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TOP STORY

Lainey Wilson held tight to her country dreams on way to the top

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

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Lainey Wilson speaks Tuesday at her No. 1 party for "Things a Man Oughta Know." The song is up for Song of the Year at the March 7 ACM Awards. Wilson also has been nominated for New Female Artist of the Year.

Larry McCormack / Main Street Nashville

Lainey Wilson's journey to a nod for New Female Artist of the Year at the [2022 Academy of Country Music Awards](#) was driven first by unbroken horses, then guided along through a 40-year-old good deed repaid.

Baskin, Louisiana, population 264, is where Wilson says having too little to do conspired with her parents' dinner table stories to create her first story song at just 9 years old.

And as she tells it, it's also where her work ethic was shaped in wild fashion by her farmer father.

"My daddy put me on the back of a horse when I was 9 years old. ... I was on the back of a horse before I could even walk. ... He would bring these horses home from horse sales that were not broke. He'd say, 'Ride it. Get on it and ride it,' " Wilson said.

"I remember specifically this one time, where the horse was just bucking going crazy and I was crying. I was so young, and I was saying, 'I want down, I want down. Get me off of this thing.' And I just remember him saying, 'Hold on, hold on.' "

As she recounted the tale, she lifted her hat to reveal “Hold On” written under the brim.

“When I feel like I can’t do it anymore, when I feel like I’m about to get thrown, I just hold on,” Wilson said. “Because at the end of the day, country music for me is my life. It’s the only thing I know how to do.”

Before moving on, Wilson paused to make one minor clarification.

“I could go home and maybe help daddy on the farm a little bit, but we ain’t doing that,” Wilson said with a wry grin. “So this is it.”

A debt repaid

Wilson may have grown up worlds away from Nashville, but the city wasn’t without an emissary.

Jerry Cupit was a Baskin native-turned-Nashvillian who’d found some success in the ‘90s as a songwriter and producer.

“Every time he would come home to Baskin, he would stop by my house at 9 years old and listen to what I had been writing, tell me what to fix, tell me what to do different,” Wilson said. “I just always looked up to him. He was the only person I knew in Nashville, and I thought if anybody was gonna help me, it was gonna be him.”

That was a sentiment seconded by Cupit.

In the 1970s, Wilson’s grandfather had stepped up to loan Cupit \$300, a sum that helped get him started under the neon lights of country’s mecca.

When Wilson readied for her own pilgrimage to Nashville in 2011, in similarly modest fashion, she made plans to live in a camper trailer.

Before she left, her father gave her one more life lesson, having her weave the trailer in and out of some pine trees and back it up properly.

When Wilson pulled that trailer into Nashville, it was Cupit who made sure she had a place to park it.

“As a favor in return literally 40 years later, (Jerry) let me live in his studio parking lot for free in my camper, for three years, and literally didn’t ask for a dime,” Wilson said. “He wanted to help me, and I would write with him every single day. He’s the one that taught me how to write a song and helped me figure out the ropes of Nashville.”

The pair formed a tight bond.

“We probably wrote 300-plus songs together. We were extremely close. When you write 300 songs with somebody, you know everything about them,” Wilson said. “He was like my second daddy.”

Two and a half years into her stay in a “10-year town,” Cupit fell ill and, in the fall of 2014, he succumbed to his illness at the age of 60.

“It was one of those moments where I didn’t know what I was gonna do next,” Wilson said. “But he had told me, ‘You know, if something happens to me, you got to keep going. You can do this. You gotta keep going.’”

Wilson had not only lost a beloved mentor, but she was suddenly left without any connection to the industry.

“That was an extremely dark place in my life,” Wilson said. “After I’d spent three years here, I had to completely start over. ... I think a lot of people probably would have packed their (expletive) and went home, but I kept hearing his voice in my head.”

It would be a long time, but just as she’d bested the horse back in Baskin, Wilson rode out her woes. After seven years, she nabbed a publishing deal; after eight, a record deal.

“I knew that the Lord was really just preparing me to have a little bit more of a story to tell,” Wilson said.

Reminiscing, Wilson compared the music business to farming.

“You get up every single day, you do the same thing. You have good years, you have bad years. You might strike gold or a tornado could roll through and blow it all away,” Wilson said. “But at the end of the day, if it’s what you love, if it’s literally your livelihood, and really the only thing you know how to do, then you have no choice but just to get up and do it.”

“Things a Man Oughta Know”

Alongside songwriters Jason Nix and Jonathan Singleton, Wilson penned “Things a Man Oughta Know” based on an idea they’d bounced around about lessons Nashville men in particular could stand to learn.

“I said, ‘Y’all better go on and cancel your plans because we’re gonna be here all night because there’s a lot of stuff y’all need to know,’ “ Wilson said with a laugh.

The song drew on Wilson’s own personal experiences, too.

“I was in a relationship and it was not the healthiest. I think I was kind of foreshadowing something that was gonna take place. And damned if it didn’t because it was literally a few months later it was like the song came true. I said, ‘I’m gonna start writing happy fairy tales,’ “ Wilson said.

Despite its notions of what masculinity looks like, the trio emphasize the song they say has touched everyone from mothers and fathers to young men who’d made mistakes and older men who almost did is about something greater.

“The song is not about whether you can change a flat tire or start a fire. The song is about having good character,” Wilson said. “It’s about treating people right. And I think that’s something that all three of us stand for and believe in.”

Still, it was an unlikely moonshot for the male ethos of country radio, had Wilson not proved strong enough to carry it to the top.

“It’s about writing with an artist who’s got the balls to say something that a lot of people don’t think is necessarily OK to do,” Nix said of why it caught on.

