I guess, you know, I guess you could call it blue collar, but I call it meat and potatoes. It's like, just say it, don't try and impress anybody. Just say it as clearly as you can. Then the way he wrote, every single line just strayed into you.

16:45 Blackmon: Every line counted.

16:48 Berg: Yeah, and no frills, nothing fancy. It was like "Why Not Me", I hear Sonny in there and I hear Harlan in there and I can almost tell you which line Harlan wrote. I mean he's not alive to say yay or nay and Sonny's in Texas I think, so. Yeah, I've always envied that. I wrote a song with Jim Collins, and it's not long after Harlan died, called "I Don't Feel like Loving You Today."

17:41 Blackmon: That's a great song.

17:43 Berg: Oh, thanks.

17:44 Blackmon: Gretchen Wilson cut it.

17:46 Berg: Yeah. I was driving in the car and that tired just plopped in that head and I swear, this sounds lou lou and everything, but I could feel Harlan in the car next to me. I felt like, I Gert chills just talking about it now, but I felt him there with me. I felt this little gift, I feel like he just dropped a little gift on me and said okay kid, you know.

18:29 Blackmon: That's those special relationships between co-writers and mentor co-writers that just — he was watching you over your shoulder or helping you with that tune, that is beautiful.

18:42 Berg: Yeah, and all I had to write on was the checkbook in my car. So I wrote the title on the back of my checkbook. That's before fancy phones. And yeah, me and Jim wrote it super fast. I did a little work tape and Cris Lacy, who was Jim's publisher at that time, just took the work tape over to the studio and they recorded it the next day. It was so cool.

19:18 Blackmon: Oh, you don't get better than that. That's old-school Nashville right there.

19:24 Berg: I know, it was so cool, so cool. We were really proud of that one.

19:32 Blackmon: So you were talking about how you could hear Harlan's lines and Sonny's lines in "Why Not Me." If — this is probably going to be a hard one — but if you were to describe Matraca Berg's songs, what would you say? What do you shoot for, what's important to you, what makes — what's the common thread?

20:00 Berg: The common thread.

20:02 Blackmon: I know this is a hard question, but just it would be good to hear what you think about — you know, what's the bar? What do you do and what are you shooting for?

20:16 Berg: Well my bar's really, really high and I've not achieved that yet but I hope I do one day. But — there are so many threads, and the threads are the people that I idolize like I'm a huge Bob McDill fan. Like, completely besotted. Bob McDill's — "Good Ole Boys Like Me" is my favorite country song ever. So I've got the Bob McDill thread, I'm trying to pull myself above that Bob McDill thread every time.

21:05 Blackmon: Talking about that country boy poet, that song —

21:09 Berg: It's literature!

21:11 Blackmon: Yeah, yeah.

21:12 Berg: It's just stunning, I mean, it's the most intelligent, not talking down — it's like you're a country boy but you're not a dumb boy, I'm gonna lay this song on you, you know? It's just so good. Braddock, Bobby Braddock, and Harlan. Kris Kristofferson, Kris Kristofferson was huge, huge for me. So there are all these little threads that kind of yank me and pull me, and Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman. I mean, there are so many influences, there are pieces of them in everything that I do because, you know, they were my teachers. That's very important, is to let your teachers teach you and you'll find yourself somewhere in there and make it your own.

22:49 Blackmon: Well starting —

22:51 Berg: So that's, that's what I hope and pray is inside of us, a song — and John Hiatt, I forgot to say John Hiatt too. Those are the — and Shawn Colvin. They're just, I feel so fortunate that I had grown up at a time where it's — see, I just keep going. But I grew up in such a time where such amazing songs were written and that the artists and songwriters had the freedom to make that music. I was watching a documentary on music in the 70s, I think it was CNN? Was it a CNN thing?

24:02 Blackmon: I don't know.

24:03 Berg: Anyways, it was you know the greatest — it says like the greatest decade in music. And I thought that, well, that's being pretty broad. And I'll be damned, I mean, that thing — there was so much heavy, heavy hitting going on with the songwriters and the singer-songwriters and the music and it was just — a really golden time. I feel really grateful that I was a 70s kid, you know?

24:42 Blackmon: Yeah. I think things like FM radio and album-oriented formats really allowed for a lot of creativity. It was a special time. I'm curious to ask you about creativity through your career. Especially since you started out so young, and as we go through our lives, things change as far as responsibilities, relationships, career milestones. How has creativity or your process changed or stayed the same or what's that been like over a span of this time, have things changed for you? Have you adapted? Have you, I mean obviously you got better at your craft and you just said you continued to strive for that, but I'm just curious about how, you know, I feel like our minds change as we go through life just like our bodies change so it must have some sort of effect on creativity. I'm just curious about your thoughts.

