

PACKAGED WRIGHT

Michelle Wright's image consultants helped her get Nashville's attention. Now if they could only find her a hit...

By David Hayes, Saturday Night, June 1995

Gently downshifting her brand-new black Mercedes E420 sedan, Michelle Wright eases off I-65 South at the Franklin exit and drives past fast-food outlets and rolling fields while a country station plays on the radio. When you've made it in country music, you live in Franklin, a tidy suburb forty minutes from Nashville's Music Row where stars such as Dolly Parton and Wynonna Judd own mansions and estates. It's also where Wright, Canada's top female country singer, recently bought a five-bedroom home, although hers is one of many lookalikes in a newly built, middle-class subdivision. Still, both the car -- which recently replaced her clunky old Ford Escort -- and the house are material symbols of Wright's progress in the country-music major leagues, a far cry from the life of a struggling newcomer.

At her house, Wright disappears into her bedroom while her longtime manager, Brian Ferriman, and her image consultant, Joan Lacey, make themselves comfortable in the bright, high-ceilinged living room. The plan is to model several possible outfits for the upcoming Juno Awards, where Wright is both a presenter and a nominee. Considering how often she has been away on tour since the fall, it's not surprising Wright's house feels barely lived in, as though the interior designer arranged the furniture and hung the prints yesterday. A homey touch is provided by Wright's four cats, who pad matter-of-factly across the white broadloom.

A few minutes later, a transformed Wright emerges. Gone are the tomboyishly simple cotton T-shirt, faded jeans, and western boots, replaced by a silky, gold jacket-and-pantsuit and colour-coordinated pumps. "Okay, Bri," she says in her characteristically husky voice as she approximates a model's runway turn. "I wonder what this'll look like under the lights?"

"It has a lustre to it," remarks Ferriman.

"Yeah, iridescent," says Lacey. "I think it would look really good on TV."

A few minutes later, Wright shows Ferriman and Lacey a short, brown Vera Wang dress, then changes into a black Badgley Mischka suit with a beaded yoke. "This might be my favourite," she says, squaring her shoulders and adjusting the jacket. "Kinda Juno-ish, isn't it?"

Ferriman, who is tall and earnest, with long Jimmy Stewart features, nods thoughtfully. Although the mood is relaxed and the conversation casual, this afternoon's fashion show is serious business. Wright is directing her remarks towards two of the key people who have engineered her career thus far and, as with almost every decision made at this stage in her career, Ferriman and Lacey know they have to get it right.

Ferriman is a former musician from London, Ontario, who operates his own management company, Savannah Music Group, in Nashville. He signed Wright a decade ago, when she was a raw-throated singer in an Ontario bar band. Today she is his number-one client. Lacey, who perches on the edge of a wooden rocking chair, is wearing a finely combed grey wool turtleneck, black leggings, and black nail polish. Her black hair is worn in a stylish blunt cut with short, ragged bangs. It is a chic, bohemian look that owes more to New York, where Lacey has worked for many years, than Nashville. Her relationship with Wright began in 1990, shortly after the singer signed her U.S. contract with Arista Records.

At the time, Wright dressed as well as she could afford and had a big country hairdo that looked as if Dolly Parton had slept on it. Lacey, whose first suggestion was that she cut off her hair, saw that with some guidance Wright could comfortably inhabit a sleek, sporty, sexy-with-just-a-hint-of-androgyny image. It ran against the country-female stereotype but, where k.d. lang's iconoclastic approach to country had been too much for Nashville just a couple of years earlier, Lacey correctly gauged an emerging tolerance for a less provocative image of contemporary womanhood. More importantly, Wright was sufficiently open-minded -- and ambitious -- to embrace the idea. With Lacey's guidance, she began by wearing elegant bolero-style jackets and matching bustiers by Manuel, Nashville's premier designer of country stagewear, with her jeans. Later, after determinedly working on her figure with her choreographer-fitness consultant, she replaced the jeans and bustiers with cat-suits that fit her like a second skin.

At the same time, Arista sent Wright (as it does most of its newly signed acts) to "media school," where a consultant coaches artists on how to handle interviews and relax in front of TV cameras. Having committed to preparing herself for a serious career in show business, Wright even fulfilled a longtime wish by having a nose job, although judging by her album-cover photos the change is a subtle one.

Later in the afternoon, Ferriman and Lacey discuss strategy while Wright models a navy-blue, floor-length gown speckled with rhinestones. "It really becomes a matter of what message we want to send," Ferriman explains. "They've sold something like 6,000 seats to fans, who will mainly be drawn from the rock community. So, it's really a rock 'n' roll awards show. In Canada, Michelle is perceived as an artist whose image is fashionable enough to overcome the country stereotype. So, I'd rather be fashion-forward, but fashion-forward in a rock sense rather than a Nashville sense."