But the message was almost lost, as the number hadn’t even been slated to make the cut of Wilson’s 2021 release “Sayin’ What I’m Thinkin’.”

That was until one afternoon when Wilson pulled over on Dickerson Pike, taken with a feeling she couldn't shake.

"I had this overwhelming feeling, I believe it was the Holy Spirit, and it just literally almost stopped me in my tracks," Wilson said. "It was literally like you have got to record 'Things a Man Oughta Know.'"

Assembled at a party celebrating the song's success, Nix and Singleton shot Wilson surprised looks, unaware the song had been in danger of not getting recorded.

"Y'all better be thanking Jesus for that one," Wilson said with a laugh.

It took 54 weeks for the song to hit No. 1.

"During my prayer time in the shower, I'd be like, in Jesus' name this song's gonna go No. 1. It's gonna go No. 1," Wilson said. "This song is who I am, to my core. It's my story. It's what I have to say. It builds a good foundation for who I am as an artist. And I just believed it. I manifested it."

On its way to the top and an ACM Song of the Year nod, it outpaced those on the typically male-dominated upper charts.

"I tell all the boy artists all the time, 'We coming for y'all, better watch out,' " Wilson said.

Things have taken off quickly for the singer since.

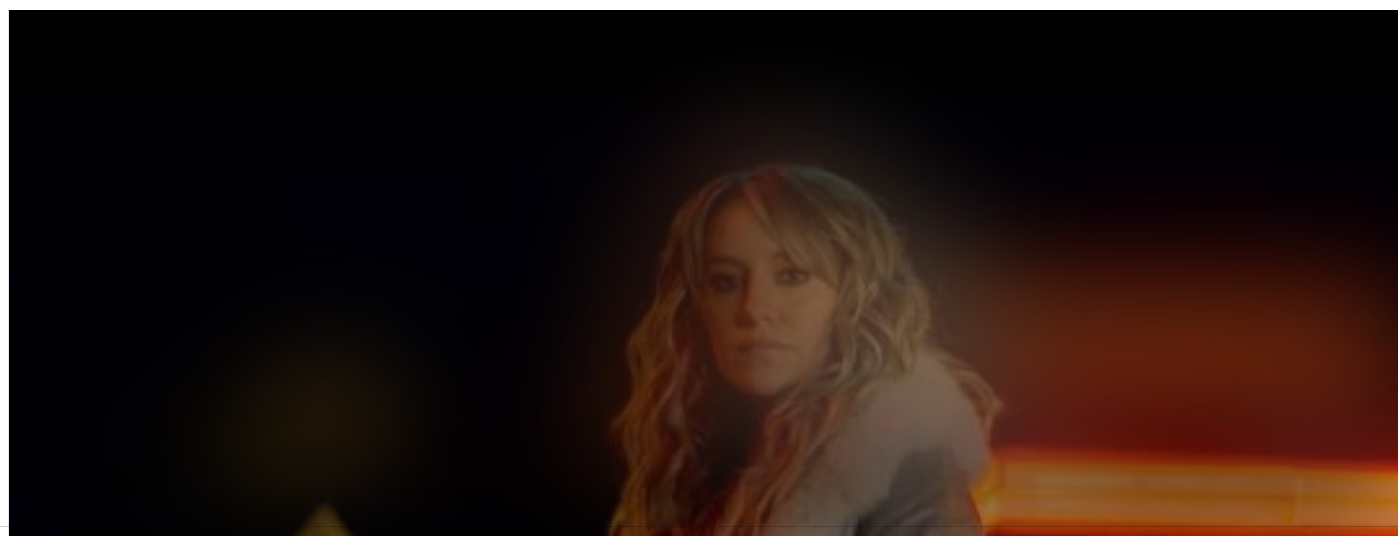
"I think I slept on my bed last year like 20 nights," Wilson said.

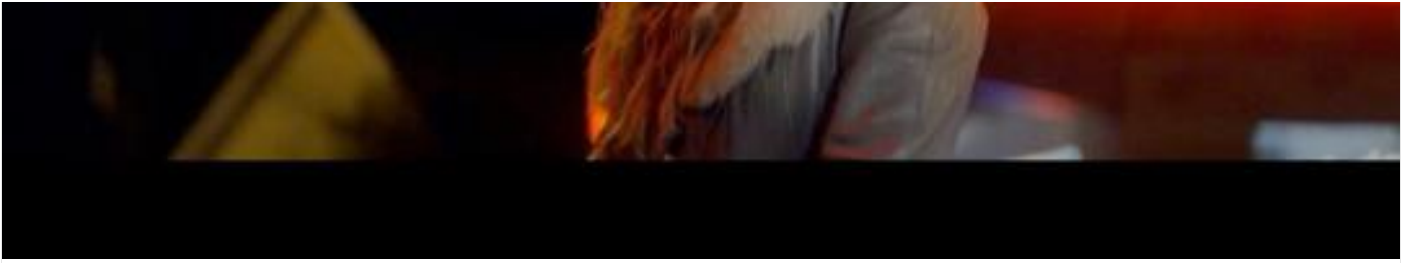
Come whatever may, she'll be heading back to the studio soon.

"I feel like (the new material) is a step up. It's in the same category as 'Things a Man Oughta Know.' It really is all stuff that's just that powerful," Wilson said.

And lest you think Wilson is satisfied with a No. 1, ask her what she's thinking about the future and she'll tell you.

"I'm the type of person where I'm like, 'OK, we did it. Let's do it again. Let's do it again, and again, and again,' " Wilson said. "It don't mean that I'm not grateful. I'm just bound and determined that this ain't gonna be my last."





Lainey Wilson - "Things A Man Oughta Know"

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