



Jason Michael Carroll is a rising country music star who keeps his roots and his heart firmly planted at home

By Renee Gannon

At the age of 32, Jason Michael Carroll isn't your typical young gun. Yes, he is a country music rising star, with two hit albums and five hit singles, performing in small and large venues across the nation and opening for some of music's biggest acts such as Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood.

But like his hit song "Where I'm From" (from his second album, *Growing Up Is Getting Old*, 2009), Jason stays connected to the small town of Youngsville where he ran through the farm fields, shared Sunday dinner with friends and family, quietly sat on the wooden pews at his daddy's Baptist Church. And Jason also is married to his high school sweetheart, Wendy, raising four children.

During breaks from the road, Jason returns home to go fishing, eat at Griffin's restaurant, shop at local stores, and run the everyday errands that a father and husband typically do. People know him as an average guy. While he does stop for autographs and photos, most people give Jason his down time.

Born in Houston, but raised in Youngsville, Jason says he appreciates the small town. "It's the way I grew up, and Youngsville is still home and where I feel comfortable to be myself. I guess all my happy thoughts go to Youngsville!"

Just a Franklin County boy

Early on, music—country, rock, pop, gospel—was a part of his life. Jason smiles and chuckles as he confesses to dancing with friends in his family

room to Michael Jackson's "Thriller."

He also fondly recalls watching his Dad teach himself guitar. "He would walk around the house in his cowboy boots practicing from a learn-how-to-play George Strait book," says Jason. "And I would hear songs like Steve Wariner's 'Some Fools Never Learn' from the truck when my parents would come home from a dinner night."

Jason also remembers the day the music stopped. The Carroll house went from guitar playing, country songs and Michael Jackson to silence after his father became a fundamentalist independent preacher when Jason was around 9 years old.

Jason found a way to his music, though, at neighbors' houses and secretly listening to bootleg tapes of songs recorded from the radio by friends. During this period, Jason remarks that listening to Radney Foster's "Just Call Me Lonesome" hooked him on country music.

His Dad busted Jason's secret music-listening life when he found a taped recording off the radio of Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy Breaky Heart." Jason laughs: "I got one of the worst spankings of my life when my Dad found that Billy Ray Cyrus tape hidden under the mattress."

But Jason had caught the country music bug and refused to shake it off.

Co-workers at Carolina Builders Supply in Youngsville urged Jason to compete in a local radio station's karaoke contest. After phoning in the initial audition to G105, Jason earned a spot to the studio portion of the contest.

Jason then told his Dad, who drove with him to the studio. Drawing the first spot to perform, Jason sang David Kersh's "Another You." After hearing Jason sing, 15 of the 22 contestants left.

Winning the contest led him to a Durham band looking for a lead singer. Jason then competed and won the Raleigh/Durham-based WRAZ-50 televised "Gimme the Mic" contest in 2004. By 2005, Jason Michael Carroll frequented Nashville and landed a recording contract with Arista Nashville. (He has since split with Arista.)

With the first single released from his 2007 debut album, *Waiting in the Country*, the music industry and fans knew Jason wasn't afraid to tell the darker side of life. In his "Alyssa Lies," Jason sings the emotional tale of child abuse, and the song doesn't end happily, but it is still one of his most requested. He has heard from teachers, parents and families about how this song affects them.

"I always have to feel what I'm singing," he says. "The country fan is not stupid, they can see through the people who are faking it. I joke that my life is a country song, so I should have no problem! I have a connection to every song I sing, whether I've written it or not, so I can give an accurate interpretation to the song and the people who are listening. The fans can say 'I've been there, I know exactly what he is talking about and so does he.'"

Jason adds: "The songs are an extension of who I am. It's about finding a connection."

Is he enjoying it? You bet. "I tell people that we are paid to set up and

Where I'm From

tear down our gear! Playing, I'll do that for free," he jokes. "If you aren't having fun, then you shouldn't be doing it, no matter what you are doing. I'm learning that every day, especially with my kids. Leaving my family is the hardest part of my job."

Jason says that when he was young, his friends wanted to be firemen, policemen and army men. "All that sounded great to me, but honestly, I wanted a big family." He now has what he wanted: a family with four kids, plus an extended family with six band members.

