



PHOTOGRAPHY: JEAN-PHILIPPE PIETER

# URBAN COWBOY

On the eve of his visit to Adelaide in March to perform at the Clipsal 500, Keith Urban talks Nashville, Nicole and brave new sounds.

WORDS JOE YOGERST

**T**HIS IS DEFINITELY not a typical Friday night in Nashville. Lower Broadway, in the heart of the music district, is closed off by police and private security guards. Thousands of people, mostly female, swarm around a corridor of metal barricades down the middle of the street. Overhead whirl news choppers with cameras trained on the mob scene.

"Never seen this before," says a local cop. Keith Urban, major heartthrob and one of country music's most respected stars, is launching a new album by playing the same honky-tonks he played when he first came to Nashville 20 years ago.

When Urban arrives - stepping out of a black SUV in jeans, T-shirt and workboots - it's instant frenzy as he and his band make their way into Legends, the first of three clubs they will play this evening.

The Friday night hoopla is more than just a clever way of launching Urban's *Fuse* album. It's a way to remember where he started - the down-and-dirty music clubs where everyone is expected to pay their dues. Urban reached Nashville from Australia in 1992, a 25-year-old singer, songwriter and guitar player ready to set the country music world on fire.

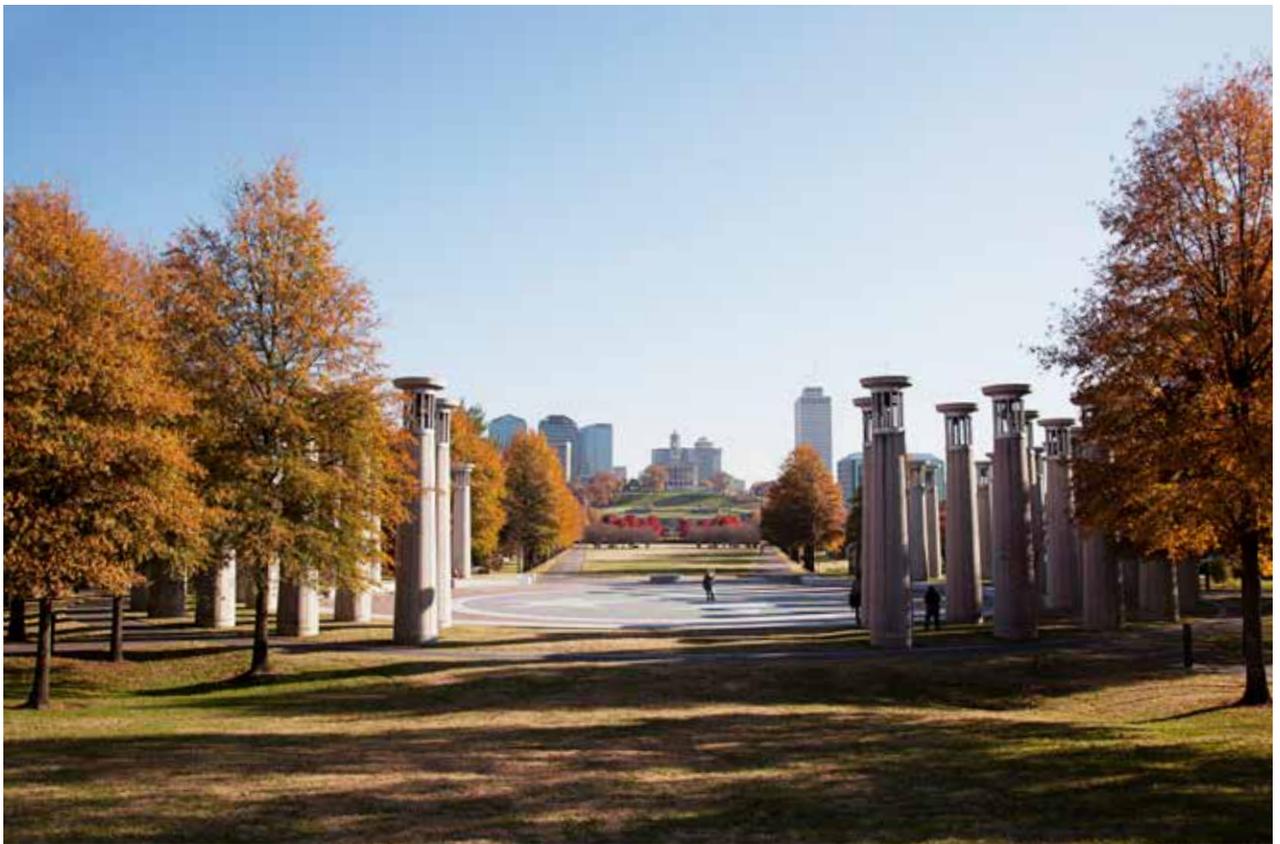
"It was always the dream for me," Urban tells *Qantas The Australian Way* a few days later in Los Angeles. "I hate the word 'destiny' because it sounds so New-Agey dramatic - but it always felt natural.

