

Josh Gracin

For country music fans, one of the highlights of the Fox network's "American Idol 2" was the success of a young Marine named Josh Gracin, a dyed-in-the-wool country singer whose electrifying performances won him hearts and votes across the country.

In the weeks leading up to his fourth-place overall finish, it's probable that there were more than a few people thinking about how nice it would be to welcome him to the country charts.

Country fans everywhere have gotten their wish. The young Michigan native with the great pipes and dynamic stage presence has recorded a debut album that will carry his brand of high-energy country to the nation's radio airwaves.

Josh signed with Lyric Street Records after a process that culminated in a life-changing audition. It took place in a Music Row office before just a handful of label executives, a scenario that has been known to terrify even experienced entertainers. Josh, though, is made of sterner stuff. "Surprisingly," he says, "I wasn't nervous at all."

His Marine training and toughness were no doubt one element, along with the lifetime he'd spent on stages big and small honing his singing and performing skills. Mostly, though, it was the fact that he'd just run a gauntlet that saw him outlast 70,000 aspirants in front of 20 million people on nationwide television. In fact, the very thing that gives most people butterflies – the importance of the occasion – had the opposite effect on him. "It came down to knowing that this could mean my career and the direction of my life," he says, "and that's what calmed me down a lot."

He was, after all, a man who had already faced-down one of our culture's most iconic figures, the dream-skewering American Idol judge Simon Cowell. Faced with his sometimes withering British disdain, Josh held his ground. "I knew he was just trying to razz me a little bit and get under my skin," says Josh with a knowing smile, "and it just made me look for ways to turn something negative into something positive."

Josh's success on the show speaks volumes about a young man whose talent and intensity are accompanied by an innate sense of over-the-top showmanship. His "AI2" performances were models of audience excitement, triggering an onslaught of fan letters and chat room adulation that made it clear a good portion of the country was smitten with him. The combination

made him a natural for attention from Music Row, especially given his affection for country music on a national show skewed toward the world of pop and hip-hop.

His debut CD captures the world-class voice and performing magic that made him such a star on American Idol 2. Songs like his debut single, "I Want To Live." The CD's energy draws directly from the fire Josh displays on stage, a place that has long felt like home for him. "When I'm up on stage," he says, "it's like a whole new world for me. I love performing. I'm a firm believer that it's really great for a singer to have a good voice, but to bring it to another level you have to draw the audience in and make them part of the music, make them feel what you're feeling."

Josh's translation from highly successful "AI2" contestant to recording star began when he sang Rascal Flatts' "I'm Moving On" on one episode. The guys in Rascal Flatts happened to be watching the show on their tour bus that night. Bass player Jay DeMarcus, impressed with Josh's talent, called and put him in touch with Marty Williams, who had co-produced both the band's breakthrough album and its highly successful follow-up. That set in motion a series of events that led to the record deal. For Josh, it was the culmination of a lifetime of singing, dreaming, and living.

"The record deal came about when Marty had me come to Nashville to sing for several labels," says Josh. "I was getting ready to go back to California when Lyric Street's Doug Howard (Sr. VP, A&R) called – it was literally hours before I was supposed to go to the airport and take off to go back – but Doug gave me the chance to audition. I got a call about a week later saying they were interested in signing me. I flew back to Nashville to meet with Lyric Street President Randy Goodman and Doug. It was just me singing and with a guitar player. It was a lot smaller crowd than I was used to singing for on the show and after I sang one song, they had me stop and pulled more people into the room. Afterwards, Randy said, 'Let's do a deal.'"

Born and raised in Westland, Michigan, about 30 minutes west of Detroit, he grew up listening to his parents' favorites – Elvis, the Beatles, and vintage rock and pop on a favorite local station. Then, when he was 11, the station changed formats. "They decided they were going to switch to country," Josh says, "and at first they literally played 'Friends in Low Places' over and over, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." Josh liked the song and, he says, "In the weeks and months after that, I really fell in love with country music. Listening to Garth Brooks, Joe Diffie, George Strait, and Randy Travis, I really started getting into it."

