



Country music's most respected artist is
Oklahoma's most beloved export. Vince Gill
shows us how to combine talent with humility.

BY TOM LINDLEY

B R O T H E R

O K L A H O M A N O F T H E Y E A R

B E N E F I T



*Sometimes that face looking back
in the mirror
Make that mirror, make
that mirror cold
But in my heart, oh, I'm a hundred
Years younger
Man, there's some things that
never get old.*

VINCE GILL HEARS the music. It's been spinning in his head ever since he was a boy growing up in Oklahoma City, head propped against the back of the divan, guitar across his chest, legs stretched out almost to the floor, strumming for hours at a time until his mother finally asked him to stop that "dinging" and play a song.

"I apologized to him a few years ago for that," says his mother, Jerene Gill. "Look what that dinging did for him."

For starters, how do twenty-four million in record sales, eighteen Grammy awards, five consecutive Country Music Association Male

LONG LIVE THE KING

After twenty-five years in the top echelon of country music royalty, 2007 Oklahoman of the Year Vince Gill continues to reign supreme.

Vocalist of the Year awards, and four CMA Song of the Year awards and memberships in the Country Music Hall of Fame, Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame, and Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame sound?

On top of that, "Benefit," a nickname hung on Gill in recognition of his inability to say no to a worthy cause, also has been honored frequently for his community service, including many events in Oklahoma supporting children's causes.

Fame, on the other hand, has had a hard time working its way into the head of the tender tenor of the Plains, whose haunting country ballads can cut you deep or lift you high. He may hear music the way few of us do, but he doesn't see a country music star staring back at him in the mirror.

Gill often is viewed as the complete package: an extraordinary singer, songwriter, and musician who's not too good to stand in line with the masses at Ted's Café Escondido Mexican restaurant in Oklahoma City. But when Gill looks in the mirror, it makes him feel a hundred years younger, like an ordinary guy, a kid, really, with a guitar slung over his shoulder and music between the ears.

"I've noticed that the more my career rose and gained attention, it always made me slightly uncomfortable being recognized," says

Gill, dressed in a hooded sweatshirt, T-shirt, and shorts in the living room of his Nashville home and looking more like a man in search of his morning newspaper than a megastar. "But I was willing to starve to do this."

WHAT VINCE GILL isn't willing to do is let himself wiggle off the hook of high expectations. All notes are created equal to him. Anybody anywhere who needs help can count on him. Every shot Gill, a scratch golfer, hits has to be straight. On the outside, Gill can't stifle a laugh or a tear. On the inside, he can't control the fire.

No one knows better than Amy Grant, the top-selling Christian and pop crossover artist who married Gill in 2000, how important it is for him to be true to himself by being true to his music.

"He's never been one to chase the latest fad. In fact, he's stubborn enough to run away from it," she says. "He acts rough around the edges, but he has an internal elegance about him. He never outpunts his coverage; he never oversings or overplays anything."

To Gill, all he's doing is being true to his roots. "Oklahomans are very salt-of-the-earth-type people," he says. "To me, we're not associated with perceptions of a southerner, a northerner, a westerner, or any pocket. We

have a common sense that I like.”

But the more Vince Gill runs away from fame, the closer it gets. His admirers tried to force another big dose of it on him not long ago on a late October evening in Nashville, where destiny hung like smoke on a honky-tonk dance floor in the house that twang built. The nobility of the country music world had gathered at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum to induct Gill, along with Mel Tillis and Ralph Emery, into the club.

Gill’s mother happened to celebrate her eighty-second birthday the night of her son’s induction. And almost precisely when the Hall of Fame medallion was being placed around his neck, in a hospice facility not far away, one of country music’s most venerable stars, Porter Wagoner, died and turned over the reins to the honor-bound son.

Although making music never fails to stir his grits, Gill, who turned fifty in April 2007, acknowledges that membership in the elite circle of musicians has inspired him.

“As long as I live, I’ll never feel like the teacher,” Gill says, paying homage to the country greats who came before him. “I’m lucky that I’ve been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame as a young man in comparison to the other hundred people, and, oh, gosh, I want so badly for all the things I do to validate it. What I’m going to continue to do is get better and honor that music.”

