

PETER Kiple's

Simple Plan



by Crystal Caviness

Getting Peter Kiple to talk about Peter Kiple is a challenge. The 2004 SESAC Christian Songwriter of the Year is much more comfortable discussing the phenomenal success of Mercy Me, a band he has produced since its first album, or about the latest project he's working on in the studio.

Beneath the humility, Kiple is one of Christian music's most successful and in-demand producer/songwriters. SESAC honored him for his accomplishments with its top genre award for "Word of God Speak," R&R's most played Christian A/C song for 2003, and "Spoken For," both # 1 songs for Mercy Me.

"That was a miracle," Kiple says softly, with no hint of irony, when asked about the accolade.

The Dallas native set his sights on Nashville 10 years ago, but ended up on a circuitous path through Mobile, Alabama, a brief stint in Nashville and a return stay in Mobile before finally landing in Music City in 1999 for the duration. Kiple credits his Mobile days as a jingle writer with helping his songwriting.

"With jingle writing, you're getting to the hook as fast as you can," he says. "It's helped me as a producer to come up with a concept quickly."

Remaining focused on his dream—"I just wanted to produce tracks"—Kiple spent a couple of years programming for other producers before getting his first real shot.

"[Producer] Jeff Mosley gave me a crack with Mercy Me," he says "They were this little worship band from Texas. We had no idea what the heck we were doing."

The ace for the band and Kiple was a song lead singer Bart Millard had written following his dad's death.

"When I heard 'I Can Only Imagine,' I knew," Kiple says. "Jeff played me the song before he told me about the band. I told him, 'I think you've got a smash,' but I had no idea how big it would be."

"I Can Only Imagine" went on to be one of 2003's biggest mainstream songs after already garnering top Christian industry honors a year earlier, catapulting Mercy Me to multi-platinum status. Suddenly those attached to the group and its music also had a spotlight shining on them, with Kiple standing front and center as the band's producer. Kiple, however, is quick to deny any part in the success of "I Can Only Imagine."

"Quite honestly, we went in the studio and it produced itself," he says. "I wish I could take credit, but it couldn't have been easier. We almost went in and did a new version of it and totally rearranged it, and I said 'You know what, let's not fix it. It's just right like it is. We just need to record it.'"

Kiple has continued at the helm for Mercy Me's second and third albums, projects that have kept Mercy Me—and Kiple—at the top of their game. The resulting business relationship and subsequent friendship resulted in a new record label, Simple Records.

"Mainly what we're trying to do is find guys with great

music who are Christians," Kiple says. "If they can play at churches, great. If they can play at clubs, great."

To date, Simple Records has signed two bands, both young and both from Texas. The Afters, the first band from the label, has a single coming in late December. A second band, whose name is awaiting clearance, will follow in the spring. The label's focus is as much about mentoring young musicians as about making music.

"It's important to have people who believe in them and who can help them tour," he says. "I feel like I can help them with material. I don't want to write their material. We're looking for bands that have something to say. I can help them put their record together and take them in the studio."

Kiple is also working with Mark Harris, lead singer for Christian band 4Him, co-writing for his upcoming solo album.

"I'm more of an editor than anything else," he says. "I try to help people finish the songs they write or at least find a target to shoot their arrows. I love helping out if an artist feels they can trust me with their music and then, maybe together, we can take it to another place."

As a producer and songwriter, it's clear Kiple's style has nothing to do with ego and everything to do with the song.



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"You become a servant to the process," he says. "Nobody wants to cut their own song if there's a better song unless they're rotten producers. It's all about that one song whether you wrote it or not."

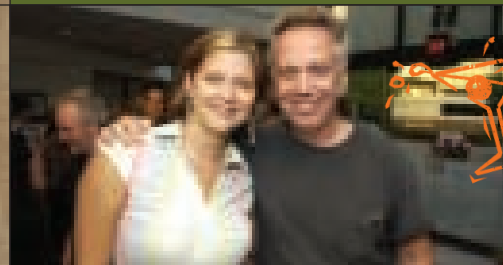
The music industry's continuing state of flux, with label consolidations and shrinking budgets, have frightened many, but not Kiple.