His first public appearance was at an 8th grade talent competition where he sang Brooks' 1993 hit "Standing Outside The Fire" and managed to win over an audience full of dance music-loving peers.

Growing up as the only boy among four sisters, Josh found his parents unwilling to sign a release for him to play sports. "I wish I could have played football," he says, "but I believe there's a reason for everything you do in life, even if you don't want to do it. I was in marching band and I applaud my parents now for making me stick with it, because it gave me a sense of loyalty and of stick-to-itiveness, of doing something to reach a goal." He describes his years with the band and his 11 years as a saxophone player as "very challenging mentally and physically, and I'm really glad I did that rather than play sports because – who knows? – if I hadn't, I might not be here today."

Josh also had experience singing everything from opera as a member of his school choir to Motown as the only male singer in a review called the Fairlane Youth Pop Orchestra. Through it all, his love of country persisted, and while he was still in school he was part of a talent competition that took him to the stage of the Grand Ole Opry, a memory he still treasures. "Just knowing I was on a stage where so many stars and country legends had performed made me glad for the experience," he says.

For all he accomplished, though, Josh came to the conclusion that he had some growing up to do. "I was never in trouble or anything," he says, "but I had a very hard time with responsibility, with doing what I said I would. I had just broken up with my girlfriend, and my music career wasn't going the way I wanted it to. I knew I had to do something. I had talked about going into the Marine Corps and finally I just walked into the office and signed up."

His stint in the Marine Corps – he is stationed at Camp Pendleton in southern California – changed him. "By the time I graduated boot camp," he says, "the experience had helped define who I wanted to be and who I was going to be for the rest of my life. It's really helped prepare me for the rest of my life mentally, physically and emotionally."

He reunited with his girlfriend Ann Marie and they were married soon afterward. "When I went in," he says, "I was having problems just holding down one job and an apartment and a girlfriend. In a couple of years I was able to have a wife and take care of a daughter (their daughter Briana), go to school full time, work my everyday Marine job and work a second job at a local department store. There's no way in a thousand years I was going to be able to do that before the Marine Corps."

About two years into his four-year term, Josh happened to see the first American Idol show. "I hadn't sung in a couple of years because I was in the Marines, and I thought it might be a good chance for me to get back out there and sing." His superiors approved, his first audition went well, and he was off and running.

Well after he became part of the show, the US invaded Iraq and the military's world changed. Although he had no control over his deployment or that of his unit, he did some soul searching nonetheless. "The toughest moment through all of this was when we were doing the show and I was staying up until four or five in the morning just watching the news and trying to keep track of how the Marines were doing over there. I felt guilty because I was singing on this show and there were fellow Marines over there in foxholes."

It was ultimately fan mail that convinced him he was doing just what he should be. "I got a letter from a mother who said, 'My son and a friend's daughter are in Iraq now, and it gives us great comfort watching you, seeing how you carry yourself on stage, how you act and how respectful you are toward other people. It reminds me what kind of people Marines are, and even though they're in harm's way, I feel like they're going to be alright.'"

For all the attention and all the fan mail he's received, Josh remains a down-to-earth young man. "I don't see myself as a celebrity at all," he says. "I'm very shy and not all that self-confident, and I feel like an ordinary person, a normal guy who's very approachable. And if I get a little carried away," he adds with a laugh, "I've got my wife to keep me humble and bring me back down to earth."

Meanwhile, he is savoring every moment, and the once-irresponsible youngster has turned a pop-culture TV contest into something much more substantial. "The night I was voted off, I pulled my daughter up on stage," he says. "That was not something that was scripted. It was just something I did. I had done a lot of growing in the past few years, and I wanted to show her that it's possible to go from where I had been to where I was then, and that someday she would be able to do the same if she'd try hard. And if she ever doubts that, I can just pop in the tape and say, 'there you are on stage with me.' I'm no longer just some kid with a dream. I'm a father and husband and this has turned into an accomplishment and an experience that's going to help me raise my daughter and show her what's possible."

Along the way, he'll be sharing the dream and the reality with country fans everywhere.

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