Just when it appeared fame had finally roped and tied him, Gill broke away with another dig at himself as his image appeared on the screen behind him at the ceremony.

“I’ve never had any work done on my face or my eyes,” Gill, whose weight fluctuations have sometimes been blamed on songwriting sessions with too many Krispy Kreme doughnuts, said in his best straight-man expression. “But I’m going to work on that chin. They’ve got my permission to take twenty pounds off.”

Everybody adores Vince Gill, except maybe Vince Gill.



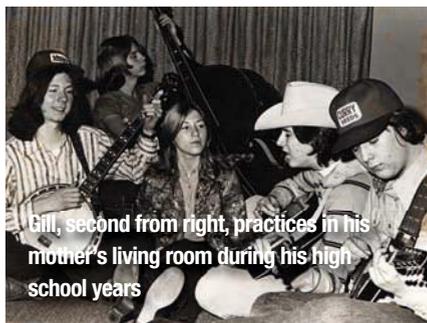
*When I was a lad
And old Shep was a pup
O'er the hills and meadows we'd stray
Just a boy and his dog
We were both full of fun
We grew up together that way.*



Vince Gill at about age five in a Cleveland Elementary School photo



Three-year-old Vince with his siblings, Bob Coen and Gina Gill, at home in Norman.



Gill, second from right, practices in his mother's living room during his high school years



A portrait of Gill at around age thirteen



The Gill family at his grandparents' Yukon home in 1963.

THE FIRST SONG Gill remembers was one his father sang to him at bedtime. “‘Old Shep’ was the saddest song I ever heard in my life, and when he would sing it, I would cry,” Gill says.

While Red Foley’s tearjerker was about the eternal bond between a boy and his dog, Gill’s own story is about a boy and his guitar. From the time he got a grip on his first toy guitar, Gill, born Vincent Grant Gill on April 12,

1957, in Norman, has carried one around.

After his father, Jamese Stanley “Stan” Gill, graduated from law school at the University of Oklahoma, he moved the family to Oklahoma City in 1961. Gill soon was ready for his first real guitar, a Gibson ES-335. After that came a steel guitar, mandolin, Dobro, and fiddle, anything with strings.

Along with the neighborhood kids, music was welcome in the Gill home, a stately

Gill played his first public show at the grand opening of Warr Acres City Hall in March 1964.



'HE'S NEVER BEEN ONE TO CHASE THE LATEST FAD.

IN FACT, HE'S STUBBORN ENOUGH TO RUN AWAY FROM IT.'

two-story brick Tudor whose resemblance to a castle tower gives it an almost mystical quality, the kind of place where dreams are made. His mother still lives in that house, and the basketball goal Gill got for Christmas one year still looks as sturdy standing in the driveway as the upbringing he got growing up in Oklahoma.

Despite Gill's adventures on the baseball diamond and summer days spent playing golf and swimming, it was music that always spoke to him in ways nothing else could. First, it was the sound of his grandmother playing the piano. Later, it was Chet Atkins, the Beatles, Merle Haggard, and on and on. Vince Gill never stopped listening.

Gill's parents gave him something important at an early age, the chance to be himself.

"I never was put under the microscope of judgment from my folks that said, 'You've got to do it from point A to point B to point C, got to get an education first, got to do this or do that,'" he says. "They knew from the time I was seven years old what music did to me. They knew it when I was ten and when I was twelve, and it never stopped. It grew and grew. And I invested my whole life in it."

As early as junior high school, Gill was playing gigs at night on the condition he keep his grades up by day. He was too young to drive a car, so someone in the band would have to pick him up and bring him home.

"I didn't worry about him," Jerene Gill says. "He was the kind of kid who wasn't going to get in trouble. He always did the right thing."

Gill, who always has been protective of his friends and family, also had an older sister, Gina, to watch his back, and an older half-brother, Bob Coen, who had a strong musical influence

on him. But Gill clearly got his friendliness from his mother, who almost drew a bigger ovation than he did when she was introduced at the Hall of Fame ceremony.

"Little by little, I find out things about my mom she never would tell me," he says. "For example, I have a friend, a newspaper writer in Nashville who did an article on me twenty-some years ago about the new kid coming to town. He told me years later, 'You know, I've been doing this my entire life, and I've written about everybody who has been in this business, and I just got my first thank-you note—from your mother.'"