It felt as natural as the sun coming up. Going to Nashville was what I was going to do at some point. I didn't know when or how, but I just knew that I would end up living in Nashville."

Growing up in Caboolture on the northern edge of Brisbane, Urban showed an early affinity for music. "I suck at surfing," he says. "Thank goodness I could play guitar." His father was an avid fan of American country music with Glenn Campbell, Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash and Ronnie Milsap in his record collection. Urban, who joined his first band at 15, was also influenced by contemporary rock music such as The Clash and Dire Straits.

By his early 20s, Urban had a recording contract, a self-titled debut album and several hit singles *Down Under*. But he longed to walk in the footsteps of those who had risen from the streets of Nashville to legendary heights. "I had no idea what I'd be in for when I got to Nashville," he says. "I didn't know how hard it would be and I'm so glad I didn't. Years and years of struggle - I really wasn't prepared for that."

As well as playing the local honky-tonks, Urban wrote songs for others, appeared as a backup singer or musician in other artists' videos and got to know as many people as he could in the business. It helped that he was blond and good-looking, and even more so that his style was the genre-bending blend of country, rock and pop so popular in the '90s. ➤



Nashville  
cityscape

By 1999 he was recording his own material, a self-titled US debut album with *But For The Grace Of God* – the first of his 15 country chart No.1 singles. He became a pillar of Nashville's country music scene, not just on his phenomenal chart success, but also his dedication to the community as a whole. "Keith is almost always the first person here when we need someone for a charity event," says Lisa Wilkerson of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Others like the fact that he's still playing with the same musicians who were part of his band before he hit the big time.

Urban met Nicole Kidman in January 2005 at a G'Day USA event in Los Angeles. Eighteen months later they were newlyweds – *Walk The Line* with an Aussie twist. Urban credits his wife with changing the course of both his life and his music career.

"Nic would say she wants to live a well-examined life," says Urban. "I came to realise that I'm the same. I just needed somebody to show me how that's done and she's absolutely perfect for that. She's so adventurous and inspires me to be far more fearless than I have ever been. I can be a bit too conservative at times, I can over-think things too much; Nic is much more spontaneous. That spontaneity is definitely a better way to live life. As an artist, she's absolutely fearless and I've become more like that because of her."

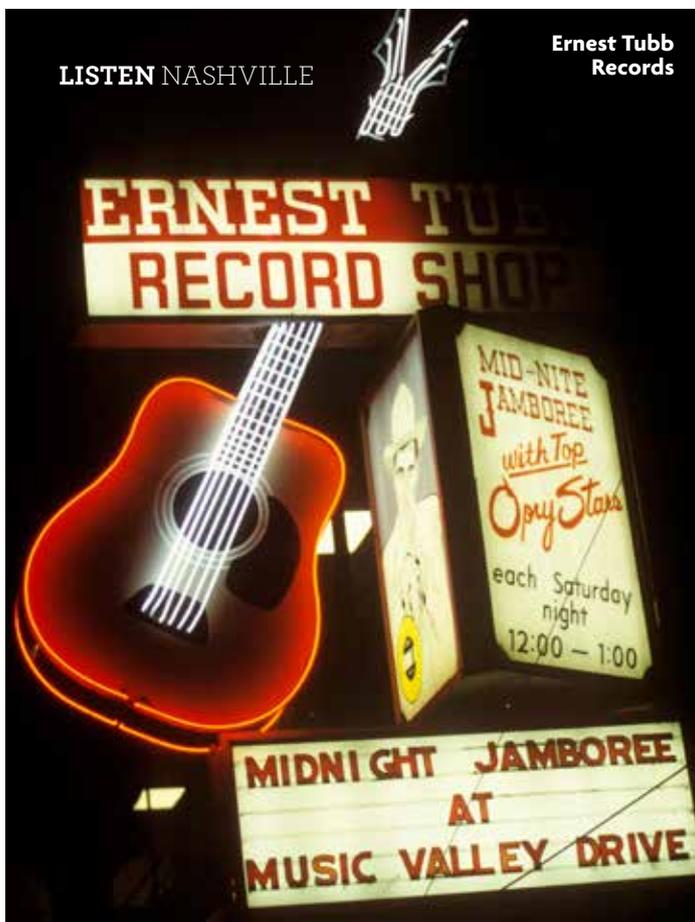
It is an odd life they live, Keith and Nicole and their daughters, Sunday Rose and Faith (Kidman also has two children, Isabella and Connor, from her marriage to Tom Cruise), shuttling between homes in Nashville, Los Angeles and Sydney. Kidman tailed Urban while he filmed first *The Voice* in Australia and, more recently, *American Idol* in the US; then Urban spent weeks at a time on her film sets. He uses their global lifestyle to soak up new tunes, explore different genres and stoke the creative fire, noting that much of *Fuse* was inspired while Kidman was filming *Grace Of Monaco* and *The*

*Railway Man* in Europe. "Just driving around, listening to the radio in the South of France, Scotland and Belgium," he recalls. "I was Shazamming songs off the radio because I liked the beat or the groove or the instrumentation. I set out to capture a sound I've had in my head for many years – a particular fusion of grittiness, sounds, textures, instrumentation and machinery blending together with particular lyrics and particular melodies. In the end, it was unbridled, no-fences sonic spirit that I was being constantly inspired by."

