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Music Man

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Producer Steve Buckingham's 30-year roller-coaster ride from Richmond guitar player to Nashville hit-maker

It's only 9 a.m., but Steve Buckingham is already positioning a large bottle of Tums on the stool that serves as his makeshift desk in the recording studio at 17 Grand, a nondescript one-level building along Nashville's Music Row. The antacids, Buckingham says, come in handy on busy session days.

"I've gone from a producer's desk to a stool," he muses, joking with the studio musicians who are filtering in for a May recording session with contemporary singer/songwriter Mindy Smith.

You may not be familiar with the name Steve Buckingham, but it's a good bet that some of the tunes produced by this former Richmonder have found their way into your iPod. If you've heard Alicia Bridges' disco anthem "I Love the Nightlife," for example, you know Buckingham's work. Since producing that first mega hit in 1978, Buckingham has racked up 27 No. 1 singles and four Grammy awards. During his career, he's worked with a truckload of superstars, including Tammy Wynette, Dionne Warwick, Linda Ronstadt, Norah Jones, Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton, who's been his friend for 17 years. Buckingham has even headed to the studio with Big Bird. He produced the soundtrack Sesame Street's Follow That Bird, which earned him his first Grammy.

Along with producing hit records, Buckingham is also senior vice president of Welk Music/Vanguard and Sugar Hill Records in Nashville, as well as an accomplished musician himself. He actually started his career as a studio musician, playing the guitar and "only when he has to" the dulcimer. Buckingham played on albums for a variety of artists, everyone from Grammy-winning singer/songwriter Joe South, famous for "The Games People Play" to singer Billy Joe Royal of "Down in the Boondocks" fame.

At the moment, Buckingham and the group of musicians currently warming up are waiting for the arrival of Smith, who'll be recording songs for a Christmas album. Buckingham produced the singer's first two CDs — One Moment More and Long Island Shores. (The latter features a dramatic version of Dolly Parton's hit "Jolene.")

To set the mood, Buckingham has added twinkling, multicolored Christmas lights and a holiday wreath to the décor. He started preparing for Smith's recording session the night before, making sure that everything was in place for her arrival. He completed the music charts, set up the instruments and the microphones. Those last-minute details followed weeks of pre-production, during which Buckingham met with Smith to go over the songs and work out the basic arrangements.

"Buck spends his time and his talent on really studying the artist he is going to produce," observes Eddie Bayers, a studio musician who'll be playing drums for Smith's sessions. He's known Buckingham for 27 years. "Buck has the innate capability of understanding the artist. He's gifted at what he does. There are only a few like him."

Nashville-based freelance recording engineer Neal Cappellino agrees. "Steve comes in well-prepared. His mind is like a steel trap. He can remember details, and he has a great cast of loyal musicians that he pulls from in Nashville. He knows how to put the right musicians in front of the artist."

As he stands alongside Bayers and the other musicians, Buckingham slips his hands into the



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pockets of his jeans, pushing back the Hawaiian shirt that loosely covers his white T-shirt and tapping his feet as he listens to Smith's demo of the first song that will be recorded today. Minutes later, Smith rushes in with a small silver tinsel Christmas tree that Buckingham places in the singer's sound booth. She follows him and slips on her headphones, waiting for Buckingham's cue to start singing.

"We have a good time when we work with Steve," Smith says later as she sits in the outer room waiting for lunch. Buckingham has been teasing the vegetarian, telling her that a beef-heavy meal is on the way. "I think the music sounds better when you are having a good time."

The Frog Prince Sings

Buckingham's foray into the music industry began when he was a youngster living in the Lakeside area of Henrico. His parents — both now deceased — moved here from Columbus, Ohio, when Buckingham was just a year old. His father, Buck, was a route salesman for a laundry company; his mom, Eleanor, stayed home to care for Buckingham. Both were very supportive of their son's talents and aspirations. Buckingham's mother, for example, kept the financial books for The Centaurs during her son's stint with the band, and his father would help drive band members to performances. "My father was one of 'The Greatest Generation,'" Buckingham says proudly. "He was right out of central casting if you were going to hire the typical World War II first-sergeant type, tough with tattoos. He was a real hero who was awarded the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts. My mother was very smart and had such class. As a young woman, she dressed and looked like Katharine Hepburn."