Along with teaching him a little about the guitar, Gill's father, who died in 1997, was a significant motivator, as if he really needed one.

"My dad was tough, and it was very typical of the times. You screwed up, and you got your butt kicked," Gill says, a lesson he eventually grew to appreciate.

However, a friendly nature and plenty of motivation only would have taken Gill so far. What really made him special in a world filled with good guitar players was his ability to hear.

"That's the gift I was given that is most special. It's hearing things that my hands react to or my voice reacts to," he says. "It has something to do with how the brain works. I just like to hear music."

At church recently, Gill's Sunday school class was asked what they would rather give up, their sight or their hearing. "I was the only one in class who said he would give up his sight. I said I could not give up my ability to hear. That's my heartbeat," he says.

A childhood friend, Rick Buchanan, says he always has been astounded by the way Gill's

brain works. "One time in high school, he had to play for an assembly, and he called me up because I had a Doobie Brothers' eight-track," Buchanan says. "He asked me to play it over the phone. I played it twice, and he played it at school two days later. That he could do stuff like that is fascinating to anyone who picks up an instrument."



*Baby brought me in out
off the highway*

*Made me put my money
in the bank, bank*

*Straightened out my crooked way
of thinking*

Made it purely pleasure when I drank.

WHEN GILL FIRST heard Emmylou Harris sing on Linda Ronstadt's album, *Heart Like a Wheel*, in 1974, he couldn't believe a voice that passionate could come out of the mouth of someone named Emmylou. He chose to believe that it was really Dolly Parton using a fake name and told all his friends the same thing.

Later, after he heard the album *Pieces of the Sky* featuring "Bluebird Wine" and saw Harris' name on the record, he officially submitted to his destiny.

"That's when I felt for the first time in my life that's what I wanted to do," Gill says.

Gill left home to play bluegrass on stage in Kentucky almost as soon as he got off the high school graduation stage at Northwest Classen High School in 1975.

"The phone rang, and I answered it," he says. "That's the way I've lived my life."

Noted bluegrass fiddle player Byron Berline of Guthrie first heard Gill play on that Kentucky

These Days: A Chronology

BY VALLERY BROWN



1957

On April 12, 1957, Vincent Grant Gill is born in Norman, Oklahoma.



1967

Gill is given his first guitar—a Gibson ES-335—by his parents.



1977

Gill graduates from Northwest Classen High School in Oklahoma City and moves to Kentucky.



1976

Gill joins Ricky Skaggs' band, Boone Creek, and later moves to Los Angeles to join Byron Berline's band, Sundance.



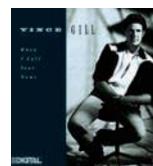
1982

On May 5, Gill's daughter Jenifer Jerene is born.



1983

Gills signs with RCA Records and moves to Nashville.



1989

Gill signs with MCA Records, who release *When I Call Your Name*. RCA later releases *The Best of Vince Gill*.

