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# PRODUCER TONY BROWN

## IS ASKING THE BIGGEST NAMES IN MUSIC HISTORY TO TAKE A SEAT

WRITTEN BY: LACEY JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPH BY: BARBARA POTTER

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1975. Elvis Presley and his band members were gathered at his Palm Springs, Calif. ranch home, playing through some of his most beloved gospel songs. During a short break, Presley turned his attention to his newbie pianist, 28 year-old Tony Brown. Brown had recently transitioned from his first major gig with the Oak Ridge Boys to play with The King, who he recalls as being “the most beautiful, coolest cat I’d ever seen,” and “someone who never quite figured out he was Elvis Presley.”

Presley called out to Brown without warning, asking, “What are you doing here, Tony?”

“Well, I thought you wanted me out here to play...” Brown said, shifting nervously on his feet.

“No, why are you *here*?” Elvis persisted, coolly.

“Well... I’m here because I play piano. I’m not sure what you mean,” Brown said, his voice trailing off.

“No,” Elvis said, searching Brown’s gaze for a moment before locking into it. “You’re here because you wanted to be here. You willed yourself here, Tony. If you have the ability, you can will anything to yourself.”

“I never forgot that,” Brown, now 71, says with a grin, cupping his chin with his hand, seeming to have reinserted himself back into that moment. “I was such a pissant back then.”

It’s clear that Brown never forgot.

Though he would make more memories with Presley, learning of his stash of astrology books, recording on the “Jungle Room” sessions

at Graceland and sharing the stage with The King all the way through to his final performance in Indianapolis on June 26, 1977, Brown managed to will an even more remarkable range of experiences to himself in the four decades since that conversation: Four Grammys. ACM Producer of the Year. More than 100 No. 1 hit songs. An exalting list of platinum and multi-platinum albums. The discovery and development of some of country music’s most defining contenders. A presidency at MCA records which, under his care, was awarded *Billboard*’s Country Label of the Year for 10 years in a row.

It was late in the fall when I arrived at Brown’s property in Nashville, Tenn. for our afternoon conversation. I walked through the foyer into the living room, noticing the rows of platinum records lining the main hallway. Brown was cozied in a chair, positioned near his grand piano, a gentle fire blazing nearby. Interesting paintings comprised of bold pops of contrasting jewel tones were mounted on the walls. Scented candles flickered and filled almost every room. It felt like stepping into a creative mecca - the kind of space that is a luxury to the senses and beckons for enchantment. Brown offered me a cup of coffee, and then invited me to have a seat by the fire.

Soon, I would learn how much he delights in the telling and retelling of his stories, especially the funny ones. Sometimes, in fact, he is so amused by his own recollections that he forces the details out in measures, often in between staccato-like chuckles. There is something eternally youthful about him, lighting up as he relives moments from his career, though he boasts about nothing.



He makes no mention of the prestigious awards shelved in his office, the stages he has stepped onto, nor the iconic figures in his phone contact list. In fact, I would later spend hours in research, stunned by some of the accomplishments he failed to speak of. He gives his remarkable legacy about as much applause as one would give an obscure garage band's jam session.

There is no semblance of bravado, or of the subtlest recognition of his own genius. And, when I affirm him in the slightest of ways, he immediately turns the limelight back to what "this" person taught him or the outrageously clever thing "that" person said. Most of the names mentioned just happen to be attached to icons.

There is Reba McEntire, Billy Joel, Brooks & Dunn, Jimmy Buffet, Emmylou Harris, Lionel Richie, Cyndi Lauper ("She's so incredible, she hits every note in one take," says Brown), George Strait ("He really is such a down-to-earth guy," he says) and a long stretch of others. Brown doesn't seem sparked by the allurings of fame but, instead, captivated by the human experience and, most significantly, how music connects to and resonates with the human experience.

Though his career began as a piano player, he became known as a hugely influential artist and development guy years before he was an award-winning producer. One day, Brown asked his friend, singer-songwriter and producer Norro Wilson, "How do I get started producing without a track record? How do I get an opportunity?" Wilson then welcomed Brown to co-produce Steve Wariner's record, "Midnight Fire." The record soared straight to the No. 1 spot.

He credits gospel singer J.D. Sumner and former President of RCA records, Joe Galante, for toughening him up. He credits his years of working with producer Jimmy Bowen for shaping him most of all, admitting to having soaked up every minute spent with his mentor. "I studied him and the musicians he worked with," he says. "He helped me understand that I needed to trust the artists [while in the studio]."

He credits every other person for every fragment of their artistic credibility, but if you dare to amplify the notion of his greatness, he will silence your mic and pull you back to Earth. I don't think it's contrived modesty or self-deprecation at all; I get the sense that it's a genuine lack of grasping the monumental thumbprint he made on the history of country music. All Brown was ever doing was being himself.

**I WAS ALWAYS LISTENING TO MUSIC TO MAKE SURE THE TRACK WAS GOOD BUT I WASN'T EXPERIENCING IT. LATELY, I'VE STARTED LISTENING TO MUSIC FOR MUSIC. TO SOOTHE ME.**

— *Tony Brown*

"I don't really think about all that stuff. I just loved being in the music, studying the music... and then, I guess, following my instinct. Now, Celine Dion? That's an icon. If she were to walk in here right now, I'd probably faint," he says, chuckling again.

Speaking of instinct, Brown seems to have been gifted with a powerful one. Not only did he sign Trisha Yearwood (he snatched her up upon hearing "She's in Love With the Boy" at her showcase), Alabama and Patty Loveless when they were unknowns, but he took a gamble on Vince Gill early in the singer's career when he parted ways with RCA Records. At the time, Brown was the only one among his colleagues who was interested in signing him. "I sensed that there was something special about Vince," he says.

In addition to signing Gill, Brown produced the record, "When I Call Your Name," that rescripted the artist's life. In the years following