"I see," says Lacey. "Well, forget the brown one. Not flashy enough. And the gold outfit is going to get very wrinkled if you're sitting a lot. I think it's between this blue one and the black one."

Wright, who has changed into the gold outfit one last time, stands with her hands on her hips in the middle of the living room and glances curiously from Ferriman to Lacey.

"I don't think there's any question," says Lacey. "If you're thinking major star, big flashbulbs going off, it's the blue one."

"Okay, I've decided," says Wright. Turning to Ferriman, she asks: "Have you decided?" Ferriman nods. Satisfied that everyone agrees on the blue gown, Wright retreats to her bedroom.

Later, Lacey explains why her contribution is significant "A lot of people hire someone for one video or one show. To me that's not developing an image. You build an image over time. Michelle's look has changed according to what's going on in fashion and in country music. We changed from the Manuel jackets and bustiers to cat-suits because a lot of other female artists were copying us, cutting their hair and wearing jackets and bustiers. From cat-suits, we've gone to Manuel vests and leggings. But they've been gradual changes. Michelle's a product, you know. A soap company doesn't change its box every five minutes, because nobody would know what it is."

Beneath Wright's and Ferriman's cool professionalism, a hint of desperation lurks. They are profoundly aware of what's at stake. Firmly established as the queen of Canadian country, the thirty-three-year-old Wright has reached a critical juncture in the evolution of her U.S. career. Although her third album, *The Reasons Why*, was successfully released in Canada in September, 1994, it has been delayed for nearly a year by Arista, whose president, Tim DuBois, decided it lacked a sufficient number of likely hits. His concern is understandable. Successful careers depend upon maintaining a steady forward momentum, especially since the so-called "new country" movement exploded in the late eighties, transforming country music from a minor-league genre into a \$3-billion-a-year industry and the second-most-popular radio format in America.

Country music, like most of the entertainment industry, is fond of myth-making and prone to cliches. Wright for example, is presented as the great success story of Canadian country, a small-town (born in Chatham, raised in Merlin, Ontario) girl who made good at home and is now conquering Nashville.

The first half of the equation is true. In Canada, Wright's second major-label recording, *Now & Then*, released in May, 1992, has sold double platinum (200,000 units and counting) and produced several hit singles. Now a year old, *The Reasons Why* has just been certified platinum (100,000 units), and thus far generated two top-ten singles - "One Good Man" and "The Wall." In less than six years, Wright has won two dozen Canadian music awards, most recently her second consecutive Juno for country female vocalist of the year. Last winter, she took a glitzy, big-league stage show -- complete with a half-million-dollar sound and light setup and two opening acts -- across Canada to forty cities, one of the largest and most elaborate tours ever mounted by a Canadian country artist. At every show Wright made time for long line-ups of fans, greeting them like family, which, in a sense, they are since many have been attending her shows since the 1980s. In the

minds of booking agents and concert promoters as well as the public, the tour established Wright as a bona fide headliner able to fill large theatres and medium-sized arenas on the strength of her name.

But when it comes to Wright's conquest of American country music, the story is both more complex and more uncertain. Although we hear about Canadian artists making it in the sprawling U.S. market, nearly all of them play pop music. Wright has managed to infiltrate the tightly knit Nashville society that controls the game of country music. Six years ago, she was among the first artists signed to the newly-opened Nashville offices of Arista Records, a division of the giant German media conglomerate Bertelsmann Music Group. In 1992 she won top new female vocalist at the Academy of Country Music awards and she has toured with the likes of Alabama, Kenny Rogers, and the multimillion-selling Alan Jackson.

But outside Canada she has had only one top-ten hit -- a bluesy, mid-tempo song called "Take It Like a Man," from her second album, *Now & Then*. In a business that measures success by artists like Garth Brooks, who will have sold a staggering 50-million records by the end of 1995, Wright is still classified only as a "tier-three" artist with the potential to become a major star. Today, Wright and the music-business professionals surrounding her are searching for a strategy that will move her upward. No-one could argue that the odds are in her favour: the last Canadian country artist to become a tier-one star in Nashville was Anne Murray, more than two decades ago.

