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Sugarland

By [Joan Tuppance](#)
April 1st, 2009

The snaking line of fans waiting to meet Jennifer Nettles and Kristian Bush of Sugarland don't care that temperatures are hovering around 90 degrees or that the line seems to creep along. They endure because they know that meeting this award-winning duo will be worth every bead of perspiration and every minute of wait time.

Nettles and Bush make it a point to visit with every fan that they can, even if only for seconds, and to give them a memory they won't soon forget. That's just who they are and who they will remain, regardless of the accolades and honors that keep mounting.

"Jen and Kristian are very down-to-earth people," observes independent Nashville producer Byron Gallimore, who produced Sugarland's last two albums. "They are always smiling and happy. They are very balanced. I have a lot of respect for them. They just like to entertain."

When it comes to pleasing fans and the industry, Sugarland has hit the jackpot. This February they won a 2009 Grammy Award for Country Performance By a Duo or Group with Vocals as well as the Grammy for Country Song for their hit "Stay." "I hope they realize what they've gotten," says Gallimore. "The Grammys are viewed as the ultimate award."

The duo won Song and Single of the Year at the 2008 Academy of Country Music Awards for the touching acoustic sensation "Stay." Nettles made history with the powerful ballad by being the only female artist to have solo-written the ACM Song of the Year. Sugarland also won Vocal Duo of the Year and Nettles snagged Song of the Year for "Stay" at the 2008 Country Music Association awards. Not bad for a group that came onto the country music scene in 2004.

While they may be a new sensation on the billboard charts, Nettles and Bush aren't new to the entertainment business. Both honed their careers in Atlanta. Nettles, who was born in Douglas, Ga., and began singing in church when she was a youngster, fronted both Soul Miner's Daughter and The Jennifer Nettles Band, playing in coffeehouses and smaller venues in the Atlanta area. She even participated in the 1999 Lilith Fair tour as part of The Jennifer Nettles Band.

Bush grew up in Sevierville, Tenn., even though he was born in Knoxville, Tenn. His family ran Bush Brother and Co., maker of Bush's Baked Beans, until they sold the company in the early 1980s when Bush was in his early teens. "I remember being 8 or 9 and knowing that was my fate," Bush says. "We were there so much I could tell you what each machine did in the cannery."

Bush's passion for music started at the age of 3 when he began playing the violin. By the age of 12, he had added the guitar to his repertoire. "I picked up the guitar with the hopes of getting a girlfriend," he says, laughing.

At 14, Bush and his 11-year-old brother cut their first album. "It was really a bad album," he says. "Making records was our hobby." Bush tried to sell all the albums to friends. A few made the purchase. "I keep waiting for [those early albums] to show up on eBay," he jokes.

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He began writing songs and performing with Billy Pilgrim, an alternative rock 'n' roll acoustic band, while he was attending Atlanta's Emory University. The popularity of the group resulted in a record deal with Atlantic Records just months after Bush graduated from Emory in 1992. "I was one lucky man," he says.

Bush stayed with the record label until the late 1990s. During that time he and Nettles were both performing in Atlanta. Nettles had started writing music when she was in college. "We were immersed in the same songwriting scene," Bush says. "She had a duo and then another band. We interacted during that time but we never worked together."

The first time Bush heard Nettles sing, he was astounded. At the time, he was working on his second Billy Pilgrim album. He heard a woman singing as he was walking through a studio in Atlanta. "I went whoa," he recalls. "I remember the control in her voice. It felt so unique. When you close your eyes and hear her sing, you know who she is. That matters to me. I identify visually with a voice."

Gallimore is also a fan of Nettle's vocals. He sees how she protects her voice when they are in the studio. "She warms up for 10 to 15 minutes beforehand," he says. "She's much like an athlete. She takes care of her instrument."

Bush and Nettles met again in 2002 and with songwriter Kristen Hall – she has since left the group – formed Sugarland. Deciding to form a band was less difficult than coming up with a name that felt right and would attract attention. "It's hard to name a band," observes Bush. "You can make a poor decision quickly."

The newly formed group got its name from the hometown of an acquaintance. "It kind of fit," Bush says. "One of the great things about this experience is you have to learn to trust yourself. If it feels right, it's right."

Shortly after adopting the name, Bush wrote a song with the same title. "We couldn't decide if that was a curse or not," he says. "As it turned out it was a great song."

Sugarland quickly established a fan base in Atlanta. When the group debuted in Nashville at the live showcase venue, 12th and Porter, fans came by the busload. Whether it was the crowd or just the good music, Sugarland signed a contract that night with Mercury Records (part of Universal Music Group).

Since the inception of Sugarland, Bush and Nettles have been pooling their writing talents. They enjoy the creative partnership. "When you have a common respect and sensibility your strengths become exponential," Bush reflects. "Jennifer will say some words or go somewhere in a melody that I wouldn't have come up with in a million years only because I hadn't thought about it."

It's not uncommon for the two to sit together surrounded by piles of books filled with things they want to write about. Bush is, during this interview, sitting in the group's Atlanta studio staring at three huge Rubbermaid boxes two to three feet deep. "They all have pieces of songs in them," he says.

