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COUNTRY MUSIC

They write the songs that sing
Foster and Camp are hitmakers for host of top artists

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Nashville isn't just a land of household names such as Faith Hill and Kenny Chesney. Behind some of country's big hits are indie singer-songwriters who provide the material that other artists take to the top of the charts.

Chief among them are Radney Foster and Shawn Camp. As performers, both men spent earlier stints on major record labels but now record for independent labels. Both are releasing new CDs of their own. And although their solo careers are now relatively small, their songwriting careers are not. Foster and Camp are among Nashville's most respected songwriters, and both have had their songs covered by a number of country stars.

Although Foster hasn't recorded for a major record label since the 1990s, his songs haven't left the charts. Country singer Sara Evans recently took Foster's "A Real Fine Place to Start" to No. 1 on Billboard's country singles chart. Rising country superstar Keith Urban recorded Foster's "Raining on Sunday."

The Dixie Chicks made hay with Foster's tearjerker composition "Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)." And fans of Kenny Chesney's current hit album should check out the songwriter credits for the soaring heartbreak anthem "Somebody Take Me Home." Yes, that song is a Radney Foster co-write.

Foster also maintains his own critically acclaimed indie solo career, and his new CD, "This World We Live In" (Dualtone), hits store shelves on April 4. Recorded with a backing band that included members of Keith Richards' X-pensive Winos, Foster's new release is an alternately gritty and tender showcase of the singer-songwriter's talent.

More freedom

"I'm an independent artist now, and I have a lot more freedom now," says Foster, calling from his home in Nashville. Although Foster now records for a smaller audience, he's no stranger to mainstream success as a performer. After his late-1980s tenure as one-half of the country-pop duo Foster & Lloyd, Foster went on to record two solo albums for the major label Arista Nashville and one for Arista Austin.

Back then Foster found himself all over country radio with such hits as "Nobody Wins" and "Just Call Me Lonesome." When his major-label career came to an end, Foster went the indie route, a decision he has never regretted. He now gets to make smaller records the way he wants to make them, and his CDs have the added bonus of showcasing his original songs to the Nashville music industry.

"The best thing that ever happened for me as far as getting songs cut has been the fact that I went and made independent albums," he says. "And while they do make me a portion of my living, it pales by comparison to getting a song cut by somebody who sells 3 or 4 million copies. I'd have to play a lot of honky-tonks to make that kind of money."

Artists have covered songs from both his major label and indie recordings. Foster originally wrote "Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)" after an early marriage ended in divorce. His ex-wife moved to France, taking the former couple's then 5-year-old son with her.

Devastated by the long-distance separation from his child, Foster wrote "Godspeed" as a private lullaby for his son to listen to at bedtime. When Foster's manager later heard the song, he was so moved by the sentiment he insisted that Foster record it for release.

"Godspeed" turned up on Foster's 1999 CD "See What You Want to See," and the singer-songwriter figured that was the end of that. He was wrong. Enter the Dixie Chicks, who covered "Godspeed" on their multiplatinum-selling 2002 CD "Home."

"I never thought that somebody called the Dixie Chicks would do it and sell 6 or 8 million records of the darn thing, and that I would get e-mails and cards and letters from people around the world who were moved by that song," says Foster. "Guys would come up to me after a show and say that when [they had been in the military] in Iraq, they sang that song to their kids every time they got on the phone. It obviously touched a nerve in people, and that was beyond any kind of impact that I ever even dreamed of having."

Like Foster, singer-songwriter Shawn Camp has seen his songs taken to the top of the charts by a number of artists, including Brooks & Dunn and Garth Brooks. Country singer Josh Turner's new CD, which recently debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard country albums chart, features four songs co-written by Camp.

Fiddler, guitarist

A talented fiddler and guitarist who started in the bluegrass ranks, Camp first moved to Nashville in 1987. He picked up work as a sideman for a number of acts, including Jerry Reed, Alan Jackson and Trisha Yearwood. Soon after, Camp began writing in earnest. Hungry to learn the craft, he set up co-writing sessions with a number of other songwriters and worked relentlessly at building a catalog of songs. After landing a solo-artist deal with Reprise, he released his major-label debut in 1993 but soon parted ways with the label over creative differences.

Though his own stint on a major label yielded no hits, it did raise Camp's profile as both a player and a songwriter. Camp's new solo CD, "Fireball," is on his own label, Skeeterbit Records. He says that recording his own songs as an indie artist while writing songs for mainstream artists has given his career balance.

"I couldn't hardly do one without the other, in a way," Camp says during a recent phone interview from Nashville. "I've always tried to keep as many irons in the fire as I could, whether it's been fiddle-playing or songwriting or whatever. When I was starting out in Nashville, I would do anything to better myself and be a professional. I feel fortunate that people are taking a liking to some of these songs, because that's paved the way for the whole deal, really."

Foster and Camp aren't alone as indie artists who are also commercially successful Nashville songwriters. Although some major label country artists write or co-write their own material, many rely on songwriters to provide their material. And Nashville is a town that teems with songwriters. Some write strictly in the hope that major-label artists will record their songs, and have no dreams of stardom for themselves. But Nashville also has a tradition of singer-songwriters who have pursued their own singular careers while their songs have been covered by other artists.

"At the same time that Harlan Howard and Hank Cochran were leading this movement towards just being songwriters providing songs, like a Tin Pan Nashville type of thing, you had Willie Nelson, Bill Anderson and Roger Miller, who were performing songwriters, and getting cuts, and also had their own careers," says Michael McCall, a former editor of Country Music Magazine.

Progressive writers

McCall also points to the rise in the late '60s and early '70s of a group of singer-songwriters who brought a progressive and often literary edge to Music City songwriting, most prominent among them Tom T. Hall, Mickey Newbury and Kris Kristofferson. The work of those singer-songwriters inspired subsequent generations of singer-songwriters, including Steve Earle and Rodney Crowell.

Chet Flippo, editorial director of CMT and CMT.com, says there's a reason these former major-label singer-songwriters can maintain smaller but healthy solo careers, all while giving their own songs greater visibility. "It proves that really good songs are always at a premium in country music."

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