"It's an ultra-small community," says Larry LeBlanc, Canadian editor of *Billboard* magazine. LeBlanc has been in and out of Nashville for years, working both as a music journalist and for singer Ian Tyson and actor Don Harron, during his days with the TV show *Hee Haw*. "Everyone's pleasant, and you'll probably get invited over to somebody's house for a barbecue," LeBlanc explains. "But beneath the genteel, southern-style veneer it's the roughest music-industry town in the business. Worse than New York or LA. Absolutely cutthroat. Very rarely have I ever seen any Canadian artist come to a crossroads quite as dramatically as this. Michelle has to deliver the goods or, quite frankly, her career will suffer a major setback."



Nashville is a city where young men and women arrive like pilgrims with guitars in their hands and songs scribbled in dog-eared notepads. Besides country music, Nashville's other big manufacturing industry is Bibles, and both serve a calling founded on hopes and prayers. The truth is, only a fraction of the young hopefuls are ever going to go beyond playing other people's hits in faceless bars around America. Wright is more fortunate than many: her success in Canada bolsters her confidence and gives her a measure of financial security, something she didn't have the first time she came to Nashville in 1980.

"I knew nobody and nothing and stayed just three months," Wright tells me one afternoon as we drive towards her home in Franklin. It's a story that has been widely told in the Canadian media. After her first Nashville experience, she eked out a living in Ontario's

rough-and-tumble bar circuit, hooked up with Ferriman, and struggled for several years with alcohol before kicking it with the help of AA. In 1986, a Nashville songwriter heard her at an outdoor concert and drew her to the attention of Arista Records.

"I played every dive that would take a country band," she says. "But I have no regrets." Accelerating past poky traffic at a speed she couldn't have coaxed out of her old Escort, she adds: "The years of experience toughened me up. It was an incredible education in what not to do as well as what to do."

When Randy Travis's upbeat hit, "Before You Kill Us All," comes on the radio, the excitable Wright leans forward to crank the volume. Less than a car's length ahead, a slow-moving white van starts to pull into her lane, notices her bearing down hard, then thinks better of it. Wright veers a little and speeds past. "What the heck ya doin', fella?" she yells, laughing self-consciously.

I ask her about her difficulty getting radio airplay. "I really believe that when people see me they're entertained," she says with conviction. "In Canada, I have hits all the time, so why don't I have hits on the radio here? That's a frustration."

An artist's relationship with radio is complex and symbiotic, and nowhere is that more apparent than during the annual Country Radio Seminar week. A few days later, Wright arrives at Opryland U.S.A., a country-music theme park covering an area roughly equal to two Disneylands and located nine miles northeast of downtown Nashville. At its heart is the Opryland Hotel, a monument to tacky extravagance containing close to 2,000 rooms, umpteen restaurants, nightclubs and shops, and four acres of flowing water and tropical gardens. It is here that Wright -- along with dozens of other artists -- will court radio programmers and promotion types from every country station, big and small, in America. Yet despite their power and influence in the marketplace, radio people are not immune to the hero-worship upon which the North American entertainment world is based, so they assiduously court the artists back. It is as intricate and contrived as a square dance.

In a warren of small meeting rooms, every available space is crammed with artists and their entourages. Here the largest radio stations have cameras set up to record "liners"-- messages used to promote the stations and their various programmes. Dressed casually in an off-white knit sweater over a black leotard top and leggings, Wright, accompanied by Vanessa Adair, Arista's manager of publicity, and Dawn Costigan, who works for Brian Ferriman, threads her way through the crowd, stopping at various stations' booths long enough to greet the reps with charming good cheer and read a series of promotional pitches from cue cards.

"Hi, everybody, I'm Michelle Wright on WVKR. Join me for 'Country Spotlight,' Sunday nights at 10:30..."

"Hi, everybody, I'm Michelle Wright and you're watching 'Pik'n Paradise.' Stay tuned for more of your favourite country-music videos..."

"Hi, everybody, I'm Michelle Wright congratulating the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo on its hundredth birthday..."

At the booth for WFMS, a station in Indianapolis, Indiana, Wright reveals her northern roots by stumbling twice over the unfamiliar word "hoosier." Arista's Adair peers around the curtain and stage-whispers: "Think like you're saying, *who's-yer* mum."

"Okay," Wright says. "Hi, everybody, I'm Michelle Wright and you're watching *who's-yer* country from WFMS-FM..."

As she leaves one booth, a tall man says: "I gotta tell you, I've been doing this for eighteen years and you're one of my all-time favourites."

"Aww, honey, thank you," Wright says, flashing a radiant smile. "Thank you."

