

Behind the Scenes Of the CMA

What's it take to become a country music star? To find out, we talked to the famous and the soon-to-be famous at the Country Music Association Awards.

The CMA Awards are down-home and glitter, smooth velvet and rough bur-lap, hot licks and cool notes, all blended together like creamy butter on crusty toast. For one special night each year, the career-making, album-selling televised show proves the most tasty event in country music. Working hard behind the scenes of this bread-and-butter extravaganza is the Country Music Association.

This year, on September 22, worldwide audiences will again watch as the grizzled, the barely weaned, and artists at career points in between, perform at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. Dozens of performances highlight the presentation of 12 coveted awards, ranging from the emerging artist Horizon Award to the Entertainer of the Year. The CMA's nearly 7,000 members nominate and vote on winners.

Since the association formed in 1958, the volunteer board of directors and members have toiled to expand audiences in America and around the world. It's nudged the advertising community to recognize country music as the perfect fit for products. The organization has fought legislative industry battles and founded the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville. But CMA's household recognition stems mainly from the awards program first televised in 1968.



Executive director Ed Benson heads the Country Music Association (CMA), often called "the world's most active trade organization."



"There's more music on this show than ever before," says CMA executive director Ed Benson at rehearsals. "The music is what makes the CMA Awards worth it."

An assistant stops by to let the CMA executive know Johnny Cash won't be able to make it to the program because of a family illness. As Ed walks away to shuffle the schedule, someone playfully asks what would happen if Vince Gill's voice gave

"I've come a long way since the first [CMA Awards Program] I did," says country star LeAnn Rimes. "Nobody really knew who I was. Now, it's kind of like everybody is starting to know."



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Shania Twain, George Strait, Barbara Mandrell, and Trisha Yearwood have all made appearances at the CMA Awards.

out today. "Oh, God, don't even say that," he moans. Superstar Vince has emceed the event for years, winning accolades and ratings.

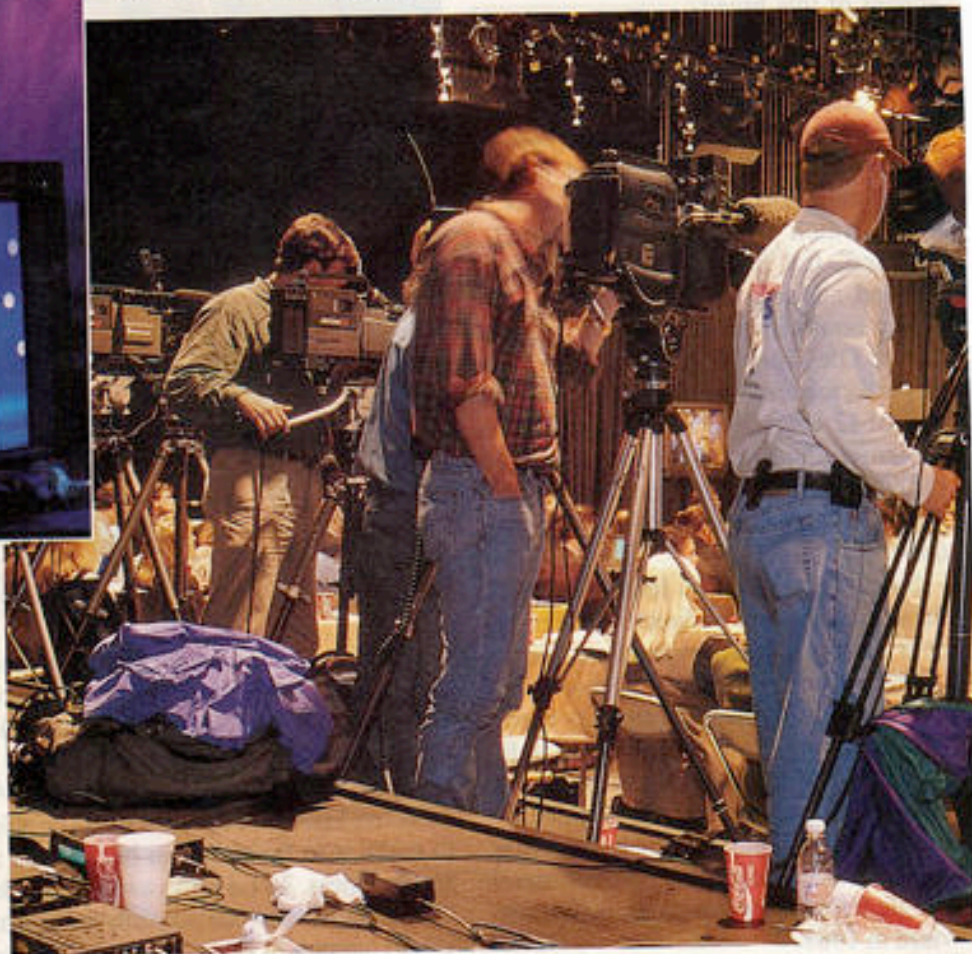
Inside the Opry auditorium, swooping boom mikes, crane cameras, and bright lights focus on famous personages. Dressed today in sweats and jeans, the elite of country music rehearse for tomorrow night's televised performance. An announcer's voice booms out into the darkened theater: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, Lee Ann Womack!" Instead of the diminutive female singer, a

