

# GARTH

JUST A BOY FROM OKLAHOMA

B R O O K S

**Country's  
hottest star  
hangs on to  
his roots.**

**By Barbara Palmer**

**Photographs by  
Alan L. Mayor**

**D**espite the banks of computerized soundboards and the black tangle of cords, the scene on the stage at the Civic Center in Monroe, Louisiana, looks more like a high school band room before class than rehearsal for one of the biggest acts in the country. A handful of figures in sweat pants and t-shirts are ambling around the stage, plucking discordantly at guitars, and messing around with the microphones.

The balding man sitting at the drum set—wearing yellow sweat pants and a University of Wyoming wrestling sweatshirt—is running through a series of standard martial riffs like he is warming up for half time at a football game. He looks familiar, but I have to lean over and ask someone if, indeed, the guy at the drums is Garth Brooks.



*Garth, March '92.*



*Colleen and Troyal Brooks join Garth and Sandy Brooks backstage at an awards show. Garth and his mom are working on a duet: "Picking Up After You."*

He may not look much like the star whose face is plastered on calendars, posters, and the walls of record stores, but he is acting the way his press clippings say he does: nice. He climbs down off the stage to talk with the half dozen people who are sitting on the front row and then goes up into the bleachers to say hello to the son of one of the guys who drives one of his four equipment trucks. (T-shirts and sweatshirts fill one semi.) The fifth-grader has taken off a few days from school in Florida to see the show, and Garth makes it worth the trip, helping him swing out over the empty floor on a rope tied to the rafters.

Six hours later, Brooks himself is swinging on the same rope over a packed audience that has been screaming itself hoarse for an hour. It seems that, almost as if by sheer force of will, the singer has managed to rearrange the structure of his face: his nose looks more aquiline, and his lips have lost the tendency to droop. His pigeon-toed swagger looks not dopey, but sexy—in an "aw-shucks" kind of way.

One minute the thirty-year-old singer is tearing up the stage, racing to the back of the stage to wave to the ticket holders watching the show from behind. The next, he is alone in the spotlight, just him, his guitar, and eight thousand fans. Whenever the tempo drops, females storm the lip of the stage, tossing or handing over red roses they have bought outside the arena. Brooks picks up every one.

A fair part of the Monroe audience is, like Garth, wearing bright western shirts, Stetsons, Wranglers, and cowboy boots, but there are also quite a few people who look like they would be at home at a Phil Collins concert. It is a good bet that many of them have a Garth Brooks tape or two outside in their cars, since every album the singer has recorded in the last five years is still on *Billboard Magazine's* list of top fifty albums and they seem to know every word to ev-

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*When Jane Pauley interviewed Garth last summer, he was still considering retirement. Since then, Pauley's prediction has proved correct: he's not quitting.*

ery one of his songs.