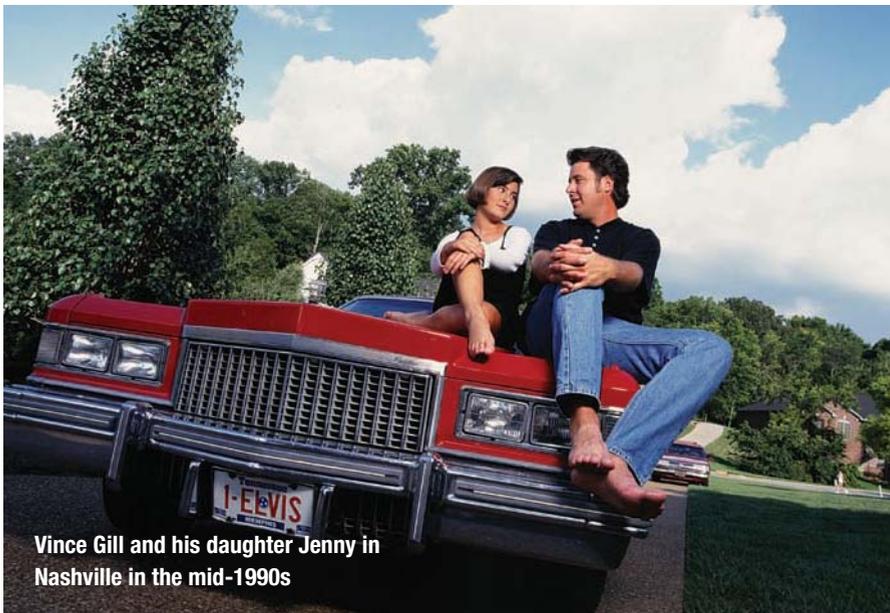


1991

Gill receives a Grammy for Best Country Vocal Collaboration and three CMA awards, including Male Vocalist of the Year.



WALTER JOOSS JIRGETTY IMAGES



Vince Gill and his daughter Jenny in Nashville in the mid-1990s

stage. “I thought he was pretty special,” says Berline, who tracked Gill down and invited him to join his band, Sundance.

After Gill later joined another California band, Pure Prairie League, many people thought his career had run off the road when he started playing with emerging singer-songwriter Rodney Crowell’s band.

“People wondered how I could go from being a lead singer in a rock-and-roll band to being a sideman, like *sideman* was a dirty word,” he says. “To me, it’s the best gig in the world because you don’t have to talk between songs. But I made the decision because of the musicians I was going to play with.”

Gill says the best advice he ever got came from Emory Gordy Jr., a member of Crowell’s band. “He said, ‘Don’t ever be the best musician in the band. You’ll never learn anything because you’re better than everyone else.’ I’ve

always surrounded myself with more talented people than I was.”

While he was in California, Gill married his first wife, Janis Oliver, herself a musician, and the couple had a daughter, Jenny, now twenty-five.

In 1983, Gill signed a contract with RCA Records, moved to Nashville, and soon released his first solo album, *Turn Me Loose*. Although it earned him the Academy of Country Music Top New Male Vocalist of the Year award in 1984, Gill spent the next few years being known more as a studio musician and singer than as a budding star.

That all changed after he signed with MCA in 1989 and released *When I Call Your Name*, which featured a duet with fellow Oklahoman Reba McEntire called “Oklahoma Swing.” The album quickly wound up winning almost every country music award in the industry.

A remarkable string of hits, including “I Still Believe In You” and “Go Rest High On That Mountain” followed in quick succession. Because Gill’s put-the-band-first attitude didn’t fall off the bus during his amazing run, it made him as popular with his peers as he was with fans.

Gill’s career reached another milestone in 2006 with the release of his most critically acclaimed work to date, a forty-three-song, four-disc box set of all new material titled *These Days*, a creative mix of traditional and contemporary country, bluegrass, and soul-searching songs that reflect a musician approaching the creative mountaintop.

Close but not there. Not yet, not ever, because Gill is not on a journey to perfection, not when he still is trying to straddle the line between getting it right and getting it great in his own mind.



1993
Gill’s “The Heart Won’t Lie” duet with Reba McEntire goes to number one on Billboard’s country songs chart.



1994
Pocket Full of Gold goes double platinum, and “I Still Believe in You” is certified triple platinum.



1997
Gill is inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame.



1999
Gill is inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame.



2000
On March 10, 2000, Gill marries Christian recording artist Amy Grant.



2001
On March 12, 2001, Corrina Grant Gill is born.



2007
Gill is inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame on October 28.



2008
In January 2008, Gill is named the 2007 Oklahoman of the Year by *Oklahoma Today* magazine.

"I don't care what record it is; I'll find someplace where I wish I could have done better," he says.

As for perfection, Gill says, "I think there are a lot of, quote, 'perfect' records that don't move me one ounce, one inch. But the essence of trying to get it right is trying to get it to a place, not about perfection. Perfection is basically unattainable to me."

Instead, Gill always was drawn to Johnny Cash. "It's the rough edges that made Johnny Cash, not the fact that he was this perfect clinical singer. It was what came out of the speakers that moved you," he says.



*We're Oklahoma Risin',
brighter than a star
Stand up and sing about her,
let the world know who we are.*

IN 2006, GILL teamed with songwriter and fellow Oklahoma native Jimmy Webb to help his home state celebrate its centennial. Webb wrote the words to "Oklahoma Rising," which the pair says was written to complement the state's official song, "Oklahoma," and Gill wrote and performed the music.