Buckingham and his circle of friends from the old neighborhood remain close, spending time together whenever he pops into town. "Everybody gets excited when he comes home to visit, even if it's just for a day," says Sandra Hunt, a childhood friend who considers Buckingham part of her family. She first recognized his musical talents at Lakeside Elementary, when he played the Frog Prince in the fourth grade's production of *Thumbelina*. "Everybody had to sing," she recalls. "It was the first time we knew Steve would be musical. Just recently, he told us he had found the frog costume from that play. His mom had saved it."

Buckingham's interests ran more toward sports in middle school, though. He played football and baseball for Brookland Junior High and ran track. Then one day the school's choral director asked the track coach if she could borrow a few members of his team to stand in the background during a play. Buckingham was one of the recruits. "She asked if anyone wanted to try out," he recalls. "It's one of those times that God turns you left. I sang 'Moon River' and got the lead in the play *Our Miss Brooks* even though I'm not a good singer. Some people in the play were musicians, and that got me interested in music."

In 1964, when Buckingham was 15, he and his friend, Ron Moody, formed The Centaurs (the group was later named Ron Moody and The Centaurs) and began immersing themselves in soul music and rhythm and blues. The band opened for and also backed acts such as the Drifters, Jackie Wilson, The Impressions and The Showmen, playing in Virginia, the Carolinas and Maryland. The second job they ever played was with Bill Deal and the Rhondels, a Virginia Beach band that produced hits such as "What Kind of Fool Do You Think I Am," at Richmond Professional Institute, which later morphed into Virginia Commonwealth University. "That was in the 'hey baby' days of beach music," Buckingham says. "Bill Deal was the best beach-music band. They were a big influence with us."

Linda Nicholson, who reconnected with her former schoolmate after seeing him accept a Grammy on television, remembers that The Centaurs played at her 16th birthday party, when they all were attending Hermitage High. "We were really impressed with them," she says. "We thought they were all so talented."

In 1969, when Buckingham was in college at the University of Richmond studying sociology, the band scored a hit with "If I Didn't Have a Dime." "That's when I knew that I wanted to be in the music business," Buckingham says. "My parents, God bless them, never discouraged me. They just wanted me to finish college." Which he did, in 1971.

The Disco Song

After graduation, Buckingham worked for Don Warner Music in the Libbie and Grove area of town, teaching guitar and selling instruments. It's there that he learned to read music. "Don gave me a book on music theory, and I taught myself," he says. In 1973, he moved to Atlanta and within a few months was asked to join the staff of studio musicians for larger-than-life music

impresario Bill Lowery of Lowery Music Company. Lowery was associated with hits such as “Be-Bop-a-Lula,” “I Never Promised You a Rose Garden” and “The Games People Play.” His stable of performers included the Atlanta Rhythm Section, Classic IV, Mac Davis and The Tams. Buckingham had originally met Lowery while playing with The Centaurs. “It was a great learning experience,” Buckingham says. “Bill was one of the last of those old-time record men that came up in the Elvis era. Thank God I got to work with him.”

It would also prove to be a starting point for Buckingham’s career. In 1977, Lowery asked him to produce a few tracks for Alicia Bridges. One of them was a song called “Disco ‘Round.”

“Bill went crazy over the disco song,” Buckingham recalls. “He said, ‘This is a hit. What if we change the first line of the chorus to ‘I love the nightlife?’”

Lowery started shopping the song to the labels. “I didn’t think much would come of it,” Buckingham recalls. But in the spring of 1978, Lowery announced that Polydor Records had picked up the song. It was released that summer, under the revised title “I Love the Nightlife.”

“Bill was very animated, especially when he was excited,” Buckingham says. “I remember him saying, ‘Get ready, Buck. You’re going to be on a roller coaster of emotions the rest of your life.’ And boy was he right.”

A Million-to-One Shot

“I Love the Nightlife” exploded on music charts around the world in 1978, launching Buckingham and Bridges on a whirlwind tour — along with producing the record. Buckingham played guitar on the hit — that included a stop in Paris the week before Christmas. “It was like a dream,” Buckingham recalls. “I remember looking at the Eiffel Tower and thinking, ‘I can’t believe playing guitar got me here.’”

When he came back to the states, Buckingham assumed he would be flooded with job offers. After they didn’t materialize, he decided to call the labels. His first call was to Arista. Still naive about the business, he asked to speak to music legend Clive Davis, the label’s founder and, at the time, president — Davis is now chairman of the BMG Label Group. “I got somebody in the artists and repertoire [A&R] department on the phone and explained who I was,” Buckingham says. “They said that Clive had been looking for me. Then he came on the phone.”