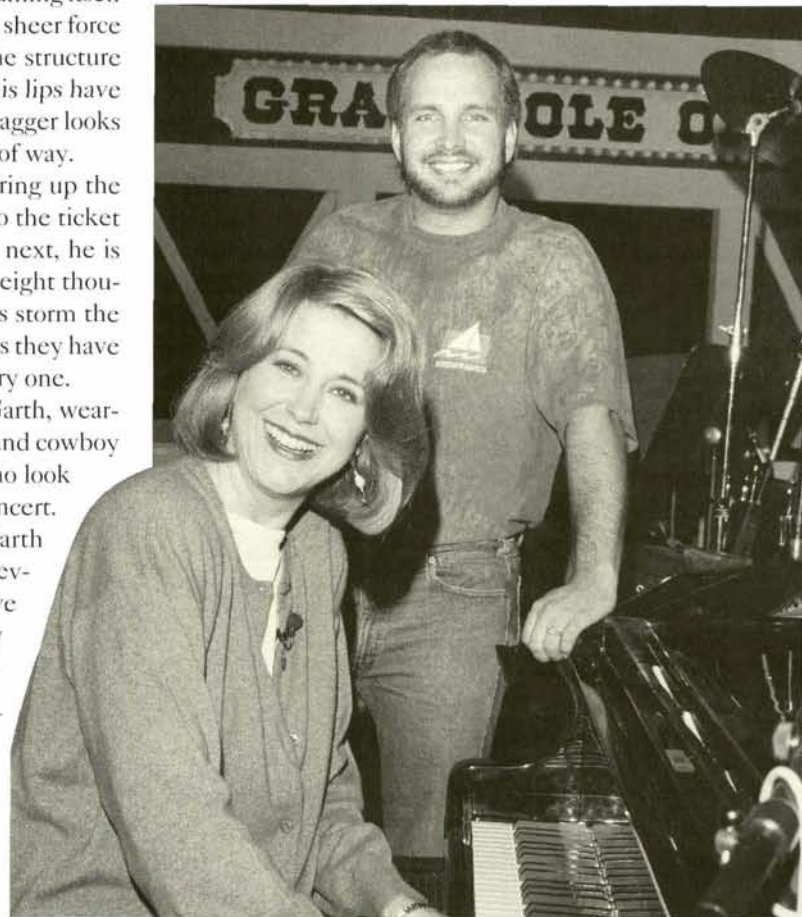
During the ninety-minute concert, Brooks sings his biggest hits and plugs his new album (*The Chase*). "Some of you may have seen a special on NBC....," he says, referring to an hour-long broadcast last January, "This is Garth Brooks." No one seems to mind that they could see almost the same show by renting the videotape. When he so much as turns the brim of his size seven-and-a-half black Stetson toward the side of the arena where I am sitting, a row of pre-teen girls are on their feet, hysterically throwing out their arms to him.

Brooks reaches out in return: He points and waves to the audience during nearly every song. From time to time, the house lights come on as if Brooks wants to get a good look himself.

Finally, he takes off his hat, opens his arms wide, and closes his eyes. Brooks has called his relationship with the audience a marriage; and it looks like he is feeling loved tonight. How did all of this happen to a guy from Yukon who still drives an old pickup truck and hasn't missed a Christmas at home with his mom and dad?

Says Brooks: "I don't have a clue."

**F**or the next few months, his fans will have to be patient. Beginning in December 1992, Brooks will take



## GARTH'S BAND STILLWATER: MORE OKLAHOMA ROOTS

eight months off to stay at home in Nashville with his wife, Sandy, and his daughter, Taylor Mayne Pearl. After Taylor (named for singer James Taylor, whom Garth reveres) was born last July, Brooks was talking about hanging up his Stetson for good so he could devote his time to fatherhood. "When I was growing up and did something, every time I turned around my mother or my father or both of them were there to watch me. It's nice to know someone is watching."

But after a few weeks of soul-searching, Brooks decided not to retire. "I feel a lot better now," he said in October. "I discovered she too likes her time alone. I must be there for her, but I can't get in her way."

It didn't hurt either that he had recently renegotiated his contract with Capitol Records ("I was starting to feel like a chump, I had the same deal I started out with") and had been able to cancel a planned world tour. His big brother Kelly, his tour accountant, then began booking U.S. dates for a tour that not only takes his family into consideration, but acknowledges the unprecedented demand for tickets. (In Monroe, Brooks had planned on only one show. When twenty thousand people showed up to buy eight thousand tickets, the promoters panicked and scrapped a publicized ticket-selling plan. Brooks called a local country station and offered to do two more shows.)

Next year, instead of traveling to a new city each night, Brooks will give two or three concerts in each venue. He, Sandy, and his daughter will stay in a rented house so Brooks can come home after work to his family, just like the dads did in his hometown of Yukon.

