

Randy Sharp Finally Makes A 'Connection' On 33rd Street

BY ANGELA KING

NASHVILLE—*The Connection* is the debut effort of renowned songwriter Randy Sharp as an artist, but it's not his first rodeo. After several label deals in the '70s and '80s failed to bring even one of his projects to the marketplace, Sharp poured his creative energy into his prolific songwriting career to the benefit of many of Nashville's biggest country stars, including Alabama, Reba McEntire, and Patty Loveless. He also shares credit for a cut on the upcoming Dixie Chicks project, *Home*.

Those first stymied attempts as an artist "nudged me over to do things as a writer, which I was all for," Sharp says. "Originally, I sang as a way to showcase the song. It was always about the song."

What began as a project for himself, *The Connection* is the first CD to showcase Sharp's talent as a singer as well as a songwriter. And it's the first of what he hopes will be many collaborative efforts with his daughter Maia, a songwriter/artist on Concord Records.

The Connection is co-produced by the father/daughter team, and Sharp says Maia's involvement was a huge part of his decision to start the project, originally planned only for the enjoyment of family and friends. After making it available to them via the Internet, Sharp says, "it got such a huge reaction, and 33rd Street Records approached me [about distribution]. That led to a national tour. The one album I did completely for just myself and my friends has provoked way more reaction than I ever had going in a more direct route."

In fact, Sharp believes the positive reception *The Connection* has received so far can be attributed to the fact that he "wasn't trying to satisfy any [radio] format or preconceived notion of what it should be. That apparently worked on a larger scale."

'A LITTLE WEIRD'

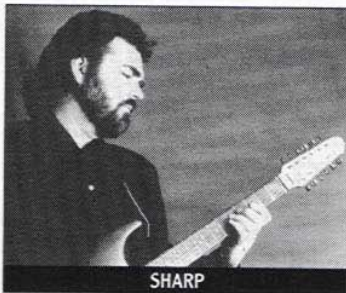
A blend of various musical styles, *The Connection* features many of Sharp's songs that have been recorded by other artists throughout the years, though only one, "New Way Out," was previously a single. Karen Brooks released it in the early '80s.

Sharp laughs about having three songs on McEntire's *Read My Mind* project—the only three not released as singles—including "I Won't Stand in Line," which is the first cut on his new CD. "That's really where you get your callouses as a songwriter: those daily rejections," he says. "Every time a new single came out, I thought it will be the next one for sure."

Those cuts were never released, he believes, because "all three of those sides are a little weird. I have always been lucky to be the thing on [another artist's] record that takes it away

from the normal. My stuff is often included because it's a little more arty, more of a left turn just to balance out [the mainstream radio product]."

That's not to say that many of his cuts haven't been huge hits over the years: Sharp has several No. 1 credits, as well as such other hits as Clay Walker's "Then What?"



WSM-AM Nashville morning host Bill Cody recently featured Sharp on his show, and he says, "Randy is a great combination of a guy who can sing and write and be equally comfortable with both. He's got all these great records." Live on the air, Cody says, "he just nailed 'I Won't Stand in Line,' that driving rhythm that song has."

JOLT FROM COMPLACENCY

As he began having hits as a songwriter, Sharp believes he allowed himself to become complacent. "As much as I like to think what I do is unique, I know to some degree you try to cater to the market and shape [what you write to] what's being asked for," he observes. "I had gotten kind of comfortable with what I do."

When he started his collaboration with his daughter, Sharp says, "I realized I was sticking to what is pretty safe, even though I was trying to put my own signature on things. In

watching the world she put herself into musically, it's way more about sounding different than everyone else. She brings different angles, sounds, and lyrical perspective. It's made me hungry again for the adventurous musical stuff."

That hunger led to what he calls "the first Sharp and Sharp" writing effort with Maia, the song "A Home" on the latest Dixie Chicks album. "That song is a product of this change, loosening up on these things, going to chordal structures that are pretty outside, and melodically too, that song is interesting to me."

Equally interesting for Sharp is the national tour he is launching in support of *The Connection*, which starts Sept. 10. His brother Steven Sharp—a longtime radio promotion executive for Asylum Records and Warner Bros. in Nashville—will work the project to radio. But the major thrust will be toward "upper-demo customers," according to 33rd Street Records president Morty Wiggins. The label is owned by Tower Records, so Sharp will have in-store appearances there, as well as at Borders Books & Music locations. The label will also have some targeted marketing in Barnes & Noble stores.

"It's important not to depend on radio for an artist like Randy Sharp," Wiggins says. "He's had a lot of success at radio, [but *The Connection*] is between formats. It's not straight country, not AC, not triple-A."

For Sharp, the timing has been perfect. "Everything that came along encouraged me. I'm older, but I don't know how much older I would [have to] be to give up trying something like this." For now, he's enjoying the "excitement of doing it creatively and doing it for the love of doing it."

Americana Awards Unveil Nominees

BY PHYLLIS STARK

NASHVILLE—Gillian Welch, David Rawlings, and the Flatlanders head the nominees for the Americana Music Assn.'s (AMA) first Americana Awards, with three nominations each. Partners Welch and Rawlings are nominated together in the artist of the year category and in the song of the year category for "I Want to Sing That Rock



and Roll." Welch is also nominated for her solo Acony Records set, *Time (The Revelator)*, and Rawlings scores a nomination for instrumentalist of the year.

The Flatlanders are nominated for artist of the year, song of the year ("My Wildest Dreams"), and

album of the year for their New West Records project *Now Again*. Scoring two nominations apiece are Jim Lauderdale and Buddy & Julie Miller.

The awards show, hosted by former Jason & the Scorchers frontman Jason Ringenberg, will be held Sept. 13 as part of the AMA's third annual convention at the Hilton Suites Hotel in downtown Nashville, which takes place Sept. 12-14.

Awards will be presented in the categories of album of the year, song of the year, artist of the year, and instrumentalist of the year. For a complete list of nominees, go to billboard.com/awards.