It turns out that Davis was a fan of the Bridges song. He asked Buckingham to fly to New York City. Buckingham obliged and spent the next morning in Davis’ office listening to songs that had been sent in to Davis. “Looking back, that was a million-to-one shot to get Clive on the phone, but to have the opportunity to spend four or five hours with him was like taking college boards,” Buckingham says. “He told me that if I ever came up with a song that I felt like was a hit to send it to him.”

Buckingham sent several, resulting in Davis sending him to Los Angeles to meet with singer Melissa Manchester in 1979. Buckingham was to produce her next album. “She was standoffish,” Buckingham recalls. “When she came to Atlanta to record, she was very reluctant. It was the first time she had worked with Southern musicians.” Buckingham eventually won her over — the self-titled album he produced contained the No. 1 adult-contemporary hit “Fire in the Morning” — and the two later collaborated on a Christmas album, *Joy*.

By the time Buckingham moved to Nashville in 1980, he was producing songs not only for Arista but also Capitol Records and a few for Motown. About five years later, after producing the Tammy Wynette hit “Sometimes When We Touch,” Buckingham landed the job of director of A&R for CBS Records, which owned Columbia and Epic in Nashville. “It was an unbelievable time to be at those labels,” he says, noting that the artist registry read like a who’s who of country stars, everyone from George Jones and Willie Nelson to Ray Charles and Dolly Parton. “I found myself in the middle of country music, and I loved it.”

Buckingham and Parton didn’t actually meet until 1990, when he was vice president of A&R for Sony-Nashville — Sony had purchased Columbia and Epic — and Parton was scouting for a new label. “I was going through one of those change-of-life things where a lot of the older country artists weren’t getting played,” Parton explains. “They dropped me from the label. I asked Steve if I could have a meeting.”

Parton told Buckingham that she felt she had a lot to offer. “Steve had to pray about it,” she says. “He’s like me, he has to pray about everything. He told me, ‘I think we should do this. I believe in

your talent.' ”

Since that time, the two have shared a number of musical successes, including *The Grass Is Blue*, which won the 2001 Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album and Best Album at the International Bluegrass Music Association Awards. “It was the most excited I have ever seen Dolly,” Buckingham says. “It was the only time I saw her speechless.”

The two also received critical and public acclaim for *Little Sparrow*, a second bluegrass-rooted album that included the song “Shine,” which garnered Parton a 2002 Grammy Award for Best Female Country Vocal Performance.

“We’ve had some great success — platinum and gold albums,” Parton says. “Steve listens to me, and I listen to him. My songs aren’t perfect. I trust Steve because I know he’s coming from a knowledgeable place. If he feels like you are over-singing a verse or giving away a verse too soon, he might say something like ‘It’s so good, let’s build up to it and have it be a surprise’ instead of saying ‘You are over-singing.’ One of the great things about Steve is that he has a lot of patience with artists.”

Grammy-winning vocalist Linda Ronstadt agrees. Ronstadt worked with Buckingham and Cajun musician Ann Savoy, who was raised in Richmond, on the album *Adieu False Heart*. “There is so much pressure when you’re standing in front of a microphone,” she says. “If the person is being pushy or criticizes you, your work won’t be creative. You have to have an avenue that is safe but doesn’t indulge you. Steve’s great about keeping you on task by providing a nurturing atmosphere.”

His work is invisible, she adds. “He lets the artist flow through his hand. He’s astounding. He does a masterful job with an acoustic record.”

Buckingham compares his work to that of a film director. “I have to have a great actor — ‘artist,’ ” he says, noting the musical equivalent. “A great script — ‘song’; a wonderful supporting cast — ‘musicians’; a superb crew — ‘engineers’; and a good set — ‘studio,’ ” he explains. “I do a tremendous amount of preproduction and homework to make it seem like I’m not doing that much producing when I am in the studio.”

Work as a Hobby

By 1992, Buckingham was in burnout mode, with the constant pressure to grind out hits wearing him down. “This business isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s all about what’s on the charts and how high is it on the charts,” he says. “I was living and dying over chart positions. I thought about moving back to Virginia, but I ended up buying a farm outside of Nashville.”