An even larger family

Jason has sung around a piano with music stars such as Sheryl Crow, Brooks & Dunne, Reba, Kenny Chesney, Leanne Womack, Randy Owen, and yes, George Strait. But the sick children he visits are the real stars and his motivation.

The children and families he meets at hospitals across the country also count as part of his extended brood. Jason admits that he doesn't know how long he'll be able to perform, or how far his rising star will go, but he will always have a big heart.

"With the time I do have using this music platform, I can go out and make a difference, to be part of something bigger than myself," he says. "I play music, but I also speak and change lives."

Jason wears his heart not on his sleeve, but on his wrists. Layers of colored bands and bracelets remind Jason of what life is all about. Each bracelet represents a cause that has touched Jason through the children he has met, children facing odds against

cancer, cystic fibrosis and other health issues. Each yellow, blue, orange, teal and green band and slate-colored bead bracelet carries a story.

One special bracelet featuring blue, orange, black and white beads with the letters BRITTANY on each white bauble is a constant reminder of why Jason strives so hard for success—to be the a champion for children and their families and a fundraising force to push medical research to find answers.

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Below left: Jason presents Josh Buckner, a patient at N.C. Children's Hospital, one of his shirts because Josh had several photos of Jason wearing the same shirt over several visits to the hospital (Photo provided by Schatzi Hageman).

Below right: Jason performs at the N.C. Children's Hospital during the 2009 N.C. Children's Promise fundraising event (Photo by Renee Gannon).



Jason's baritone voice cracks when he talks about Brittany Coppedge. He first met Brittany when she was 9 years old, the daughter of Jason's first guitar player, Jeff Coppedge. Almost like a little sister, Brittany could tell Jason what went right and wrong during shows. She spoke her mind, and he listened.

In late November 2006, after months of health problems and trips to the N.C. Children's Hospital, Brittany and her family received the devastating diagnosis of lung cancer—unbelievable in a young, athletic person who never smoked. In December 2006, Brittany died at age 19.


"We do it for the kids"

Because of Brittany, Jason stays involved with the Chapel Hill hospital, visiting the children several times a year, especially in November each year for the N.C. Children's Promise Radiothon/Telethon. (He first participated in 2005 and is performing in a benefit concert on Nov. 18.) He and his wife, Wendy, visit on Mother's Day and around Christmas as well. He also serves as Honorary Chairman for Brittany's Battle, a non-profit charity that raises awareness and money to help families battling cancer.

When he visits the children and families at hospitals, Jason does more than just pop in and sign autographs. He and Wendy come loaded with books, puzzles, toys and stuffed animals. He's a talker, and spends three or more hours during his visit. "We show up as a surprise, and it makes for a great day for the kids and a break for their families, a time to relax,"

"We do it for the kids," Jason says. "Kids do not deserve to deal with these life-threatening issues. And it's tough on the parents."

He remembers the frightening time when his daughter was tested for cystic fibrosis, but finally diagnosed with asthma. "I want to be the voice for families, to raise enough money that some day, that last dollar goes to a piece of research that solves the mystery."

Jason is currently working on his third album. And no doubt, the songs will touch the listeners' hearts and confirm the connection Jason Michael Carroll has with country music fans and the families he has met along his musical journey. 



Top: Jason is a regular special guest at the annual N.C. Children's Hospital Children's Promise fundraising event. (Photo by Renee Gannon).

Bottom right: Fans push to the stage to see Jason perform at the Harley Davidson Show in Asheboro (Photo by Wendy Phillips Carroll).

Bottom left: Jason performs at an outdoor concert along with youngest son, J.W. (Photo by Wendy Phillips Carroll).

For more information

www.jasonmichaelcarroll.com
www.ncchildrenspromise.org
www.brittanybattle.org



Country for Kids Nov. 18

Jason Michael Carroll will be among the musical performers at the 9th annual "Country for Kids" concert to benefit N.C. Children's Hospital. The concert will be held Thursday, Nov. 18, at 7:30 p.m. at the Durham Performing Arts Center (DPAC) in Durham. Tickets are \$25 and are available through Ticketmaster.com, DPACnc.com or (919) 680-2787. For more information, visit www.ncchildrenspromise.org.