"Ultimately if you're here making a record, you're not in it for the money," he says. "It's a bigger victory if the artist wins. It's great to go home at the end of the day and know somebody made it, partly because of you." ★

SESAC developments

SESAC Open House Celebrates the Nashville Music Community

SESAC's Music Row headquarters was the scene of a recent Open House for the Nashville music community. A capacity crowd gathered for a heavy dose of Mexican food, margaritas and good old-fashioned schmoozing.



SESAC's Shannan Neese is pictured with SESAC affiliated songwriter Bob Delevante.



Shown from left to right are *Performing Songwriter* magazine publisher Lydia Hutchinson; artist manager Bob Doyle; SESAC's Tim Fink; and publisher Jody Williams.



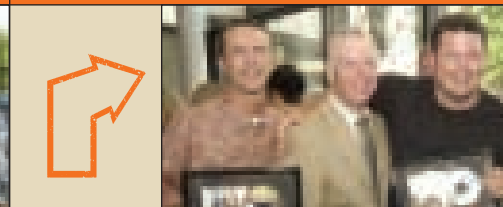
Shown from left to right are SESAC's Pat Rogers; SESAC songwriter Jerry Salley; SESAC's John Mullins; and Amy Hendon from Paragon Studios.

SESAC HEADS TO "MAYBERRY" FOR ARLOS SMITH'S #1 CELEBRATION

SESAC chose the spacious atrium of its Nashville headquarters for a well-attended celebration of the #1 success of songwriter Arlos Smith. The longtime SESAC affiliate recently topped the country charts in both *Billboard* and *R&R* with the Rascal Flatts smash, "Mayberry." The crowd enjoyed a feast of country country cookin' that included fried chicken, apple pie and cherry cokes.



Shown from left to right are SESAC's Tim Fink; publisher Jimmy Metts; Arlos Smith; and SESAC's Shannan Neese, Pat Collins, and John Mullins.



Pictured from left to right are Jimmy Metts from Good Ole Delta Boy Music; SESAC President/COO Pat Collins; and Arlos Smith.

SESAC CELEBRATES SAM & ANNIE TATE AND "SOMEBODY"

SESAC songwriters Sam and Annie Tate recently hit the top of *Billboard's* country chart with their smash hit, "Somebody," recorded by Reba McEntire. SESAC celebrated the success of the husband/wife songwriting team with a #1 party held at the company's Music Row headquarters.



Pictured from left to right are Carnival Music's Frank Liddell; Annie Tate; SESAC President/COO Pat Collins; Sam Tate; SESAC's Trevor Gale and Dennis Lord; Brad Kennard of Carnival Music; and SESAC's Tim Fink.



Carnival Music's Travis Hill (left) is shown with Reba McEntire producer Buddy Cannon.

SESAC CELEBRATES WITH JODY WILLIAMS MUSIC



Seen celebrating the success of songwriter Liz Rose's three concurrent *Billboard*-charting singles during the recent Jody Williams Publishing Anniversary gala are her publisher Jody Williams, SESAC's Tim Fink, Rose, and Katherine Blasingame, Creative Director for Jody Williams Publishing.

SESAC BUILDS A HOUSE

In September and October, SESAC took part in a house build for Nashville Area Habitat for Humanity. With the help of corporate partners in the local community, SESAC employees and affiliates pitched in to help build a home for Nashville's Tammy Choate and her three children. Pictured from left to right are SESAC affiliate Charley Stefl, SESAC's Shannan Neese, John Mullins, Stephanie Renshaw, Maxine Edwards, Susan Edwards, Justin Levenson and Eric Stephens.