Buckingham now has a small Victorian house in Nashville and a 250-acre farm with a Victorian home about 50 miles southeast of the city. He collects vintage cars — a 1957 Corvette and T-Bird and a 1963 Ford Galaxie convertible that he drives around Nashville — he bought the car’s Commonwealth Ford (a former Richmond dealership) license-plate frame on the Internet. He shares his space with his three small terrier mixes — Suzy, Buddy and Milo. “All of my dogs through the years have been strays,” he says. “One of them, Danny, who lived to be 16 years old, went with me everywhere. He was so well-known in Nashville that articles were written about him.”

Even though his current job — Buckingham joined the Welk organization in 1999 — isn’t a spit-out-the-hits-or-hit-the-street scenario, Buckingham still finds himself working most of the time. “My hobby is my work,” he says. His homelike Nashville office reflects his career. Rows of framed gold and platinum albums fill the wall behind his desk. A custom-made 1973 Gallagher G70 guitar sits nearby. The mantel over the fireplace across the room houses awards as well as framed photos of artists Buckingham has produced. Close by is a large cutout poster of Parton singing into the microphone. A neighboring credenza holds neatly piled stacks of CDs sent in by aspiring artists.

Buckingham is constantly bombarded with calls and CDs from hopeful artists and songwriters. “I don’t listen to CDs every day,” he explains. “The other day I went through a stack of 300 and set aside four. There might be one that I follow up on. You know within the first 10 or 15 seconds if you need to keep listening.”

When he’s in the recording studio, Buckingham admits he can be intense, especially if he’s working with someone who doesn’t measure up musically. “Some people might say I’m

intimidating, but I'm not to the people I work with and who know me," he says. "I'm pretty laid back. Sometimes you have to be intense to get things done."

And sometimes you have to rely on your sense of humor, something Buckingham got from his dad. "Steve's an elaborate practical joker," Cappellino says.

Bayers remembers when he owned a recording studio and Buckingham disguised his voice and called in, posing as someone who wanted to rent just eight tracks of a 48-track recording machine — something that couldn't be done. "I started laughing when I realized that this is ridiculous," Bayers says. "Buck finally let the cat out of the bag."

But this practical joker knows his limits. "Dolly warned me many years ago by saying, 'Don't be pulling your jokes on me,' " he says. "And I never did."

Homecoming Honors

Sitting in the lobby of The Jefferson Hotel, Buckingham, who has just flown into Richmond to deliver the 2007 commencement address at University of Richmond, cuts a distinguished figure. His silvery white hair offsets a tailored black suit and patterned black button-down knit shirt — a complete departure from the casual outfits he wears in the studio. "It may sound corny," he says, "but I try to fashion my clothes after the gentlemen of the 1940s — Cary Grant, Fred Astaire, etc."

"Steve has class and intelligence," observes Parton. "He is a true Southern gentleman, one of the classiest men I have ever met."

Buckingham was shocked at the invitation to speak at commencement. He read the letter to his assistant in disbelief. "I thought I was going to be one of several speakers," he recalls. The university assured him that he was the main speaker. "I had no idea how people were going to relate to my speech, probably stunned silence," he says. Buckingham's speech on lessons he has learned from people in the music industry was well-received.

Parton insisted on visiting Richmond back in 2000 to meet Buckingham's mother. "I told him I want to go with you to Richmond to meet your mama and tell her what a good job she did with you," Parton says, laughing in her signature style. Parton is so comfortable with Buckingham that she often asks him to serve as her escort to public events. "My husband doesn't like being in the limelight," she explains. "And Steve loves doing it. He and I both love to dress up. We are old-school like that."

One of the highlights of Buckingham's career came last year, when he escorted Parton to the 29th Kennedy Center Honors, where Parton was honored for her lifetime contribution to the arts. Buckingham served as a consultant for the portion of the show that paid tribute to his longtime friend. The weekend was surreal, he says. "You would look around the room and see people like Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Smokey Robinson and Barbara Walters."

At the State Department dinner the night before the show, Buckingham sat between Parton and Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of President John F. Kennedy. "Our dear friend Alison Krauss sat across from me and all night kept mouthing the words, 'I can't believe I'm here.' Neither could I," Buckingham says. During the televised show, the president and the first lady were seated with the honorees. "Dolly turned to me and said, 'I can't believe a little country girl from Locust Ridge, Tennessee, is here.' I replied, 'I can't believe a guitar player from Richmond, Virginia, is here.' "