

Milestone IN THE MAKING

Award-winning artist **Michelle Wright** celebrates her incredible career and the 30-year anniversary of hit single, "Take It Like A Man," with a new album.

BY KAYCIE WILL

It's not every day someone spends over 40 years in the same line of work. For country music artist Michelle Wright, there was never another option—she was born to sing.

The Farmer's Daughter

"I grew up in a small town called Merlin, Ontario, population 500," Wright shares. "My parents were grain farmers in Canada, just 45 minutes across the Detroit border into Ontario."

The Canadian grew up in a musical family, which gave her the opportunity to step on stage at a young age.

"My parents were also country music singers," the self-proclaimed farmer's daughter reveals. "I grew up watching them get dressed up to go play on a Saturday night at the Legion or the Moose Lodge. Mom and dad would bring me up on stage when I was a kid just to sing a few songs with them."

Wright's first foray as a musician began to help her family round out the band during practice sessions in their garage.

"My mother played bass and my brother played guitar," Wright shares. "Somebody needed to play the drums. So, at 12 years old, I sat down behind those drums."

Just a year later, she progressed to guitar.

"When I was 13, I picked up the guitar and started playing," Wright recalls. "By the time I was 17, I joined a couple of different bands that I would play with on weekends."

On one such occasion, Wright caught the eye of an American booking agent visiting the lakes of Ontario from Detroit.

"He heard me singing and said, 'I could sure use a singer like you in one of my bands,'" she remembers. "I was going to college at the time, so I asked him to let me finish my first year of college."

As promised, after wrapping up the semester, she auditioned for a band called Wild Oats, and accepted the agent's invitation to join. And the rest, as they say, is history.

"That's how it started for me," Wright shares. "I played the clubs six nights a week for nine years before I got my first record deal."

"We played constantly all across north America," she continues. "That scene was

This year, Michelle Wright released Milestone, an album that celebrates her lasting career and the 30-year anniversary of her song, "Take It Like A Man."

PHOTO BY GINA R. BINKLEY



Wright performed at the 2022 CMA Fest in Nashville, Tennessee, promoting her new album, Milestone.



really, really valuable to an artist like me. I know that scene doesn't exist so much today. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to be out there on the road like that and develop my chops."

Nashville Bound

She'd made it to the city, but Wright knew she had a long road ahead.

"As a Canadian girl from Ontario, the odds of getting a record deal in Nashville were slim to none," she recalls.

Wright's big break came unexpectedly, when her agent asked her to take an open timeslot for a group who canceled last minute. She and her band played an hour-long, midday set, and Wright closed the show with her cover of a song originally released by the all-male rock band, Exile.

"When I was playing the clubs, I would sing a lot of male artists' songs to try to differentiate myself a little bit from the girl coming in next," Wright explains. "I have a deeper voice, so singing some of those male songs were right in my wheelhouse."

As fate would have it, Rick Giles, an up-and-coming producer/songwriter was visiting Ontario from Nashville to see another

act at the same club. Giles walked in backstage right as she was finishing her set.

"He heard me singing, but he didn't see me," Wright recalls. "He said, 'that man has an interesting voice.' Then he came around to the front of the stage and saw this little 120-pound girl standing up there singing."

Giles immediately knew he'd found country music gold.

"If he'd have been three minutes later, I have no idea what would've happened in my career," Wright shares. "But I took that gig, and he showed up on my last song."

From there, Wright's unprecedented success blossomed as one of the few Canadian artists making an impact in the U.S. at that time. In 1988, Giles partnered with Steve Bogard to produce Wright's *Do Right By Me* album under Canada's Savannah Records. That album garnered significant attention in Canada, with seven charting singles.

Shortly after, Wright signed with Arista Nashville, a new label whose early acquisitions also included artists like Alan Jackson and Leroy Parnell. Wright's debut U.S. album, a self-titled record produced by Arista, opened doors in Nashville, but it was her sophomore album—and one special song—that catapulted her into fame.

Take It Like A Man

While her iconic, distinctive voice began to draw attention of major players in Nashville and across the U.S., Wright returned to the studio with rekindled passion. What she didn't know was that her 1992 album *Now and Then* would take her career to the next level, thanks to the success of the track "Take It Like A Man."

"I will never forget the first time I realized that 'Take It Like A Man' was a hit," Wright recalls. "The band and I were at a club in Texas one night. I played 'Take It Like A Man,' and the crowd sang along and applauded. The band and I got on the bus after that show and said, 'that's what it feels like when you have a hit record.' We could feel the energy around that song."

As the song gained popularity, Wright and her band stayed on the road promoting the album.

"It was a bit of a fight to get it up the charts, because it was a little different sounding," Wright remembers. "But we knew it was happening. I could feel it as an artist, and because of the response I started getting from fans."

The song topped out at number eight on U.S. charts, making Wright the first Canadian-born modern country music artist to reach top ten on the charts in America. Meanwhile, in Canada, "Take It Like A Man" climbed to number one, further securing Wright's success. In 1993, Wright was named the Academy of Country Music's Top New Female Vocalist.

"It was so fun," Wright says. "I cherish it. Here we are all these years later, and I've been able to travel the world and have the most incredible experiences in my life. I'm certainly having an opportunity to reflect even more fondly now."

"IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE AN ARTIST, YOU'RE GOING TO EXPRESS YOURSELF THROUGH WHAT MUSIC MEANS TO YOU."



Growing up in a musical family, Wright started playing guitar at age 13 and joined a band just a few years later

Seeing the World

During her 41 years on the road, Wright and her band made enough memories to last a lifetime—but they’re not done yet!