26:13 Berg: I mean yeah, each decade beings in a completely different set of things to write about. And as you mature your perspective changes, and I don't think you necessarily drastically change as a spirit, as a person. Your perspective gets wider, it's like a panorama expands and you see the bigger picture because you've lived the bigger picture. That can be a good thing and a very frustrating then because everything's not so cut and dry and black and white. Especially, I've noticed that in my 50s. It's unreal how much more — when you get the long feelings out, but writing gets a little more complicated.

27:50 Blackmon: Is it hard to get those complex ideas in a three or four-minute song? Is that what you mean?

27:56 Berg: I just, it's not really — it's just that some things that I wrote in my 20s or my 30s I would not write now because I have a different perspective. It's more about — it's less about now, does that make sense?

28:30 Blackmon: It totally makes sense.

28:33 Berg: So, I'm going through this phase where I'm trying to figure out — I did write one song that I love so much with Gretchen Peters, and it's the kind of song I want to write right now. She recorded it and Ben Glover — we wrote it with Ben Glover too and he recorded it — so when I record it too, they'll be three versions floating around. I found myself, I think getting a little more of a John Prine-esque point of view in my songwriting and I think he was just born an old soul. Now, his songs are meaning so much more to me and it always meant a lot to me, but they're hitting a different place right now and — so that's, you know, that's the funny place I find myself in now. It's different voices speaking to me.

30:08 Blackmon: And that's satisfying I'm sure to have the — to be able to do that, chase that.

30:18 Berg: Yeah, I mean, yeah so far iivegoti a pretty good bunch of songs to at least begin recording. But there are much more — there's so much more I want to tell that I haven't told yet and it's just finding the right framework for it.

30:46 Blackmon: Let me ask you a few questions about songs. I'm gonna ask you what's your favorite hit that you wrote is, what's your favorite cut that wasn't a hit, and your favorite song that hasn't been cut. We'll start — what's your favorite hit that you wrote?

31:06 Berg: My favorite hit is probably “Strawberry Lime.”

31:11 Blackmon: Okay. What's your favorite cut?

31:17 Berg: My favorite cut.

31:20 Blackmon: I know these are really, these are kind of hard to answer, but just off the top of your head.

31:26 Berg: You know how many cuts I've had Odie?

31:28 Blackmon: I know. But they're special — you have special babies, don't you?

31:34 Berg: Well, my — Emmylou and Rodney Crowell recorded a song I wrote called “Back When We Were Beautiful” and I'm so proud of that, I can't tell you.

31:50 Blackmon: Proud of the song and the recording. Yeah.

31:55 Berg: Yeah. So that one is really, really special to me.

32:06 Blackmon: And do you have one that — do you have one that you just love that — you know everyone's got one that they love that hadn't been cut.

32:22 Berg: Like, what do you mean hasn't been cut? Like a big cut, or just any cut?

32:27 Blackmon: Well, anyway. One that you just — you loved and thought that would be a hit and somebody besides your own recording — you know everybody's got that one in the drawer that's like I'm proud of that one.

32:46 Berg: Right. Gosh, I mean that's hard, that's a hard one.

33:00 Blackmon: That's harder for some than others to pick those out, you know?

33:05 Berg: Yeah, I'm sure they'll just all come to me later.

33:12 Blackmon: Yeah, I might — should've written these questions, sent you these questions ahead of time, but it's fun just to hear off the top of your head. The only thing else I want to ask or talk about is your hope for young songwriters and music. Anything you think about when you, you know, think about imparting wisdom and sharing with young writers the way people shared with you?

33:41 Berg: Right. Well, I hope that they — even if it's fully appreciated, that they don't run away from making art. I know it's a singles-driven world right now, but it's not going to feed you, it's gonna burn you out, eventually. Just kind of go for it, just aspire, I guess that's what I'm saying. You know, there's great music out there, and I just hope that they reach and reach and don't get caught up in the singles market. Like, say, Billie Eilish. Her — she makes albums. She doesn't make singles. There's a flow in there and there's a story and that's important, in case you (??) [35:18]. Also, I hope they — and maybe most important, I hope they visit the greats, you know. Just find somebody and find whoever — find whomever those people were influenced by and then go to those influences and go backward and back and back and back. That's the greatest school — it's that. You would have to get inside of those great songs and these great artists and get inside what came before it. That's the greatest thing that you can possibly do. Gretchen Peters, who's a magnificent writer, used to write out her favorite lyrics. She said that taught her more than anything about how to write lyrics. I think that's just brilliant, I kinda think I'm gonna do that.

36:59 Blackmon: Yeah, I always think back to The Beatles learning all those covers when they were playing early on and learning that craft by learning other people's songs.

37:11 Berg: Yep, just get inside those songs. It's not — you're not going to end up being a copy, you're just going to make whatever is good there your own.

37:29 Blackmon: I think this is a good place to wrap up, I'm going to stop recording.