hulking unknown man walks out. The burly stand-in takes his bows, hamming it up, as the crowd roars.

Steve Pippan, a Nashville actor and songwriter, is another rehearsal stand-in. "We have to be prepared to sing, use a Tele-Promp-Ter, and ad-lib acceptance speeches, which I did this morning," he says. Teen sensation LeAnn Rimes and her mother were present. "So I said, 'I want to thank my mother, Mrs. Rimes, and the warden at the Middle Tennessee Correctional Facility for Wayward Boys. You know, you *have* to thank God, mama, and the warden.'"



"It was wonderful [to have the] members of the association pat me on the back, saying, 'You did a good job, so here you go,'" says traditional country crooner Lee Ann Womack as she rehearses a CMA awards performance. Normally reserved, Lee Ann admits she ran around and yelled when she learned she'd received a Horizon Award nomination.



All jokes aside, today's country music has little to do with past stereotypes. "We inherited a certain stigma that [country music] was twangy, it was old-folks music, it was boring, it was sappy," says Robert Reynolds of The Mavericks, whose band offers a decidedly non-twangy sound. "[To me] it didn't seem a contradiction to love the Beatles and Buck Owens. The CMA has worked with the artists to show the rest

of the country and around the world that country music is cool, it's hip, it's contemporary."

That evening after rehearsals, "new" country and traditional artists come together in perfect harmony at the T.J. Martell Foundation fund-raising event. Proceeds benefit the Frances Williams Preston Laboratories, a division of the Foundation at the Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer

Center. LeAnn Rimes, the radiant young superstar from Texas, seems perfectly at ease as she giggles her way through a few bowling frames, surrounded by media and fans.

Carefully orchestrated seating ensures camera crews can pan easily to celebrities.

A few lanes over is Tanya Tucker, who also caused a sensation as a little girl with a big, big voice. "The Country Music Association is vital to any entertainer, any performer, any recording artist," she says between frames. "It's a family of people to me that are bound and determined to make country music the best in all the world."

For relative newcomer Matt King, the association's mission ties in with its name. "CMA stands for something that I believe in—country music," says Matt. Tall, with a lingering Appalachian accent, the Asheville, North Carolina, native is an up-and-coming artist whose "overnight" success, when it comes, will be years in the making.

"I love being in front of people, singing," he says. "[Music] is not supposed to put a wall between you and me, so when I get up there, I try to be as honest as I possibly can." Fame, too, appeals to him. "I wouldn't have a record out if [I didn't want that]," he says. "The first thing I did was run to the record store to look at it."

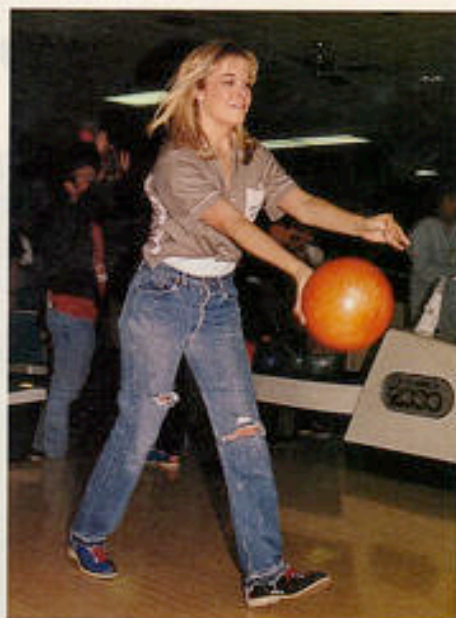
His words speak to what the CMA and its famed awards show, coming up in just hours, do best—create the perfect balance between magic and money.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson



SPOTLIGHT ON THE CMA

For information on the CMA Awards, check out their Web site at www.cmaworld.com.



ABOVE: With her torn jeans and lip-biting grin, country artist LeAnn Rimes looks just like the kid she happens to be.

LEFT: In Studio B, media from around the world await winners who make brief appearances after receiving awards on the Grand Ole Opry stage.