**Y**ou have to get pretty far along in Garth Brooks's life story to find anyone who saw even a glimmer of a star in the stocky sixth child of Colleen and Troyal Brooks. Garth Troyal Brooks was born February 7, 1962, in Tulsa. When he was four years old, the Brooks family moved to Yukon, a town settled by Czech farmers. Though the urban sprawl of Oklahoma City is only a pasture or two away from Yukon's city limits, Yukon has hung on to both its ethnic and agricultural roots: The yearbook from Garth's junior year includes a shot of the home economics class making kolaches for the Czech Festival. When the Future Farmers of America assembled in the gym for its group picture, members filled eight rows of bleachers.

Garth Brooks fit right in. He appears often on the pages



*Brooks once signed autographs all night long at Nashville's Fan Fair, an annual chance for fans to meet country stars. "I've met some real sweet people," he says.*

**W**hen Garth Brooks lived in the athletic dorm in Stillwater, he had a standing agreement with his roommates, Ty England, from Oklahoma City, and Dale Pierce, from Woodward, both aspiring musicians like himself. "We always said, if one of us made it, we'd call the other one," says Pierce.

After Garth got a recording contract in Nashville and was putting together a band to go out on tour, he was true to his word. He called both of his old friends. For Pierce, who now plays with a locally popular country-western band, the Red Dirt Rangers, "It was really bad timing. I'd just started a business, had just got married, my dad had just died, and we found out we were having a baby."

England, however, took Garth up on his offer. "Garth has said it many, many times himself. Ty is better than he ever thought about being," says Pierce. "Very few people are more naturally gifted with singing ability than Ty is."

In concert, England plays Keith Richards to Brooks's Mick Jagger, acting as a good old boy foil during rowdy numbers like "Friends In Low Places." When his boss takes a break, England performs a solo number, wearing a white Stetson nearly as large as Garth's.

The impression that England may be poised to leave the band and strike out on his own is entirely correct. "I see Ty's solo career in the future," says Garth, "and though I would hate to lose him, I wish him success."

Though they both grew up in Oklahoma, Garth didn't meet keyboard player and fiddler Dave Gant until they were both in Nashville. Garth calls Gant the most schooled of the bunch: Gant took violin lessons from his mother in Ada, his home town, and was classically trained on the viola at the University of Central Oklahoma. In high school he played in a country-western band in Kiowa. The vocalist was a little red-haired girl named Reba McEntire.

Last year, when Gant married Susan Polly in Elkhorn, Nebraska, (pop. 1,500), the security guards outside weren't on hand to watch over the wedding presents. During the ceremony, Brooks sang "Unchained Melody."

Nobody takes great pains to point out that Betsy Smittle is Garth Brooks's sister, least of all Garth Brooks. When he introduces her in concert, it is as someone who has been a good friend all of his life—and a hell of a guitarist. "Betsy Smittle has been in it for twenty years," says their mom, Colleen. "She didn't just pick it up just because she's Garth's sister."

Colleen Brooks has been known to brag on Betsy, her only daughter, when asked about Garth. "She's got a smile that would light up a room if it was completely midnight."

Garth teases Betsy during rehearsal, calling her "Hollywood," for her flamboyant style. "She has a wonderful knack for rhythm, but probably her greatest talent is relating to the audience," says Garth. "I'm not sure anyone has as much fun as Betsy does onstage."

—BP

*Garth's Okie cushion: Third from left, Dave Gant, Ty England; second from right, Betsy Smittle.*





*The soft-spoken Brooks becomes a different person on stage. Case in point: the tilted hat routine he does during "Friends in Low Places" has become more raucous as the star's gotten bigger.*

of the yearbook—escorting high school royalty and in his junior year, as a candidate for Yearbook King. In his senior year he had the lead in the class play: a photo shows him earnestly rehearsing in a black Styx t-shirt. He was also on the football team, a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and the Future Homemakers of America. "It's no big deal," says Todd Johnson of the latter. (Johnson is another bulky ex-jock who grew up across the street from the Brooks family and was Garth's classmate.) "We all took home economics. It was an easy A."