“I’ve been on the road all these years, all the time,” she shares. “That’s what I do, playing everything from 25,000 audience festivals to 500 seat theaters to even a club. If it pays the bills, and I get the boys in the band paid enough to get us to the next gig, we do it.”

Over the years, the band’s touring style improved significantly from their lowly beginnings.

“Once we got the tour bus, it turned into a little home,” Wright reveals. “I even had two little cats, Marge and Homer, that we named after the Simpsons. When I found them, they had little runny eyes, and I brought them on the bus. I told the guys it was just until their eyes got better, but of course, years later, they were out there.”

Eventually, Marge and Homer won the hearts of the entire band as they became part of the family out on the road.

“I had little cat doors in between the two doors that separate the bunk area from the back area,” Wright laughs. “The band loved them, and my driver loved them, because, at nighttime, one of the kitties would lay on the dash.”

Even after the success of “Take It Like A Man,” Wright never slowed down, staying on the road with her band. She’s found purpose in performing, both for herself but also for the fans.

“There’s a lot that goes on to get to a stage some nights,” Wright admits. “But when you’re on that stage, everything in the world just goes away. However tired you are, whatever it took you to get there, whatever challenges you may be having in your life, it all goes away when you’re on that stage. You’re with people who are going through their

own stuff. But for this moment in time, we’re really enjoying something together.”

Now, after over 40 years of consistent touring, Wright has no plans to change her lifestyle anytime soon.

“Traveling and making music is what I continue to do,” she says. “People keep showing up, so I’ll keep showing up.”

An Anniversary Album

This year, Wright has even more songs to share with her loyal audience. Her newest album, *Milestone*, celebrates not only Wright’s lasting impact on country music, but also the 30-year anniversary of “Take It Like A Man.”

“That name just came,” Wright says of the title. “My manager and I were talking about it, and I said, ‘it’s a real milestone, isn’t it, to be here 30 years later and celebrating [Take It Like A Man].’ We realized that was the title of the record, and we rolled with it.”

For Wright, this album is the culmination of a lifetime of music and experiences, told through 10 impactful songs.

“*Milestone* celebrates the joy of being out on the road and doing all those things I really love,” Wright reflects. “I’ve written about some of the journeys I’ve been on over the years. I wrote four songs on the record, and the others are by songwriter friends of mine.

“Some of the songs on this record are songs I’ve held onto for more than 20 years,” she continues. “It’s a record I’m really proud of that combines my country rhythm and blues roots. It’s soulful, R&B country.”

While Wright’s music has always embodied the blend of traditional country and Detroit-based Motown, this album holds even more meaning for the artist.

“I feel like it’s the best record I’ve ever made because I do feel, as an artist, I’m at peace with all of it—with who I am, the age I am, and where I am in the music business—

and that’s a beautiful place to be,” Wright reveals. “This record was made from that really peaceful place. I think it shows when you listen.”

Small Town Tells Her Story

Making *Milestone* gave Wright an opportunity to reminisce on her roots and the incredible journey of her career.

“One of the people that I was writing with, Danielle Boujeaurd, started asking me questions about myself,” Wright says. “I started telling her about singing at the World Series, kissing the Stanley Cup, and traveling around the world. She said, ‘that’s what we need to write.’”

Despite Wright’s initial hesitation to tell her own story with music, she fell in love with the song born from Boujeaurd’s question. The result, called “Small Town,” was the first single released from the *Milestone* album.

“This song really is my journey in a three-minute snippet,” she notes. “I love singing it, and I’m so very excited to have that out there.”

Still Country

With a new album on the charts, the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame inductee holds a fondness for the classics, but she’s equally thrilled to see more artists putting their own spin on modern country music.

“It is wonderful to see how country music is not just one thing anymore,” Wright shares. “When it was, that’s what it needed to be. We had a certain sound. As the decades have come, we’ve expanded.”

As she considers her own upbringing, Wright expresses thanks for the diversity of music that influenced her personal style.

“I was raised on the greats—Tammy Wynette, George Jones, Anne Murray, Loretta Lynn, Conway Twitty, and on and on,” Wright reveals. “I love, love, love that music, but I was raised just across the border from Detroit, so the sounds of Motown were a huge influence on me. There was rock and roll coming across the radio, too. I am perhaps one of the first artists that brought all of those influences to country music.”



A career’s worth of chart-topping songs and timeless hits allowed Wright to inspire other artists to expand their music beyond one type of country.

“Now, at a push of a button, this generation can hear every kind of music,” Wright says. “They grew up in the nineties listening to those of us who were pushing the envelope. I brought a lot of influences and then subsequently influenced other artists that were all influencing each other.”

Unlike some country traditionalists who mourn recent changes in country music, Wright appreciates the artistic spin many modern musicians have brought to the genre.

“I don’t get too tangled up in all the talk that country music, isn’t country music anymore,” Wright explains. “For it to stay the way it is, then we wouldn’t have the freedom to express ourselves. You can’t do that to art. If you’re going to be an artist, you’re going to express yourself through what music means to you.”

And that’s exactly what Wright continues to do. She’s still making music that impacts her—and her audience feels the impact, too.

“I’m so happy to see that country music is still alive and well,” Wright concludes. “The fans are making that happen. Maybe it’s not perfect for some people, but I believe we’re a healthy format.”

Wright looks back fondly on the success of “Take It Like A Man,” and still enjoys playing the song during her shows.

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