

THE MAN AND THE MOVIE

15 years later, George Strait's Pure Country is still a hit.

Story by Chris Neal

It all began in Las Vegas.

For several years, every time George Strait played Sin City, legendary Elvis Presley manager Colonel Tom Parker was in the audience. The Colonel saw something in George, already a huge country star, that suggested he might have the makings of a movie star as well—just like Elvis himself.

"He told me I reminded him of Presley," George told *The Star* in 1992. "The Colonel kept telling me, 'You have to start doing movies.' I would just say 'Yeah, yeah,' and then go on to something else."

But Colonel Tom wasn't kidding around—he contacted his friend Jerry Weintraub, the producer of movies like *Diner* and *The Karate Kid*, who also saw silver-screen potential in the charismatic singer from Texas. The exec approached George backstage at a show with the idea, but still met with resistance. The singer was worried about his own untested acting ability, and concerned that a movie might depict him and all of country music in a negative light.

"What do I have to gain?" Weintraub once remembered the country superstar telling him. "I sell a lot of albums. I got a great life. I go out and do 75 concerts a year, and I sell out most of them. And I don't know how to act."

But George at last came around to the idea—and in 1991, the wheels began turning. Screenwriter Rex McGee, a Texas native, was hired to write the script. "Jerry Weintraub gave me only two directions," Rex recalls with a chuckle. "He said, 'George has to sing 10 songs, and we've got to let George rope something.'"

George, Rex and *Young Guns* director Christopher Cain had several meetings to discuss story ideas—but in the end, Rex drew much of the plot from his own life. He had spent 20 years in Los Angeles before moving to the small Texas town of Cleburne when he inherited his aunt's house there. "I was a little lost at that point," he explains. "I had two deaths in the family and a longtime relationship had just broken up, so I was a bit shellshocked when I moved back to Texas." Ironically, Rex's other major story idea came from a notion he'd long had about Col. Parker's most famous client. "I had always imagined what would have happened if Elvis had gotten rid of the Memphis Mafia and Col. Parker and went back to his roots," he says. "Would he be dead now? This is a life-or-death thing for creative musical people. They get stuck playing one kind of music, and they can't get out of the role."

From these elements, Rex fashioned the story of Dusty Wyatt Chandler, a country superstar burned out by the over-the-top glitz and glamour of his career. Dusty finally snaps, unexpectedly walking away from a tour to return to his Texas hometown. There, while his manager (Lesley Ann Warren) frantically tries to locate him, he rediscovers his roots and falls in love with a rancher (Isabel Glasser) who's unaware of his true identity. ("I remember suggesting that the girlfriend be a bull rider," Rex chuckles, "and George said, 'No way I'm gonna have love scenes with a woman bull rider!'").

Rex inserted one particularly personal touch into the script. “There’s a shot in the film of George visiting the cemetery where his parents are buried,” he explains. “The names on the headstone are actually the names of my own mother and father, who were both deceased by then. It was a thank-you to my mom and dad, who will never get to see it. I wept like a baby the first time I saw that.”

Carrying a major motion picture was quite a daunting task for George, whose acting experience was limited to a few videos. “I hope I can pull it off,” George told *Country America* magazine in 1991. “Ninety percent of the time when an actor tries to become a singer or a singer tries to become an actor, it doesn’t really work out. But with the right people, I think we can make a quality movie. The biggest fear I have about making one is somebody laughing at me.”

Nonetheless, George—who cites Clint Eastwood, Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson as his own favorite screen thespians—didn’t take acting lessons before the cameras rolled. He and the movie’s creators feared that if he came off onscreen as attempting to “act,” it would interfere with his laid-back charm and natural charisma. To help him ease in, the concert sequences were shot first.

“Acting is a totally new thing for him, but he figured out where the marks are, how to hit ‘em and how to find ‘em,” director Christopher Cain told *Chicago Country* upon the film’s release in 1992. “He learned to tap into an emotional moment.”

George’s romantic lead, Isabel Glasser, did her best to help that process along. “I tried to make it as easygoing an experience as I could,” she says. “I felt like the more relaxed we were with each other, the more fun we had as actors, the easier it would be for the characters to fall into the relationship that they needed to find.”

The shoot, which took place in several Texas towns, as well as Las Vegas, took a total of 43 days. “So it was short and sweet, and I had a good time,” George said. “A real nice change of scenery.”

George also headed into the recording studio to make the movie’s soundtrack—which, having already released a dozen albums beforehand, was not such a change of scenery. But this, too, proved to be a landmark: The *Pure Country* album was the first to pair George with Tony Brown, who continues to be his producer of choice. It also remains George’s best-selling album of new material, having shipped six million copies.

Most of the songs were chosen simply because George and Tony liked them, but a few were tailor-made to fit the film. “Heartland” was to be the anthem that would establish Dusty as a bigger-than-life star, and writers Steve Dorff and John Bettis wrote and rewrote the tune until it fit the needs of the scene—it had to be poppier, more hard-rocking than a typical George tune. Despite being an atypical George tune as a result, “Heartland” became a No. 1 hit (as did the movie’s climactic ballad, “I Cross My Heart,” also co-written by Steve Dorff). George’s then 11-year-old son, George “Bubba” Jr., was enlisted to sing “Heartland” over the opening credits.

The movie hit theaters on Oct. 23, 1992, earning \$2.7 million in its opening weekend on the way to a \$15 million total. Not a blockbuster, but not bad for a relatively low-budget movie—and one that would go on to make much more money as a video and television staple.