Johnson remembers Garth as someone who got along with everybody. "Back when we were teen-agers getting into trouble, it seems like Garth never got into any. But he liked attention."

"I'm always surprised no one says he's funny," says his mother, Colleen Carroll Brooks, who in her everyday life is as open and exuberant as her son is onstage. "His first complete sentence was, 'I'm the boss around here.' He kept us all in stitches."

Colleen herself had a contract with Capitol Records in the 1950s. She cut four singles and was a featured performer on Red Foley's Ozark Mountain Jubilee. "I have what they used to call a cigarette alto," says Colleen. "They said I was kind of a cross between Jo Stafford and Frank Sinatra." Garth calls his mom, "Totally professional. She's got the best vocal I ever heard from a female."

Except for a stint singing at the Moose Lodge in Yukon, Colleen gave up her singing career to raise her six children. As far as she was concerned, it was a good trade: "It used to be if you were a star, your life was taken from you." After Garth graduated from high school, he followed his brother Kelly to Oklahoma State University in Stillwater on a partial athletic scholarship (he threw javelin). He majored in advertising, but graduated with a love of performing and a knack for marketing.

Whether or not Brooks seemed destined for stardom in those days depends on who you ask. "I always knew Garth was going to make it," says Dale Pierce, a fellow track team member who lived in the athletic dorm with Brooks. Pierce played the banjo, and the two were known to play all night in the lobby. "Garth and I used to more or less keep everybody up, until they'd kick us out."

"He just always had a stage presence, even just sitting and picking in the living room. He'd be singing in the hall, and people would just stop and turn around and look."

"It's kind of funny," says a guitarist who used to hang out at Wild Willie's, a campus bar where Brooks had a Wednesday night gig, "of all the local musicians, he's not the one I would have picked to become a star." To him, Brooks seemed to be somewhat of an outsider in Stillwater's music scene, playing mostly covers: Don McLean, Neil Young, Dan Fogelberg. "Back then, he didn't have the whole image of Garth Brooks."

Brooks did impress even his critics with his doggedness. He played regularly at the Holiday Inn, a decidedly uncool venue in collegiate Stillwater. "He was just a real hard worker," says the guitarist. "A lot of the local guys would turn down gigs because they didn't make enough money. Garth would play every time he had a chance."

If others were unsure that he had found his place, Garth wasn't. Sitting with his guitar at Willie's playing for thirty people was the same thrill he now gets playing in huge auditoriums, he says. "It's exactly the same. I'm having fun and trying to be entertaining. I can't let a song go without there being some kind of message in it."

Stillwater was also where Garth met Sandy Mahl, a feisty child psychology major he first saw while working as a bouncer at Tumbleweeds, a country dance hall on the outskirts of town. One night Sandy put her fist through a bathroom wall in a scrap with another girl. Garth escorted her outside, and a few weeks later, the pair began to date. Pierce remembers Garth coming in and saying, "Man, I met this girl, and I think she's what I always wanted." From the beginning, Pierce says, Garth and Sandy seemed to have the gift of talking openly to one another.

But in 1985, Brooks left Sandy and the cozy confines of Stillwater behind for Nashville. "I just bawled when he left," says Colleen Brooks. "None of us wanted him to get into (the music business)."

Brooks had promised his mom he would call and let her know where he was as soon as he checked into a motel. When he hadn't called by three a.m., Colleen was ready to call the police. When the phone finally rang, Colleen let her youngest son have it. "I was chewing him out, saying 'I won't have this,' and Garth was saying, 'Mom, MOM...I'll be home in a few hours. I'm in Fort Smith.'" When he drove up to the house in Yukon, "I was tickled to death," says Colleen. "I hung on to him like a rag."

