



FROM  
SMALL TOWN  
TO  
CENTER STAGE

CMT GIANTS

A MUSICAL TRIBUTE TO

ALAN  
JACKSON

**C**ountry music superstar Alan Jackson has been called a lot of things. Prolific songwriter. Unwavering neo-traditionalist. Superlative entertainer.

Now he adds another term to his ever-growing list of descriptors: CMT Giant.

With the airing of *CMT Giants: Alan Jackson*, a 90-minute tribute featuring performances by fellow stars including George Strait, Brad Paisley, Taylor Swift, Martina McBride, Dierks Bentley, Lee Ann Womack and Miranda Lambert, Jackson is officially counted as one of the biggest and best stars in the country music galaxy.

"It's hard to believe I've reached a level where I deserve something like this," says Jackson. "The attention is a little embarrassing, to be honest! I mean, George Strait is obviously a bigger giant than I am. He's been one of my favorites since the early '80s. That's quite a tribute to have him part of it."

BY M.B. ROBERTS

As the third Giant to be saluted by CMT, Jackson is in impressive company. Previous honorees are Reba McEntire and Hank Williams Jr., a childhood hero of Jackson's in whose tribute he participated last year.

During the new show, Jackson's musical contemporaries will pay tribute to him by singing several of the hit songs he has written and performed during his nearly 20-year career. To him, this is the ultimate compliment.

"When you write a song, you're almost numb to it before you ever record it," says Jackson. "But when somebody else sings a song you wrote, it sounds better to you. A few years ago on an awards show, Lee Ann Womack, who is one of my favorite singers, sang 'Remember When.' I was out in the audience and it just knocked me down!"

For Jackson, this tribute marks a long road he has traveled since 1990 when he quietly but confidently stepped into the national spotlight alongside other stardom-bound

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newcomers such as Garth Brooks, Vince Gill, Clint Black and Travis Tritt.

Since then, Jackson, who recently celebrated his 50th birthday, has passed milestone after milestone: 33 No. 1 singles, 100 major industry awards and just recently, more than 50 million albums sold.

"It's unbelievable when you start realizing how many albums that is," he says. "I heard somebody say if you stacked them all up, they would reach to the moon and back. I don't know about that, but it's a long way from that first gold album years ago."

Looking back, Jackson's career may best be described as a series of 'giant' steps. It all began in 1985 when he and his wife, Denise, whom he met at a local Dairy Queen when they were still in high school, made the big decision to leave their tiny hometown of Newnan, Ga., and head to Nashville in pursuit of his musical dreams.

"For Denise and me, it was like going to Europe," says Jackson. "I'd never been anywhere except for Alabama and Daytona, Florida. People back home were saying, 'Poor ol' boy. He's gone crazy, selling everything and making his wife

move to Nashville. They're going to starve to death. They'll be back in six months.'"

The Jacksons didn't starve, but like many young couples, they struggled.

"My whole focus was on the music," says Jackson. "That's all I did, try to find a way to get in the business, singing demos, writing with people or playing little clubs or doing showcases. I constantly hammered away at it."

Jackson's big break came when Denise, who was working as a flight attendant, met country superstar Glen Campbell in an airport and boldly gave him one of her husband's tapes. Campbell's publishing company signed Jackson to a writing deal. Three years later, he signed a recording contract and released his first album, *Here in the Real World*, which launched four chart-topping singles.

Years of nonstop success followed. Giant events, some positive, some negative, continued to dominate Jackson's

life. Over the years, the Jacksons welcomed three daughters: Mattie (18), Ali (15) and Dani (11). Then, in 1998, came his much-publicized separation from Denise, followed by a healing reconciliation four months later. In 2007, Denise wrote a best-selling book, *It's All About Him: Finding the Love of My Life*, about how the experience of almost losing her 30-year-marriage strengthened her faith in God.

"The accomplishment is to survive," says Jackson of his successful marriage and happy family. "We started out as kids, not knowing what love was, really, and to add all the ingredients of the music business... this rollercoaster ride—it's amazing we did survive. We've got all this history with us. We're happier than we've ever been."

These days, Alan Jackson can't find much to complain about. Well, maybe one thing.

"I wish I was three inches shorter," he says. "I'm sixfoot-four, which is a little too tall. I love old cars, but most of them I can't fit in! I can't find clothes or sit down anywhere because my legs are too long."

When you're a giant, you've just got to take the good with the bad! ~

CMT GIANTS: ALAN JACKSON PREMIERES SAT. DEC. 6 AT 9/8c.