After kicking around several ideas, Urban and his team came up with the idea of launching the album with a Friday night "pub crawl" with stops at three celebrated honky-tonks in downtown Nashville – Legends, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge and The Stage. "It really doesn't feel that long ago we were playing these kinds of clubs," Urban says. "A beer-soaked, smoke-drenched, shag-carpeted stage and people who I'm going to assume are really surly, and we've gotta win them over. That's the attitude you've gotta get up there and play with."

The apex of the evening is a spontaneous moment at Tootsie's when Urban starts playing a blues riff and says, "I'm gonna predict if I play this riff long enough, we might find a singer in the crowd who knows how to sing this song. If you happen to be a bad-ass, blues-legend singer, this might be your cue." And up comes Aerosmith's Steven Tyler, who launches into an impromptu, unscripted, dive-bar version of *Walk This Way* with Urban and his band.

"You know, the idea of walking up with no sound check, plugging in, dialing it in and in two seconds starting playing was exhilarating for me," Urban says after the string of Lower Broadway gigs. "It's the truest of truths and you're so in the moment. In this day and age of concerts that have to be choreographed, structured, assembled and repeated night after night after night, any time there's room for pure spontaneity and unpredictability, I just love it." ➤



LISTEN NASHVILLE

Ernest Tubb  
Records

## MUSIC CITY SIGHTS

*Nashville has long been a magnet for musos.*

### COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME & MUSEUM

This museum spans American country music from the fiddle tunes and folk songs of early British settlers and gospel hymns of African slaves to social media-savvy modern stars such as Taylor Swift. In a dramatic modern building, it has thousands of artefacts, from Elvis Presley's gold-plated 1955 Cadillac to a Martin D-28 guitar on which Hank Williams Sr composed many a tune. *222 5th Avenue South.*

### RCA STUDIO B

Between 1957 and 1977, Studio B churned out more hits than any other US music studio. Of the 35,000 songs recorded in this modest brick building on Music Row, a thousand or so made the Billboard Top 10 including tunes by Elvis, Roy Orbison, Dolly Parton, Charlie Pride and the Everly Brothers. Virtually unchanged since the 1970s, it is still used for recordings. Guided tours available at the Country Music Hall of Fame.

### GRAND OLE OPRY

Many country big names skip the Opry these days, but it's still a showcase for old-timers and up-and-comers. Shows on Friday and Saturday night year-round, Tuesday nights (Mar-Dec) and Wednesday nights (Jun-Aug). The new theatre is an architectural monstrosity. *2804 Opryland Drive.*

### RYMAN AUDITORIUM

The "Mother Church of Country Music" was home to the Grand

Ole Opry radio broadcasts and live shows from 1943 until 1974, when it moved to the outskirts. A National Historic Landmark, the red-brick Ryman was built as a church in 1892. Backstage tours are rife with quirky tales about the stars who once performed here. The Opry returns to Ryman during the winter. *1165 5th Avenue North.*

### COOTER'S PLACE

Down the road from the Opry and dedicated to the 1979-85 TV show *Dukes Of Hazzard*. The souvenir shop/museum has items as varied as the original *General Lee* (a 1969 Dodge Charger), other vehicles from the show, and Daisy Duke's cut-off blue jeans. This is the place to buy a Confederate flag or Rebel boxer shorts. *2613 McGavock Pike.*

### ERNEST TUBB RECORDS

Wedge between the honky-tonks on Lower Broadway, this old-fashioned record shop has free live music on a stage at the back, as well as country music merchandise ranging from biographies and songbooks to Johnny Cash CD box sets and Nashville souvenirs. *417 Broadway.*

### THIRD MAN RECORDS

Fast forward to the 21st-century version of a music store. Owned by edgy alt-rock maestro Jack White of White Stripes fame, it has music related novelties, live shows from Third Man groups and a vintage 1947 Voice-O-Graph recording booth where visitors can etch their own voice in vinyl. *623 7th Avenue South.*

✦ Keith Urban tours *Light The Fuse* nationally in June.

✦ For afares and holiday packages to Nashville, call Qantas Holidays on 1300 735 542 or visit [qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway](http://qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway)



Ryman  
Auditorium