It had taken Brooks only twenty-three hours in Nashville to learn that the music community wasn't waiting to welcome him—while waiting to see a producer, he saw a well-known songwriter come in the office and ask for a five hundred dollar loan. Brooks could make that much in a week back in Oklahoma. "When you go to a new place and unpack, you unpack who you are and get ready to go out. As Garth explains it today, "I realized that everything I was, I had just left behind in Oklahoma."

One of the things left behind was Sandy Mahl. The other was his parents' blessing. Sandy married Garth the next year, in May 1986, and in 1987 the pair went to Nashville along with Santa Fe, a band from Stillwater. But Brooks didn't yet have his mother's blessing. "When he went the second time, it broke my heart," she recalls. "I thought, 'The marriage won't last.' I talked to Sandy, too. I asked her 'Are you sure you want it? You're going to have to give up an awful lot.'"

The band soon split up, but Garth and Sandy stuck it out in Nashville, supporting themselves by cleaning churches and working in a boot store. Sandy sold flowers in a local Wal-Mart parking lot. "I went to Nashville to visit," recalls Colleen, "and Sandy had a dozen purple roses for me. They were so

happy and doing so good, they got my blessing."

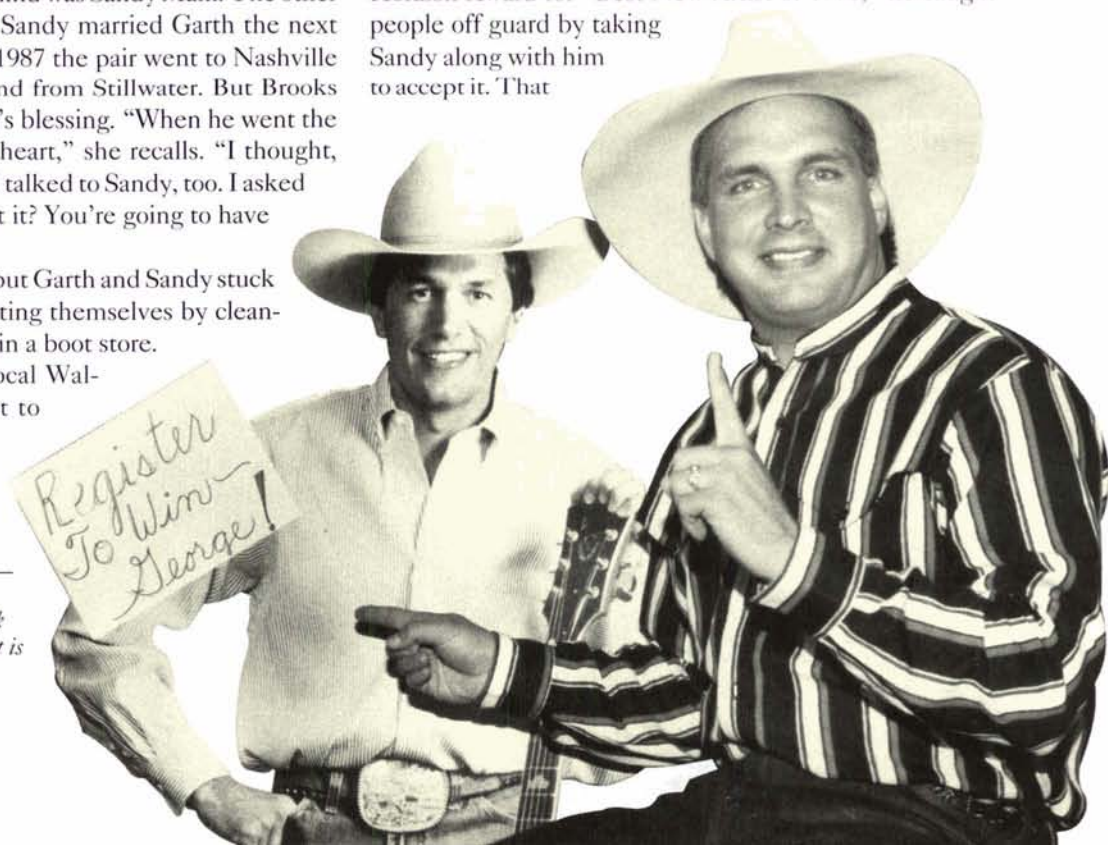
Within ten months, Garth had a deal with Capitol Records. Though Capitol executives had already passed on Brooks, the singer filled in one night for an act that failed to show at a writer's showcase at Bluebird Cafe. A Capitol Records executive in the audience offered him a record deal on the spot.