Later in the afternoon, inside the cavernous Tennessee Ballroom, Wright takes her place at one of Arista Records' booths. Here, hundreds of reps from smaller radio stations, armed with portable tape recorders and a list of promotional slogans, line up to get a couple of minutes' time from their choice of about twenty-five country artists. The brutal realities of celebrityhood are nakedly on display. The lineup behind Billy Ray Cyrus's booth is never less than about forty deep, with nearly twice that many at Garth Brooks's. I notice that newcomer Lisa Brokop, a Canadian, has no more than one or two reps at her booth at any time, and once I see her sitting alone. Wright's lineup varies between ten and fifteen.

Unlike many artists, Wright takes naturally to the public-relations aspect of her job. She draws on an invaluable character trait: the ability to be both self-promoting and politely self-effacing at the same time. Earlier, during her only break in a gruelling schedule, I watch as Wright's lunch is interrupted half a dozen times by fans -- including waitresses -- seeking autographs. Each time she smiles and patiently chats to them without a hint of condescension. It is only after she has been repeatedly asked by radio reps when she will finally be providing them with a new record that I detect overtones of frustration in her voice. "We're getting new stuff out to you real soon," she says over and over. "Thank you, thank you so much for asking."

With career momentum so important, it's unusual, though not unprecedented, to take nearly two years to release a new CD. When I ask Tim DuBois, Arista's hands-on president, about his overall strategy for Wright, he says: "I leave the complex career strategy up to the artists and their managers. In my mind I have only one job, and that is to find hit songs, because that solves almost every problem. All of the strategies, charts, graphs, next-action objectives, and all that don't mean much until you have the hits."

DuBois, a former musician and award-winning songwriter, is considered one of the sharpest executives in Nashville. In just six years, Arista's small roster of artists -- which includes Alan Jackson, Brooks & Dunn, Pam Tillis, and The Tractors -- has sold 40-

million units and produced more than fifty top-ten hits, making it one of the leading Nashville labels.

In the early summer of 1994, "One Good Man," the song DuBois had selected as the first single from *The Reasons Why*, was released in the U.S. but failed to take off. DuBois commissioned a market-research firm to test the album. "We had gone through two albums and not achieved the success we wanted to achieve," he explains, "so I began to question myself. All modesty aside, our track record's pretty good and I trust my guts and instincts, but I wanted some feedback from somebody besides me and my staff."

The research showed that although DuBois's instincts about "One Good Man" had been right -- no surveys exist to explain why "One Good Man" wasn't embraced by radio programmers -- the rest of the album contained too few potential hits and too many ballads for U.S. country radio. That led to the year-long delay as Wright, Ferriman, and DuBois listened to an estimated 400 songs, recorded a second CD's worth of material, and went through four producers. As it stands, DuBois is planning to release one or more singles this fall, waiting for one of them to become a hit before releasing the album, which may not be called *The Reasons Why* although it will contain several songs from the Canadian album of that name.

Mesmerizing hit songs fuel country music. At one time, country artists recorded a couple of albums a year, each one containing one or two hits. But as the industry has grown -- the number of Nashville-based record labels has tripled over the past six years -- the marketplace has become correspondingly more crowded and competitive. To do well today, an artist's material must fit into whatever narrowly defined sound radio-station researchers have determined their audience wants at a given time. (When Wright's "Take It Like a Man" hit the top ten three years ago, its slick country-pop was right in fashion. Today, the style has moved towards a more traditionally twangy country sound.) A CD is expected to sustain itself for a year to eighteen months, which requires no fewer than four or five top-ten songs.

For Wright, a relative newcomer, finding hits is especially important. When established stars, such as Travis, Brooks, Reba McEntire, Wynonna Judd, or Tanya Tucker, release a single, its success is virtually guaranteed. For that reason, every Nashville songwriter with an "A" song to peddle approaches them first. Often the best songs are optioned and held by stars for a future album. That leaves someone like Wright, who aspires to write her own material but is still developing that craft, hoping to luck into an overlooked hit or an "A" song by an unknown young songwriter who lacks connections to the stars. Luck plays an enormous role. During the making of her *Now & Then* album, Wright rejected a rather bleak song called "Walkaway Joe" that became a huge hit for Trisha Yearwood. On the other hand, Wynonna Judd had been hanging onto "Take It Like a Man" until finally deciding it wasn't right for her. When the song found its way back into the pool, Wright snapped it up.

"It's a real challenge because it's not necessarily about being different," says Wright, who admits that trying to second-guess the market drives her crazy. "That's where artists can

shoot themselves in the foot. When it comes to fitting a format, different isn't necessarily what radio programmers want. They want something that's going to keep their listeners tuned in."