For Bush, the writing process is magical. "You feel as if you are a vessel," he muses. "It's as if the words come to you. Over time you get more and more used to it."

Gallimore has always been impressed with the duo's songwriting abilities. "They cover a lot of territory as far as their library of music," he says. "They draw from a lot of places and influences."

When it comes to musical influences, neither Bush nor Nettles listened exclusively to country music. Growing up, their tastes leaned more toward rhythm and blues and pop/alternative groups, such as REM, the B-52s and the Indigo Girls, than country.

"You have Jen and Kristian that came out of various Southern areas," Gallimore says. "You infuse that with the music they were raised with. Their songwriting is phenomenal."

Bush and Nettles didn't let their prior tastes deter them from focusing their attention on Nashville. That decision was right on the money. Their first album,



"Twice the Speed of Life," sold more than 2.4 million albums with three of its songs peaking at No. 1 on the charts. In 2005, they were named Breakthrough Favorite New Artist at the American Music Awards and Top New Duo or Vocal Group at the Academy of Country Music awards.

Their second album, "Enjoy the Ride," sold more than 2.2 million albums, and grabbed the No. 2 spot on Billboard's Top Current Country Albums chart when it debuted in fall 2006. Their current album, "Love on the Inside," released in 2008, produced their fourth No. 1 single with "All I Want to Do."

Their rise to fame has made them road warriors, touring with Kenny Chesney, Brad Paisley and Brooks & Dunn as well as headlining the CMT on Tour 2007: Change for Change.

That type of grueling schedule takes Bush away from his wife and two children. Even though he's very much a family man, Bush is also an entertainer who loves his work. "I couldn't imagine my life without all the people I have in it now," he says, adding that music is his calling. "I'm so humbled that I get to do this for a living. I'll do it till my fingers bleed."

Balancing his passion for his work with his deep love for his family is a delicate undertaking. "You are torn so many times," he says. "You are torn between your responsibilities to the things in your life and to your duties."

Bush can relate to long-haul truckers who spend most of their time on the road, away from home. His work, like the work of truckers, is not "for the faint of heart." Bush often leaves on tour in February and doesn't come back home to stay until November. "I visit home once a week or every two weeks for a day or two," he says. "I empathize with the traveling life. The beauty of it is that it allows me to be alone and to be lonely. I get a sense of self when I'm around me all the time."

To cope with all the stress associated with the road, Bush practices yoga each day. His workouts are strenuous. "It helps give you a certain amount of power over your body and mind," he says. "The sport requires great control and awareness and it gives me great benefits to my heart and physical body."

Bush and Nettles take their work and their health very seriously. Neither one parties when they are on the road. "Our show is a physical show," Bush explains. "We have to work hard all day long. We don't want to burn out or quit."

The two are consummate entertainers, always thinking of ways to give their fans a show they won't forget. In recent concerts, for example, they have crawled into individual clear, large inflatable spheres that are thrust into the audience and rolled across the uplifted hands of fans in the crowd. Bush and Nettles, who like the idea of stage diving but thought that country fans might not share in their enthusiasm for the rocker-type stunt, saw the spheres used by Wayne Coyne of the group Flaming Lips. "We are fans of his and he did it," Bush explains. "He's into performance art. It's one of the coolest things you will see."

Bush thinks of country music as an interactive sport like NASCAR. "You can get to and touch a NASCAR driver and you can get to and touch a country star," he says. "That's part of the job. Our show happens because fans participate."

This year Sugarland will continue to explore the interactive theme. "We are trying to create an environment that when you buy a ticket for the show you'll be able to tell your friends I was there when this happened," Bush says. "We work as hard as we can to create better music and a better show."

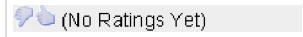
Bush knows what fans want from their favorite bands. Why? Because he is a fan of groups such as Pearl Jam, REM and The Police. When he goes to a concert, he saves his ticket and usually buys a T-shirt. "I read linear notes and join fan clubs," he says. That's why it's important to him to give fans an interactive experience at each show. "When you get 20,000 people doing the same thing at the same time, it's magic. All of a sudden you are not so alone and that matters."

Bush admits he has been awed by the awards bestowed on Sugarland by the country music industry because the group is still based in Atlanta and not Nashville. "These people voting for us are our peers," he says. "They are not

people we hang out with every day because we don't know them. It's such a vote of encouragement to have these people say you are doing a great thing, keep going, we support you."

At the moment, he's savoring Sugarland's success and feeling very proud of the new "Love in the Inside" album. "I worked harder on it than the others," he says. "I feel like I've been training for the Olympics and someone puts you in. I've been waiting to make a record – since I was 13 – that is this good."

The album takes him back to his youth, when he would stay up late at night and listen to music with his ears perched near the speakers. "It changed me," he says. "I've been chasing that perfect storm of opportunity, creativity and inspiration for so long. To have an album like this I am humbled to say I think I found it. It really feels like I gave it all I've got."



April 1st, 2009 | Category: Featured

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January 24th, 2010 at 10:25 am

Hi. Very nice Blog. Not really what i have searched over Google, but thanks for the information.

1

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