His first album *Garth Brooks*, released in 1988, produced four number one hits (among them the anthem "The Dance") and sold half a million copies in six months. His Stetson earned him a spot for awhile with "hat acts" like Clint Black and George Strait, but his theatrical, athletic stage shows loaded with special effects soon set him apart. Says Russell Barnard, publisher of *Country Music* magazine, "We knew he was going to be big. How big, no one could have guessed."

Here is how big: His first three albums, *Garth Brooks*, *No Fences*, released in 1990, and *Ropin' the Wind*, released in 1991, have sold seventeen million copies (before *No Fences*, which sold six million, no country artist had ever sold more than four million copies of an album). *Ropin' the Wind* made musical history when it debuted at number one in both country and pop charts in *Billboard Magazine*. "I don't think we're going anywhere," said Brooks when he heard the news. "I think the people who listen to rock 'n' roll are coming over to country."

And with his rock concert-style show, Brooks treats country fans to rock's energy—without drifting out of their comfort zone. He smashes only one guitar at a time and splashes his band members with bottled water. He still says "sir" and "ma'am."

When the Country Music Association awarded Garth its Horizon Award for "Best New Artist of 1990," he caught people off guard by taking Sandy along with him to accept it. That



The two Georges—Jones and Strait—make Garth star-struck and nervous. "(Mark) Chesnutt is fishing buddies with George Strait. I don't see how he can relax around him."

simple act of marital fealty earned the young singer a lot of attention. "Somebody once told me they were watching that night and told me, 'I didn't know who you were, but I knew I would follow you.' I thought that was very sweet." Since then, Brooks has taken home a slew of awards: the CMA Entertainer of the Year (two times); numerous album, video, and single awards; and from *Billboard*, Top Pop Album Artist and Top Country Artist. He's stayed remarkably unself-absorbed throughout the acclaim. He canceled an appearance at the American Music Awards this past January when Sandy, three months pregnant, collapsed. And at the Country Music Awards, he was scheduled to sing a duet with George Jones, but begged off due to nervousness: "I'm Garth Brooks. He's George Jones, King of Country."

**R**ussell Barnard doesn't agree, however, that Brooks single-handedly blurred the borders between country, rock, and pop. Country has often been found "Rubbing against the edges of rock and roll," says Barnard. "It comes and goes." And Garth wasn't the first to put on a rowdy show: Hank Williams, Jr., for example, has been known to duckwalk across a stage.

Furthermore, the release of *Ropin' the Wind* coincided with a change in the way *Billboard* counted record sales; the magazine now includes records bought at places like Wal-Mart and K-Mart. The new system counts sales more accurately; it also showed there is a much bigger market for country music than had previously been believed. "Garth Brooks was the hottest item at that moment," says Barnard. "He got a tremendous amount of publicity. That doesn't take away from the fact that he's one of the most successful entertainers of all time."

Although Brooks's albums have never been particularly well-received by critics (especially on the East Coast—*Rolling Stone* once called him "the Vanilla Ice of country"), as a live performer, he is regarded as being without peer. "Garth

Brooks has made this point himself," says Barnard. "He doesn't consider himself a legendary musician so much as he does a very successful entertainer. He doesn't make a big deal out of whether or not his stuff is historic in the sense of Merle Haggard or Johnny Cash."