It became the title song on the two-disc album *Oklahoma Rising*, which features forty-six songs performed by musicians with Oklahoma roots and demonstrates just how much red dirt still is stuck on Gill's boots.

As Oklahoma City promoter and friend Lee Allan Smith sees it, Gill has done too many things for Oklahoma to count, from hosting the Vince Gill Celebrity Golf Tournament, which raised money to support Special Care, a development and care center for children, to his support in the aftermath of the bombing of the Murrah building and countless fundraising appearances.

Like a lot of sons who move far away, Gill regrets not getting home more, but he makes the most of it when he does.

"The best feeling in the world is when you're flying into town and hitting the streets you know so well," he says.

Byron Berline says it's not unusual for Gill to show up at the small music hall above his fiddle shop in Guthrie, pick up an instrument, and jam with local kids making their stage debut. Berline introduces him by saying he's going to bring a fellow on stage who looks a lot like Vince Gill.

As for Gill, the more ordinary you make him sound, the better. By all means, lock up the limos and hide the VIP passes when he's around.

"I don't want to be seen as somebody using his celebrity as a platform or for preferential treatment," he says.

That's another reason he's so popular with his fans and why he often gets requests from organizations that say they might go under without help. Because Gill thinks giving time often means a lot more than writing a check, he has a hard time saying no to a fan.

Christmas was fast approaching in 2006 when Gill opened the letter that had landed on his desk at his Nashville home. It was from the family of a fan who was not expected to live much longer, an older woman who loved his music and, like most females, couldn't resist a sweet face. The letter listed a telephone number, and Gill made a mental note to call to wish her Merry Christmas and acknowledge the weight of her struggles.

It was the type of call Gill had made many times before. Only this time, Christmas Day got in the way, so it wasn't until a couple of days later that he picked up the phone.

"Oh, I'm sorry. She died this morning," the voice on the other end said.

Tears welled up in Gill's eyes—his grandmother told him if your eyes leaked, your brain wouldn't swell.

"I felt like a heel," Gill says. "You always think somebody's got a little more time than they do."

The woman's son said he appreciated Gill's call, and the two spoke for a few more minutes.

"Where do ya'll live?" Gill finally asked.

"A small town not far from Nashville," came the reply.

It probably wouldn't have mattered if the funeral had been in Anchorage, because Vince Gill instantly knew that, if invited, he would be there to sing "Go Rest High On That Mountain," his sad but comforting go-to-heaven anthem completed after his brother's death in 1993. A couple of days later, he dropped everything to sing at the funeral of someone he had never met.



*Oh, these days
I'll take these days
Over any other days I've ever known
Oh, your sweet ways make these days
Feel like home.*

AMY GRANT WON'T FORGET that night in Ryman Auditorium, the original home of the Grand Ole Opry, when her husband sang that song to her in front of a packed house there to celebrate the arrival of *These Days*.

"It was a surreal experience to hear those vulnerable expressions in front of so many people," she says. "I'm sure there are a lot of people who've felt that way about someone, but this was not the normal way to say, 'I love you.'"

The marriage of two great voices in 2000 was a much-talked-about event. Nearly eight years later, a collaboration of major musical proportions has settled comfortably into a love story fit for a country song, highlighted by the birth of their daughter, Corrina, in 2001 and underscored by the fact that they still call one another before and after one of them takes an airplane flight.

"You safe?" Gill will softly say into the phone.

Grant says she admires her husband's tender heart, his respect for others, his generosity, and his powers of observation, not to mention the way he makes her laugh with one his carefully crafted impersonations.

"Vince doesn't exercise false humility because he is fully aware of the depth of his gift," she says. "But he appreciates other peoples' gifts, too. I've never heard him tell anyone else what to play because he sees music as a shared experience," she says.

To make her funnyman smile, Grant surprised Gill on his fiftieth birthday last April by having a friend play "Happy Birthday" on the accordion and then buying breakfast for everyone in the restaurant.

"He likes to go to the same breakfast haunt five days a week," she says. "When he comes home, I'll ask him, 'Who'd you have breakfast with today?' He might say, 'Oh, the retired preacher' or 'Someone who just moved to town.' Part of him is a bit of a loner, but then he will just invite someone to join him for breakfast."