Practically from the moment filming on *Pure Country* was wrapped, George has been asked again and again whether he will ever star in another movie. He has consistently said that he enjoyed the moviemaking process, and would consider doing another one—perhaps a Western. “I’ve looked at a few scripts,” he said back in 1996, “but I haven’t found anything that’s right yet.” Apparently, he still hasn’t—15 years after *Pure Country*, it remains George’s only starring role (he did make cameo appearances in 1982’s *The Soldier* and 2002’s *Grand Champion*).

George's movie career may have ended with *Pure Country*, but the movie itself refuses to die. In recent years, it has become a staple on Country Music Television, and now screenwriter Rex McGee is mounting a stage-musical version. It was a model for Toby Keith's recent movie debut, *Broken Bridges*—which also dealt with a country star returning home. "I think *Pure Country* was very successful not because George Strait is just this charismatic actor, but [because] his audience was fulfilled," director Steven Goldmann said in an interview featured on the *Broken Bridges* DVD.

"I am continually amazed at the people that come to me and tell me it's their favorite film," Rex says. "They see it over and over again. It's amazing to me." Indeed, *Pure Country* has never truly left anyone who worked on it. "It's the one film I've done that people still recognize me from," Isabel says. "I get stopped every so often in the supermarket or at the airport. "It's a film that people really love. It touches a lot of people."

STRAIT TO BROADWAY?

Pure Country becomes a stage musical.

Pure Country was first seen on movie screens, then found a new audience on TV. Now, 15 years after the film premiered, the story of Dusty Wyatt Chandler's disillusionment and redemption is hitting the stage. Original screenwriter Rex McGee and songwriters Steve Dorff and John Bettis, who wrote the movie tune "Heartland," have been collaborating on a stage musical version of *Pure Country*.

"I saw so many other opportunities for the piece to grow," Rex explains. "It was a George Strait vehicle, but people seemed to like the characters, and seemed to like the themes in it."

Ironically, *Pure Country* co-star Isabel Glasser notes that a friend of hers in New York recently auditioned for the very role Isabel played in the movie. "She called me and said, 'Isabel, you're not gonna believe this, but they're doing a musical of *Pure Country* and I'm going to go read for Harley!'" she recalls with a chuckle.

The musical got a test run with two invitation-only staged readings in New York last September, and the team behind it is now in talks with investors. Click on <http://web.mac.com/rexmcgee/iWeb/purecountry> to find out more, and to hear demos of the songs to be included—including Gretchen Wilson's version of "Don't &#! With Lula."

Rex has done a lot of writing in the last 15 years—he recently scripted a Hallmark Channel movie called *Where There's a Will*, and just finished work on a screenplay about Texas debutantes, *Nose to the Toes*—but he admits that he just can't seem to escape *Pure Country*. "It's become my life," he chuckles, "quite unintentionally!"

GEORGE'S LEADING LADY

Isabel Glasser will never forget the day she almost punched George Strait in the face.

The actress' *Pure Country* character, Harley, was supposed to take a swing at George, playing country star Dusty Wyatt Chandler. Of course, she wasn't supposed to really connect with his face—but she had to get close enough so the camera couldn't tell she hadn't really popped him one.

"The first time we did it with the cameras were rolling, I threw this punch and he fell down," she recalls. "When the director, Chris Cain, finally stopped the scene, I could hear George laughing. He looked at me and said, 'I could feel the wind flying past my nose from that punch—and I will never make you angry!'"

There wasn't much danger of that happening anyway. "He was a total delight," she recalls. "He was always a pleasure to work with, had a wonderful sense of humor and was a very good sport."

He came onto the project as a team player, and was always willing to do whatever he needed to do as many times as he needed to do it. I think of him often, with nothing but smiles on my face.”

Isabel admits that she knew George’s name before being cast in Pure Country, but was unfamiliar with his songs. “I’m a New Yorker!” she chuckles. “I’d never been exposed to a lot of country music.”

She quickly remedied that. “I started listening to a lot of his music, trying to get my hands on as much as I could before I’d met him,” she remembers. “I learned that he’s an icon for a reason. He sings from the heart.”

One of Isabel’s most treasured Pure Country memories is of a scene she wasn’t even in. She recalls watching George shoot the sequence in which, sitting on his grandmother’s porch, he sings “Last in Love” with only an acoustic guitar. “It blew me away,” she says. “It was so simple and so elegant. It was a beautiful moment, and a really wonderful thing to watch.”

Isabel, who has also been seen in movies like Forever Young and a variety of TV shows, has recently focused more on parenting than acting. “Right now, my biggest job is being a mommy to my 3-year-old twins,” she reports. “I have a boy and a girl who are absolutely my heart.”

As the twins get older, Isabel plans to return to acting full-time—and says she’d be pleased to work with George again. “I keep waiting to hear about a sequel,” she laughs, “but I don’t think that’s ever gonna happen!”

THE DEVIL AND MR. STRAIT

One unlikely inspiration for Pure Country goes way back: The centuries-old tale of Faust, a scientist who makes a pact with the devil. “That’s the ultimate story of hitting the depths and then finding redemption,” Pure Country screenwriter Rex McGee explains. “This is a story of a personal transformation, and that’s what Faust is.”

In the movie, the dissatisfied country star played by George finds himself in a honky-tonk, where he meets the young woman who will help him find redemption. Sounds simple, but it’s a plot point with deep roots. “When Faust goes to the depths, he hears the song of a woman’s voice and he goes to this bar,” Rex explains. “His life is changed by this waitress who brings him a drink.

“It sounds a little highfalutin’ for Pure Country,” the writer admits with a chuckle, “but it was something I was working with.”