Where Brooks has set himself apart from the others is in his businesslike approach to his career. "He's well-educated," says Barnard, "and he came out here with a real plan about how to go about it. He is very personally involved in shaping the marketing and promotion and the stage style. He's different in that regard from the performers who let their manager run all of the stuff and just show up and play."

Brooks is also notorious in his scorn for ticket scalpers and bootleggers. For every show, he holds back tickets to the



*When Brooks was playing back in Stillwater, he promised himself that if he ever made it big, at least one song each night would still be performed Willie's-style: just Garth and an acoustic guitar.*

## **Brooks has called his relationship with the audience a marriage, and it looks like he's feeling loved tonight.**

first two to five rows of seats, a trick he learned from talking with Bruce Springsteen's manager and the manager of U2. If he didn't do that, Brooks says, "The people in the first three rows are sitting down all night, pissed because they paid \$250 to \$500 for their tickets." Instead, before each show starts, Brooks sends someone out to deliver the front-row tickets to folks seated up in the balcony. All ticket prices are comparatively low, about \$17. He told *Forbes*, "I believe in the Wal-Mart school of business. The less people pay, the more they enjoy it."

Bootleg t-shirts are another sore point with Brooks. "This is crazy, but we hired a lawyer to chase these guys (selling unlicensed t-shirts) down in the parking lot." At one venue, a guy selling t-shirts told one of Brooks's crew, "Not even God is getting us out of this parking lot tonight." The renegade t-shirts are poor quality, says Brooks. The ones he licenses for sale are marked "Blue Rose, Inc." and are always made in America.

Barnard says Brooks can expect to wrestle with such problems for a long time, since country fans are known for their loyalty. In Dallas, where a single ticket was reportedly offered for \$900, he broke Bruce Springsteen's standing record by selling 18,000 seats in thirty-seven minutes.

Lately, people have been comparing Brooks's popularity with that of Elvis. When he hears that, Brooks almost snorts.

Does his life ever seem surreal?  
"All the time."

**T**he bigger Brooks gets, the more determinedly he insists that he is the same guy he was in Stillwater—a little richer, a little better known, a little more bald. He missed his high school reunion in 1990 only because he was touring in Canada. (After watching a videotape, he says he is kind of glad he did: "I was the only one who aged. Ev-

eryone looked fantastic. I'm thirty or forty pounds heavier, and I had a lot of hair in high school.") And until last spring, his parents lived in the same house in Yukon where Garth grew up. Christmas 1991 was the turning point, says Colleen Brooks. She hung a sign on the door wishing everyone a Merry Christmas and requesting some privacy, but the doorbell rang all day long. The capper came one morning when she thought she had discovered a body out in the dumpster. It was someone looking for Garth's trash.

In March Colleen and Troyal moved to Edmond to a four-bedroom house with a swimming pool, pond, and horse barn on one hundred and fifty acres. Though the *Daily Oklahoman* listed Garth Brooks as the buyer of the \$640,000 piece of property, his mom says, "Garth helped. Troyal has always been a very good provider." The best thing about the new house, both she and Garth say, is that it is big enough to hold a table the whole family can gather around. "Garth calls it my Disneyland." (The singer offered to buy his wife's parents a house, too.)

Though *Forbes* has listed Brooks as the thirteenth richest entertainer in the United States, estimating his 1991-1992 income at \$44 million, Garth and Sandy have never been the kind of family that spends much money. "We like to do things that don't cost a lot, like walking or going to Wal-Mart. We do that now at 8:30 p.m., just to look at things, not to buy anything."

Now that he and Sandy have more money than they can spend in ten lifetimes, Garth says, "The best part is the independence of not having to kiss somebody's ass. We've really slipped in a real cool mode."

"And I won't have to worry about sending Taylor to college, like my folks did. She can go as far as she wants."