At his Hall of Fame induction, Gill, speaking extemporaneously, talked about life before Amy Grant. "I wanted to be able to lay my head on the pillow at night and find peace. But I couldn't do that. I've always been trying to right those wrongs in my life, and I struggled with that. Then I met Amy Grant, and that changed."

Her ability to see the good in others and discard the rest was an eye-opener for Gill,

Vince Gill and Amy Grant performed on the *Today* show in August 2007.

AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES



'DON'T EVER BE THE BEST
MUSICIAN IN THE BAND.
YOU'LL NEVER LEARN

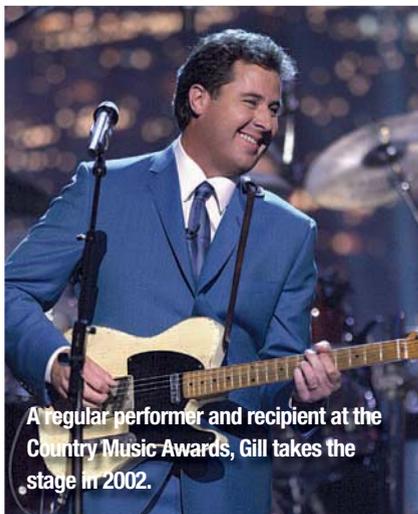
ANYTHING BECAUSE
YOU'RE BETTER THAN
EVERYONE ELSE.'

JOHN JERNIGAN

In November 2007, Gill talked to reporters at the Ford Center in Oklahoma City prior to the Centennial Spectacular concert.



'I DON'T WANT TO BE SEEN AS SOMEBODY USING HIS CELEBRITY AS A PLATFORM OR FOR PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT.'



A regular performer and recipient at the Country Music Awards, Gill takes the stage in 2002.



Vince Gill and Amy Grant's happy clan, including their first child together, Corrina



In October 1993, Oklahoma City mayor Ron Norick proclaimed the week of October 20th Vince Gill Week and presented Jerene Gill with a street sign to commemorate the occasion.



Vince and his mother Jerene at the Festival of the Horse in Oklahoma City in 1993

who said he was always sizing up others a little bit.

Gill says the first time the two played golf together, his famous temper on the golf course surfaced. Angry with himself over a bad shot, Gill broke the head off his golf club sticking it back in the bag.

"When that quality comes out in me, most people have cast a harsh, critical, judgmental eye toward me, and that's been pretty hurtful," he says.

Conditioned to expect more of the same from Grant, Gill said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

Gill said Grant shocked him with her response: "You know what, that doesn't surprise me."

Gill came back with an awkward, "Excuse me?"

Grant then said something that changed Gill's life: "I've watched you, and when something's funny to you, you laugh on

the tips of your toes. When something moves you, you cry. Now that golf shot hasn't gone so well, and it's made you angry. You don't control your other emotions, so how in the world could you ever expect to control this one?"

The power of her observations hit him between the eyes like a jumbo driver.

"That was very profound," he says. "Now, I always kind of chuckle at anybody who likes to say, 'I saw him break this club or go through the trees.' Instead, I think, 'Well, this person here loves me. I don't know if she loved me that day, but she saw a good quality in me.'"

Although he's still good at ducking the camera and deflecting praise, Gill has used the power of love and some lessons in life to take a second look at himself and his music.

For example, he considers the gift of time the greatest gift he can give, which is why he winds up unannounced at so many fundrais-

ers and funerals of strangers.

Still, there is no time for the rocking chair, because Gill still can hear the music playing in his head. He also has been energized by the artistic acclaim of *These Days* and his entry into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

"I'm re-inspired," he says. "What's interesting is that right now I feel like I'm better than I was when I was really on fire. I sing better now at fifty than I did at thirty. I play better than I did all those years ago. Brevity and the theory of less is more is really quite true."

As a further testament to these days, Gill continues to demonstrate one of his most characteristic traits, humility.

"I think there are people who are much deeper thinkers than I'll ever be," he says. "I've just got a little life under my belt, and all I know is that life will humble you."

Like a true Okie, Vince Gill can make a few words go a long way. 