Hot SONGWRITERS - Cool SONGS

“When you’re hot you’re hot.”

by Peter Cronin

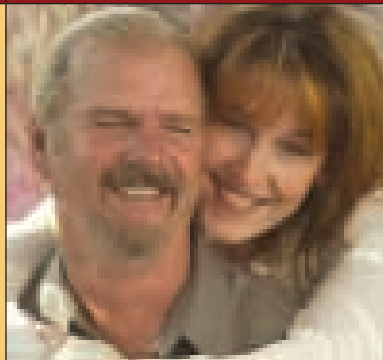
Jerry Reed’s immortal words of wisdom ring particularly true in the world of the hit songwriter. In Nashville these days, a hot single will indeed get you your 15 minutes of fame. And then it’s back to work.

But every one of those songwriters knows that a truly cool song goes on forever. And SESAC’s Nashville affiliates are turning out more than their share of cool songs these days. Thankfully, each of the hit writers spotlighted here has a slightly different definition of cool. Right this minute they’re among the hottest songwriters in town. Now *that’s* cool. ★



SAM & ANNIE Tate

Sam and Annie Tate routinely complete each other’s sentences without missing a beat. They’re that kind of couple. And it’s no wonder. On their way to becoming the most successful husband-and-wife country songwriting duo since Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, the Tates have worked constantly and tirelessly side-by-side, writing their way to a unique place in Nashville’s songwriting community.



“We work together, we vacation together, we live together, and we share so much,” says Sam. “With most marriages the husband and wife work and don’t see each other, so there’s a freshness there. The fact that after 18 years we’ve managed to keep our marriage and relationship as tight as it is is nothing short of a miracle.”

Both partners chalk it up to “passion.” Simply put, they love each other and they love what they do together. But, of course, it isn’t all that simple.

“I’m very demanding, and she has put up with more crap from me,” says Sam. “People are terrified to write with us, because so many people have said, ‘You’re not going to believe the Tates; they fight like cats and dogs.’”

“We don’t fight as bad as we used to,” Annie counters. “We’ve learned each other’s strengths and how to get the best out of the other person instead of just yelling.”

“But part of the experience of writing songs is that you bare your soul,” Sam continues. “There’s no holds barred if you’re going to dig deep, and that’s the only way the process really works. That passion is going to spark arguments. But what’s come

out of 10 years of writing together is that we’ve learned to keep that in the writer’s room.”

What comes out of the writer’s room is another story. As their hits—with artists ranging from Lee Ann Womack to Joe Nichols to Chely Wright to Reba McEntire—vividly illustrate, Tate and Tate have perfected a songwriting style that is anything but predictable but that somehow squeezes nicely into the confines of the mainstream country format.

“The challenge becomes how do you find an idea that hasn’t been done and do it differently, and it is a challenge,” Annie says. “We’ve tried to write whatever we thought would fit on the radio, but it just doesn’t work that way for us.”

“We’re writing inside a format designed for radio, and

my favorite music in the world is country music,” Sam adds. “But, to me the most exciting thing is when I hear a song that I know has broken the rules.”

Sam Tate was getting serious about the craft as early as the late ‘70s, when he left his native New Mexico for Nashville and started kicking around town with artists like John Prine and Kris Kristofferson. Tiring of the Nashville scene, Tate headed to Los Angeles and landed his music in films (*Smokey and the Bandit*, *Cannonball Run*) and TV (*Simon & Simon*). California girl Tate was, meanwhile, working on her own career as a singer in the Linda Ronstadt mold. The pair hooked up through a mutual friend and the sparks—romantic and creative—immediately starting flying.

“She had four demos that she’d done so she played them for me,” Sam recalls. “I listened and they were really, really good.”

“At first it was more of a mentoring thing,” Annie adds. “I’d sit down and write my little songs, and then he’d walk in and say the best line in the whole song right off the top of his head. He taught me a lot.”