When I ask Tim DuBois how serious it would be if Wright did not have any hits from this record, he is blunt. "After a while you reach a point where it's hard to get radio back on your side. I'm not going to minimize how important it is that this record is a success. It is incredibly important."

Brad Chambers, the programme director at KPIX-FM, one of four Dallas-Fort Worth stations in what is considered the top country market in America, confirms DuBois's analysis. Although Chambers is a Wright supporter, he admits, "There is a certain once-bitten, twice-shy mentality in radio. If an artist has a couple of stiffs -- it's not a very kind word, but that's the vernacular -- it makes it more difficult for them to come back."



Wright is fortunate to be able to put such concerns temporarily behind her when she returns to Canada, where she is treated like a true diva. Few country artists sell out shows in Toronto -- and even fewer Canadian country artists -- but Wright has managed to do so at Massey Hall, complete with scalpers working the sidewalks. While one of her two opening acts is performing, Wright, rather than resting up, is backstage at a "meet-and-greet," the obligatory hand-shaking and autograph-signing that occurs at every show.

On stage, Wright opens her show singing "Safe in the Arms of Love," a hit single in Canada. She is wearing black cowboy boots, leggings, and a black bolero jacket sprinkled with sequins and embroidered red roses across the back. An energetic performer, she prances around the stage, occasionally hamming it up rock`n`roll style with one of her six-member band. Often, especially at the beginnings and endings of songs, she strikes a dramatic pose, raising her arm gracefully then flicking her wrist to cut off the last note.

Although her audiences respond enthusiastically each time she freezes in a modified arabesque or tosses sultry glances over her shoulder, it feels consciously choreographed rather than spontaneous. Last September, when she performed on the nationally televised Canadian Country Music Awards in Calgary, she ended her number by awkwardly folding herself onto a riser in a clam-on-the-half-shell pose reminiscent of Las Vegas supper-club shows. Wright methodically prepares her stage movements with the help of her choreographer-fitness instructor, but so do many performers. She simply hasn't learned how to make the rehearsed segments of her performance seem effortless, the way she has with her singing.

Throughout the show, Wright's voice soars to a spine-tingling crescendo on one song, then swoops to an earthy growl on the next. At times, especially on ballads, the warm tones and direct conversational delivery bring to mind Anne Murray, but her voice is nonetheless distinctive -- there's no mistaking it's Wright when one of her songs comes on the radio.

At the post-concert backstage reception, Ferriman watches as a poised Wright poses for pictures with an assortment of sponsors and record-company officials. "Years ago," he says, "I had a feeling there was a business opportunity in an artist who was the antithesis of the blonde, big-haired, buxom country singer standing like a statue at the microphone singing 'women-as-victim' songs."

Ferriman was right. Country changed enough to accommodate female artists as diverse as Mary-Chapin Carpenter, whose literate brand of storytelling appeals to pop, rock, and country fans; Trisha Yearwood, the Generation X sweetheart reminiscent of the young Linda Ronstadt; and Pam Tillis, a gritty honky-tonk singer with Tex-Mex influences. But country hasn't grown big enough to split into self-sufficient niche markets the way pop music has. It's still a narrow genre so beholden to radio that it tends to encourage conformity rather than diversity.

"I'm not really a rebellious person," Wright told me during an introspective moment one evening in Nashville. "I just want to make records. What are they doing on the radio? Okay, that's cool, gimme something that sounds like that and I'll make the song my own, make it a great country song that they'll play. We're trying to give radio songs that are undeniably hits."

That approach has been known to succeed, but it can backfire. Few become stars, or remain so for very long, with such a cookie-cutter approach to their work, yet Wright isn't the only artist desperate to capture the elusive "new country" market, where radio programmers track subtle shifts in their audience's attention spans, making tomorrow's hits hard to predict. The challenge facing the brain trust surrounding a mid-level artist like Wright is figuring out how to position her comfortably so that her music and image intersect with the marketplace. But it's up to Wright to decide what she wants artistically. One of her strengths -- that she's so accommodating, so open and willing to take direction -- may also be holding her back.

The finale of her Massey Hall show is a rousing version of "One Time Around," a song from *Now & Then*, the three-year-old album that was the turning point in her U.S. career. "You get one time around/One roll of the dice/One walk through the garden/One quick look at life/The time that you lose/Can never be found/The world keeps turning/You get one time around."

Between the lines, which she sings with such conviction, is an inescapable irony. The young girl with the bad country hairdo and the nascent drinking problem got a second chance at Nashville. She has no intention of leaving this time, and she'll wear whatever dress it takes to stay.