

In step with Brad Paisley

by Eirik_Knutzen

Flying from Nashville to Las Vegas for the live telecast of the "43rd Annual Academy of Country Music Awards" at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on May 18 will be a no-brainer for Brad Paisley, a hardened roadrunner who spends more than 200 days a year on a customized, 45-foot Prevost bus with every amenity.

BRAD PAISLEY - Country music singer Brad Paisley is a hardened roadrunner who spends more than 200 days a year on the road. CNS Photo courtesy of Doug Clark. Skipping the event - in order to spend as much time as humanly possible with his wife, actress Kimberly Williams and their handsome son, 1 1/2-year-old William Huckleberry - would be considered bad form in the tightknit country music industry. ACM's Top Male Vocalist and Album of the Year ("Time Well Wasted") winner last year is nominated in four categories in 2008: Entertainer of the Year, Top Male Vocalist of the Year, Album of the Year ("5th Gear") and Video of the Year ("Online").

A quick turnaround in the sky will also allow Paisley enough time to mingle with his friends, enemies and fellow nominees, including Kenny Chesney, Rodney Atkins, Taylor Swift, Carrie Underwood, Trace Adkins and Reba McEntire returning to host the show for the record-breaking 10th time. But as soon as Montgomery Gentry and Brooks & Dunn stow their gear for the night, the intense man from Tennessee will be back on a jet heading for home.

"Personally, I like winning awards - they're extremely valuable over the course of one's career," explained the 35-year-old country singer-songwriter. "They can do so many different things for a performer. If you're going through a lull in your career, winning a major award means you're back and doing well. If you are already doing well and a rising star, a big award can raise awareness of your work, selling more records and raising your fees.

"But I'm in midcareer now with lots of ACM and CMA awards to go with my 2008 Grammy Award

("Throttleneck," Best Country Instrumental Performance)," he continued, "but I don't like reminders of the past all that much. Nor do I have time to dust or polish the statuettes, so my parents take care and display most of them at their house. Somehow they keep track of it all."

After a week or so decompressing at his home in Franklin - a historic community of some 55,000 including neighbors Miley Cyrus, Adkins, Sheryl Crow and Ashley Judd - Paisley will orchestrate an industrial-strength rehearsal with his seven band members before hitting the road with The Paisley Party, his six-month national tour exploding out of the chute in Albuquerque, N.M., on June 11.

"True, it can separate you for a little too long from family and friends, but I really love it on the road," he said, chuckling at the memory of overcrowded vans and barely converted school busses. "To me, it's a lot more comfortable setting than many other settings and life on the road is different now than it used to be back in the '60s. My bus, Air Force One - because I'm the commander-in-chief - is fully stocked with food and drink, a full kitchen, a full-sized bed and a state-of-the art sound system to go along with satellite television."

Two band members - who happen to be Paisley's close friends - ride with him and the driver on Air Force One; the remaining five band members and chauffeurs make do in regal splendor on a nearly identical bus.

Roadies and techies somehow become part of the one large caravan.

"I regard Air Force One as my traveling home, a sacred space where I live," said Paisley. "After a show, I want to be able to go home and close the door. Not long ago, a truck mechanic fixing one of our vehicles hung around to party. Drunk as a skunk, he walked into my bus, sat down and demanded that I sing him a song. I

refused and he wouldn't leave, so my drummer finally grabbed him by the shirt and through him out the door. Like I said, this is sacred space."

An only child born and raised in Glen Dale, W.V., Paisley's father works for the state's Department of Highways and his mother is a no-nonsense fourth-grade teacher. Several musical family members lived in the area, but it was his maternal grandfather - Warren Jarvis - who became his most influential mentor.

"Never was a professional, he just loved sitting in his easy chair and playing the guitar before working the evening shift for the railroad," said Paisley.

"I learned as much from him as anybody. At 8, he gave me my first guitar; at 13, I opened for George Jones and Ricky Skaggs at the Capital Music Hall in Wheeling. A music scholarship to Nashville's Belmont University finally came my way."

After earning his bachelor's degree in 1995, he was convinced that fame "was only three minutes away." Fame and fortune finally arrived with his first big hit, "He Didn't Have to Be," in 2000.

"Everything changed right then and there," Paisley recalled. "People around me changed, and so did I. I had some major flaws and inadequacies back then, which I believe have been smoothed over. I hope so."

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