Despite the rumors, there’s a palpable respect and a rare give-and-take at work in any conversation with Sam and Annie Tate, in or out of the writer’s room. The proof is in the songs. From their recent #1 with Reba McEntire, “Somebody,” to Lee Ann Womack’s “The Wrong Girl,” hit songs from Sam and Annie Tate always take the listener in intriguing directions and invariably stir up unexpected emotions. And then there are the ones that just fall out for the fun of it, like their latest hit single, Tracy Byrd’s “Revenge of the Middle Aged Woman.”

“We’ve been writing long enough that there are times when we sit down and just write something fun and laugh about it,” Annie says. “Well, lately we’ve been doing a couple of those and they’re getting cut. . . and they’re singles!” ★

“WE’VE LEARNED EACH OTHER’S STRENGTHS AND HOW TO GET THE BEST OUT OF THE OTHER PERSON. . .”

ARLOS Smith

If you ask Arlos Smith to get up and say a few words, you’d better have some time on your hands. At a recent

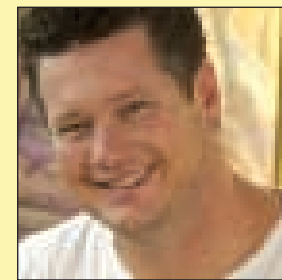
SESAC party celebrating his latest #1 single, Rascal Flatts’ “Mayberry,” Smith delivered a list of thank-yous that went on for over 20 minutes and acknowledged nearly everyone who was in the house and several who weren’t. Nobody was surprised. Anyone who’s ever met him knows that the singer/songwriter meant every word. Arlos Smith is all about the people around him.

“The older I get the more I believe there’s a positive and a negative in life,” Smith says. “It has to do with finding good hearts and good people. The more you cut the negative out of your life, the more you attract positive people.”

With a steady stream of cuts and two #1 country hits under his belt, Smith is definitely on to something. He grew up in Vienna, a suburb of Parkersburg, West Virginia, becoming an all-state defensive back before heading to West Virginia University at Morgantown. Locally, Smith’s post-college options were somewhat limited, but he was already songwriting and dreaming of greener pastures.

“It was a blue collar town,” he says. “You either worked for Borg-Warner or Dupont or pumped gas. My dad and my brothers worked for Dupont. I would’ve pumped gas. Finally, my wife said, ‘Go; get this out of your system. I’ll give you one year.’”

He made the move to Nashville in October, 1994. With Randy Travis’ wife/manager Lib Hatcher as his first landlord, Smith moved into an apartment above the Randy Travis Gift Shop adjacent to Music Row and lived with a revolving roster of roommates that included at one time or another future country stars Michael Peterson, David Kersh, Daryl Singletery and Deryl Dodd.



“I didn’t know anything about this town, and I didn’t know what to do,” Smith says. “For six months I was miserable.”

To make ends meet, Smith took a job tending bar at a Music Row watering hole. Opportunity came knocking in the form of an afternoon customer. Singer/songwriter Shane Decker, then signed to EMI Music Publishing, asked the bartender what he was doing in town. When Smith explained that he was here to write songs but was getting nowhere, the more experienced songwriter replied, “Well, you’re writing with me tomorrow.”

Much to his surprise, when he showed up at EMI the next morning, Decker was waiting and Smith’s career was off and running. One year to the day after his wife’s ultimatum, he signed his first publishing deal, with Malaco Music. In the subsequent decade, Smith has learned a lot about himself and a lot about the craft of songwriting.

“For 10 years I’ve been writing hooks and songs, and now I’m figuring out that the people to write with are the people that heal my soul,” he says. “Not the people who are necessarily the best writers, but the people who, when we get together to write, even if we don’t write a word on the paper, when I leave the room, I leave a better person.”

With cuts from artists like Michael Peterson and Canadian country singer Jessica Robinson already to his credit, Smith took an artistic detour in 2000, forming the duo Smith & Jones with singer/songwriter Jeff Jones. When the act failed to ignite, Smith returned fulltime to songwriting, hitting pay dirt in 2001 with the ballad, “Home to You.” Recorded by John Michael Montgomery, the song shot to #1 and earned Smith SESAC’s Country Songwriter of the Year award. This year he hit #1 again, supplying country stars Rascal Flatts with “Mayberry,” a song this confirmed co-writer wrote all by himself.