The old friends and family members Brooks surrounds himself with on the road seem to provide the singer with a sort of daily reality check: Guitar player Ty England, an old buddy from Stillwater, is another former resident of Iba Hall; bass player Betsy Smittle is his sister; and keyboard player Dave Gant is from Ada. His road manager is Mickey Webber, whom Garth met in the second grade. (Colleen Brooks still goes to Jacque's Family Hair Styling in Yukon, where Mickey's mom, Jacque, does her manicures.) "You can tell in the first five seconds of a conversation if total strangers are sincere or not," says Brooks. "Me and Mickey will sit there and talk to someone. When they leave we say, 'Hey, that guy was really cool' or 'What a bogus individual.'"

"It's great not to be surrounded with yes men. They'll tell me, 'I think you're getting a little fat.' Kelly and Betsy and I will argue about tickets, seats and stuff, and views... The one cool thing about the whole bunch is if I have to go off and be the boss, that's okay. They'll tell me, 'I'm doin' it, but (you're) still wrong.'"

Brooks also keeps up with the Yukon Millers, the football team he played for unspectacularly in high school. This fall, the team made it all the way to the playoffs, and Garth got a request from a Yukon woman to send the team a good-luck fax. "I said, 'No ma'am, I didn't do it when they were

0 and 10, and I don't want them to think I'm supporting them because they're winning.'"

Garth still wears a beat-up DuPree Sports cap from his days working at a sporting goods store in Stillwater. "It's a root, something to hold on to. They keep trying to take them away from you." He has outgrown another keepsake, the brown shirt he wore in the eighth grade in his school picture for the Yukon *Spirit* yearbook. "I'm much heavier now, so Sandy wears it." And rich as he is, he still drives a red 1986 Chevy pickup he bought used at Dub Richardson Ford in Oklahoma City. "Sandy jokes and bitches, I haven't really taken care of it, it's ugly," admits Brooks, but "I love it. It reminds me that Oklahoma is my home."

Such thoughts come often. "My wife and I look at each other," says Brooks, "and think, 'God, our little girl was born in Nashville, not in Oklahoma.' I'd love to raise my child in Oklahoma. But I'm in a business I pray to God I'm in for years and years. I have to be in Music City."

I asked everyone I talked to at the concert in Louisiana if they knew that Garth Brooks is from Oklahoma. To my disappointment, not one of them did. You can bet, though, that Brooks won't forget his Oklahoma roots.

He says he is sorry that when he is standing on a stage accepting an award, he has never thought to thank the state itself. "Just to be raised in Oklahoma puts you on the board in the game of life."

"Don't be afraid to go anywhere in the world. If you were raised in Oklahoma, you were raised with all you need. There a rightness and a goodheartedness there that's not anywhere else."

"There's only one Oklahoma. And I'll be honest, I miss it." □

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*Barbara Palmer is associate editor for Oklahoma Today. Alan L. Mayor is a Nashville photographer.*

## Getting There

*During the summer, the Garth traffic is pretty heavy in Yukon, says Todd Johnson, who sells Garth Brooks Boulevard replica traffic signs and miniatures of the Yukon water tower (it proclaims the town as the home of Garth Brooks). Travelers along the interstate are lured in by a sign along the highway advertising his Yukon Trophies shop at 1007 W. Main. Visitors can drive by the house where Brooks grew up at 408 S. Yukon, and that's about it for Garth-related attractions, says Johnson.*

*In Stillwater, Wild Willie's has dropped the "Wild" from its name, but there's still live music Wednesday through Saturday nights (a band called the Hickedelics plays frequently). Willie's Saloon is at 4th and Washington, (405) 372-9854. Live music, country dancing, and the occasional rodeo are features at Tumbleweeds Dance Hall and Arena, the club where Garth worked as a bouncer and met his future wife. The club is at the corner of Lakeview and Country Club Road, two miles north of Highway 51. (405) 377-0075.*

