

# MICHAEL RAY

When rising country singer Michael Ray made his first exploratory trip to Nashville, he got a life-changing piece of advice from an industry insider.

Go home.

“He said, ‘Don’t move. The way the music industry’s going to become, you’re not going to be able to get a record deal just doing a showcase anymore. You’ve got to bring something to the table,’” Ray said. “He said, ‘I want you to go back to Florida, grab a band and become the biggest you can be in Florida on your own, and then I want you to come back.’ So I put a band together of friends of mine and we started to play.”

Turns out it was the best thing Ray ever did. He built a rowdy fan base tilling the same fertile Southeastern soil Jason Aldean and Luke Bryan used to start their careers and returned to Nashville three years later to claim a record deal, a publishing contract and a few unexpected opportunities along the way.

Ray continued the journey from tiny Eustis, Florida, to the big time with the release of his first single “Kiss You In The Morning.” The debut single went #1 in just 24 weeks, an incredible achievement for anyone, let alone a straight out of the gate. Ray’s follow-up single, “Real Men Love Jesus,” is currently climbing the charts and touching hearts at the same time. The touching ballad shows a different side to the artist, showcasing his true country roots.

Scott Hendricks, Warner Music Nashville’s executive vice president of A&R and Ray’s producer, calls Ray “country with an edge.” “Michael, he’s got it all,” said Hendricks, who is known for his work with Blake Shelton, Brooks & Dunn and Alan Jackson. “He sings well. He’s a really seasoned entertainer. Girls find him not hard to look at. He’s got the drive, the motivation, the work ethic, the right attitude going into this thing. He’s been great to work with in the studio, just getting better and better every time we’re recording. He takes it seriously, and we do have really high hopes for him.”

Something else Ray has? Authenticity.

Raised in rural central Florida an hour from Orlando, but worlds away, Ray grew up hunting alligators and fishing for tarpon at the end of white sand dirt roads. The child of a family full of musicians, he began his professional career before he was a teenager, graduated to the bar scene as soon as he could drive and hasn’t let up on the pedal since.

“When I was 9 years old I wanted to learn how to play. I started playing guitar with my grandfather. Two, three nights a week we’d play community centers, Moose Lodges, assisted living homes, the VFW. I grew up with him on very, very old country music. I grew up playing Porter Wagoner, Bobby Bare, Earl Thomas Conley, Merle Haggard, Waylon- that was my first introduction to country music.”

Not long after, he went to his first big concert: Garth Brooks in Orlando.

“That was one of the big things that changed everything to me,” Ray said. “That was my visual of what I wanted to do.” The show was the start of a chain of musical events that would help

shape Ray's dynamic, muscular, thoroughly modern sound. "I started watching everything Garth did. And Gary Allan came out with 'It Would Be You.' I started listening to my generation's country. And then I started listening to my generation's punk. And my generation's rock 'n' roll, my generation's R&B, even a little bit of hip-hop. I could relate to all of this stuff."

Ray started writing his own songs, blending the ragged spirit of those early favorites and the bombastic new sounds of modern country around the turn of the century with pleasing bits and pieces from all over the musical map. What emerges is a thoroughly modern sound that's sonically adventurous, lyrically diverse and over the top on the voltage meter.

"He is all about energy, energy, energy, both in his music and how he presents it on stage," Hendricks said. "There aren't very many moments where you're going to have time to rest when you watch him, because there's a lot of energy he's putting out."

He developed the approach in a grassroots way, plying club owners and promoters with press packets that included music, fun facts and a headshot. His pitch: "Dude, I'll play for free." He'd stay glued to the riser four and five hours a night at the bar, armored with an acoustic guitar and a growing repertoire of original songs. He put together his first band after returning from that early trip to Nashville and got his first break playing the Boots N Buckles Saloon in Lakeland, Florida, opening for Jason Michael Carroll.

A DJ who didn't give her name approached him after the set and took a CD with her. The next day a friend called to announce he was on the radio. That DJ turned out to be Sara Michaels of WPCV-97 Country and she started playing his music every day at 5:15 during the rush hour, "Right between Kenny Chesney and Jason Aldean," Ray said with a smile.

The next time he came back to Lakeland, he sold out the club as a headliner. Not long after he graduated to some of the largest regional clubs, selling out Orlando's House of Blues, for instance, during presale multiple times a year.

He came to the conclusion he'd hit the mark he was aiming for: "There was nothing else I could do there on my own. I didn't know how to take that next step." It was time to move to Nashville. He shared a small apartment with his band. He slept on the floor. The bass player got the couch and the keyboard player had the closet all to himself.

Ray continued to spend about half his time on the road, traveling back and forth to the Deep South, and the work he was putting in began to pay off quickly. He soon met manager Tony Conway, a 40 year industry veteran and owner/CEO at Ontourage Management. Conway helped guide Ray to a publishing contract with Warner/Chappell Music and a record deal with Atlantic Records/Warner Music Nashville. Ray continues to grow his following, having recently toured with Chase Rice, Sam Hunt, Kip Moore, and early 2016 hitting the road with Brantley Gilbert.

"Now he's stretching the boundaries from state to state to state to stretch those fan bases," Hendricks said. "Some guys kind of stop when they get here. This guy is a road warrior. He's out there all the time, playing wherever they will allow him to play to build his fan base. We just need to get those fans some food, some new music to have."