

Hunter Leath: 20-Year-Old Country and Christian Singer and Songwriter with Talents Far Beyond His Age

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The New York Times

NASHVILLE – Both sides of the music business equation – music and business – can be daunting to artists of any age.

But the greatly talented singer, pianist, guitarist, and songwriter Hunter Leath already has a mature grasp of both music and its commercial side, even though he won't turn 21 until next February.

Maybe the kid, who hails from the small Memphis suburb of Rossville, Tenn. (population 664) was born to be a musician.

“My parents always said that even before I was talking, I would hum songs,” Hunter says in a telephone interview en route to a recording session in late July.

He's currently a student at one of the most famous musical training grounds anywhere, Belmont University, whose dozens of famous products include superstars Steven Curtis Chapman and Brad Paisley.

What's remarkable about Hunter's Belmont career is that in many ways that also began very young, when he was in the seventh grade.

His father, who Leath credits as “the one who got me interested in music,” brought Hunter to a Belmont Preview Day when he had just entered middle school.

“After that, Belmont was my only choice,” says Hunter, who just completed his second year. “I didn’t really want to go anywhere else.”

This quiet confidence and maturity, much of which comes from Leath’s strong Christian faith, shines brightly through Hunter’s music. The demos and videos of his songs such as “Apple Of Your Daddy’s Eye,” “Ready, Let Go,” and “Safe At Home” already sound professionally produced and radio-friendly.

Many of his new songs were co-written or co-produced by another Belmont standout, Ben Cooper, who like Hunter plays piano and fuses Christian and country influences – as well as pop and rock – in his music.

A brand new song Hunter has recorded called “Counting On Maybe,” co-written by Ryan Payne and Leath, has already become one of Hunter’s personal favorites.

Cooper and Leath are in the process of writing and recording a 6- or 7-song EP Hunter expects to release this fall. Cooper does a great deal of work with the Grammy-winning Music Row writer and producer Gordon Kennedy, who co-wrote Eric Clapton’s 1997 smash “Change The World.”

Hunter’s approach to Ben Cooper shows a great deal about his quiet confidence. About 18 months ago, he heard Ben play a few songs at a concert Gordon Kennedy was hosting, and loved what he was hearing.

“I wonder if this guy would ever be interested in co-writing,” Leath recalls thinking. “So I Facebook messaged Ben with the expectation I would never hear back. Then I got a message back saying that he’d checked out some of my stuff.”

Hunter, smiling, describes that as one of his first “aha! moments.” He had never had a published songwriter compliment Hunter on his own songs. That gave him not just a huge boost of confidence, but also a very experienced musical partner to collaborate with on songs, videos, and recordings.

The musical influences of Leath began when he heard his Dad playing albums by singer-songwriters such as Phil Vassar, the former Eagle Don Henley, and Billy Joel.

The guy who has most inspired two generations of the Leath family – Hunter and his father – is Mac McAnally, born in Red Bay, Alabama in 1957 and like Leath, raised on the outskirts of Memphis.

By age 19, McAnally was a session guitarist in Muscle Shoals, as Geoffrey Himes writes in *The Encyclopedia Of Country Music*. McAnally’s 1992 midtempo country story song “The Trouble With Diamonds” is a particular favorite for the Leaths.

“The way that he writes and tells stories, Mac McAnally is the epitome of a great songwriter,” Hunter says.

Leath expects a great deal of the financing for the EP project to come from a 45-60-day campaign he’ll launch in August on the site pledgemusic.com.

Hunter’s father, a talented amateur guitarist whose own musical background has deep roots in Southern Gospel and a stint in the Christian band New Spirit at Union University, started his son in music and has remained a massive inspiration and role model ever since.

Hunter’s first instrument was drums at age 4. He had a complete drum kit by his fifth birthday.

Mrs. Leath has always been both a sunny presence and a major inspiration.

“It’s almost impossible for my mother to see the negative in anything,” Hunter says. “I’m a lot like her. Everything is positive.”

By his first year of kindergarten, Hunter was playing both drums and piano. That was the year he started piano lessons, and quickly fell in love with the instrument.

Through middle and high school, Hunter played both music and football for the Rossville Christian Academy Wolves.

Church music has always been a major thread in Hunter’s life. For one thing, at Piperton Baptist Church, he was playing keyboards during services by age 13 and within a few years had become a salaried worship leader.

“I really liked it, that gave me a lot of experience in a leadership position,” says Hunter, a natural leader himself.

He also picked up guitar during those years, and began focusing on songwriting more as his high school days were wrapping up.

His strong Christian beliefs extend to his writing as well.

“Faith is very important to me,” he says. “I’ve already decided that there are certain lyrical topics I’m not gonna write about. You can create a really well-written song that doesn’t revolve around drinking or sex.”

As a young music entrepreneur, Hunter understands and appreciates the immense value of radio. But he also knows that in order to survive financially today, artists need to generate a great deal of their income by touring. He’s been developing that skill by playing writers’ nights and solo performances in

Nashville night spots such as Puckett's Grocery Downtown, Belcourt Taps, the Tin Roof, and South.

He's the first to admit that it's taken him a while to become comfortable on stage.

"Initially, I wasn't a fan of playing live," he says. "I always thought I had an awkward stage presence. But the more I play out, the more I like it. I love doing writers' rounds. When I perform, I prefer a more intimate setting.

"When I'm on stage," he continues, "I try not to be the guy who talks a lot. That always bothers me.

"I want the song to talk for me," Hunter says.

He'll grow more confident on stage going forward, and that's the direction Hunter Leath and his music have been headed his whole life.

He's just beginning to scratch the surface of his music now. Fans and radio folks who get on the Hunter bandwagon early figure to have an amazing musical, spiritual, and emotional ride ahead of them over the next few years as Leath heads straight towards the top of the charts.

By that time, a whole *lot* of folks figure to be humming his songs.

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Revised July 25, 2014

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