“I feel confident now,” he says. “I can write alone, and I feel like I want to. Just write the truth. I think I’m just now hitting a lick and starting to really figure that out.” ★

Ron HARBIN



Growing up in Bakersfield, California, SESAC’s Ron Harbin just couldn’t escape it. Country music was everywhere.

“I actually went to school with Buck and Merle’s kids,” Harbin says. “I was a rocker—Hendrix, Cream, that kind of stuff. But I had aunts and uncles, they had an old Haggard record floating around, and I just fell in love. That’s how it got up and rolling for me.”

Inspired by what he was hearing, Harbin began “dabbling” in poetry, occasionally getting up to perform one of his homegrown compositions at a local honky tonk. Tired of working in the family oil well business, and looking for a better place to raise his two kids, the 31-year-old Harbin packed up the family and moved to Nashville in 1986.

“When I landed in town, I figured Nashville was short on songwriters,” he says. “I had no idea what I was doing, so I walked into town and just did it.”

Harbin’s first impulse may have been slightly off the mark, but his next revelation was dead on.

“I realized these guys were writing two, three times a day, and I figured they had to be short on ideas,” Harbin says. “So I went on a hook hunt and tried to develop ideas that were a little different. I started getting into camps by being a guy who probably had an idea laying around, because I wasn’t writing five days a week, two times a day.”

To make ends meet, and as a kind of insurance policy “in case the songwriting thing didn’t work out,” Harbin and his wife started a pizza business north of Nashville in rural Portland, Tennessee, with Harbin pursuing songwriting “after the lunch rush.” He was spending a lot of those afternoons with Kim Williams, who was just starting on his way to becoming one of Nashville’s top tunesmiths.

“Sometimes Kim would be writing with an artist and he wouldn’t have anything, and he’d call me and say, ‘Hey Ron, you got a hook? I’m writing with Doug Stone.’ I either had one or I’d come up with one, because I had all the time in the world.”

In his own uniquely quirky search for song ideas, the Nashville newcomer was willing to look anywhere and everywhere, including that venerable wellspring of country music inspiration, Toys R Us.

“There was a story in *Country Weekly* about a game called *Adverteasing*,” Harbin says. “It was like the old *Password* game. It had 2500 advertising slogans, and I got 3 cuts—including my first major cut—out of that little game.”

Now it can be told; a US Postal Service slogan was the inspiration behind George Strait’s “Overnight Male.” And Janie Fricke’s “You’re the Finishing Touch” was also inspired by some advertising line or another.

Harbin’s life these days is a lot more like those disciplined Music City songwriters he first encountered. Among his regular collaborators are the aforementioned Williams, David Lewis, Anthony Smith, Aaron Barker, Cyril Rawson, and Lonestar’s Richie McDonald, with whom he has forged a unique bond.

“One thing Richie and I have in common is that he’s an early bird and I am too,” Harbin says. “I live in Portland, but I’m usually in my office in Nashville by 6 a.m. And Richie loves to write that early. We may both have a day write somewhere but we’ll write from 6 or 7 until 10 and then go to our regular writing meeting.”

To further maximize their songwriting time, Harbin has been hitting the road with McDonald and the band. One of their recent co-writes, “Mr. Mom,” is Lonestar’s latest hit single, and Harbin hit previously with the Lonestar #1, “What About Now.” With artists like Lonestar, Aaron Tippin, Sara Evans and Tracy Lawrence regularly cutting his songs, Harbin knows he’s where he was meant to be.

“If they’re cutting them, this is what I’m supposed to be doing,” he says. “I love working in Nashville. I love coming down the hill in the morning like, ‘All right man, new day, let’s go.’ And at night it’s like, ‘Let’s get out of that mess.’ I’m glad in both directions.” ★