

# Hitting Success



There is a group of Georgia Southern Sigma Chis who share a love for the Fraternity and country music. Cole Swindell, **2005**, and his mentor, Significant Sig Luke Bryan, **1999**, are songwriters and singers. Michael Carter, **2001**, is Bryan's guitarist, and Blain Rhodes, **2008**, is manager of artists and repertoire (A&R) for Universal Music Group, the record label to which Bryan is signed. These men are connected to one another in interesting ways, and they support each other as true brothers would.

In this issue of *The Magazine*, we highlight Swindell, the Academy of Country Music's 2015 New Artist of the Year. With Bryan's encouragement, he left his hometown in Georgia for Nashville, Tenn., in 2007, hoping to one day sign a publishing deal to write songs. He roomed with Rhodes, whom he had

recruited to the Fraternity in 2005, and at some point, they both worked for Bryan.

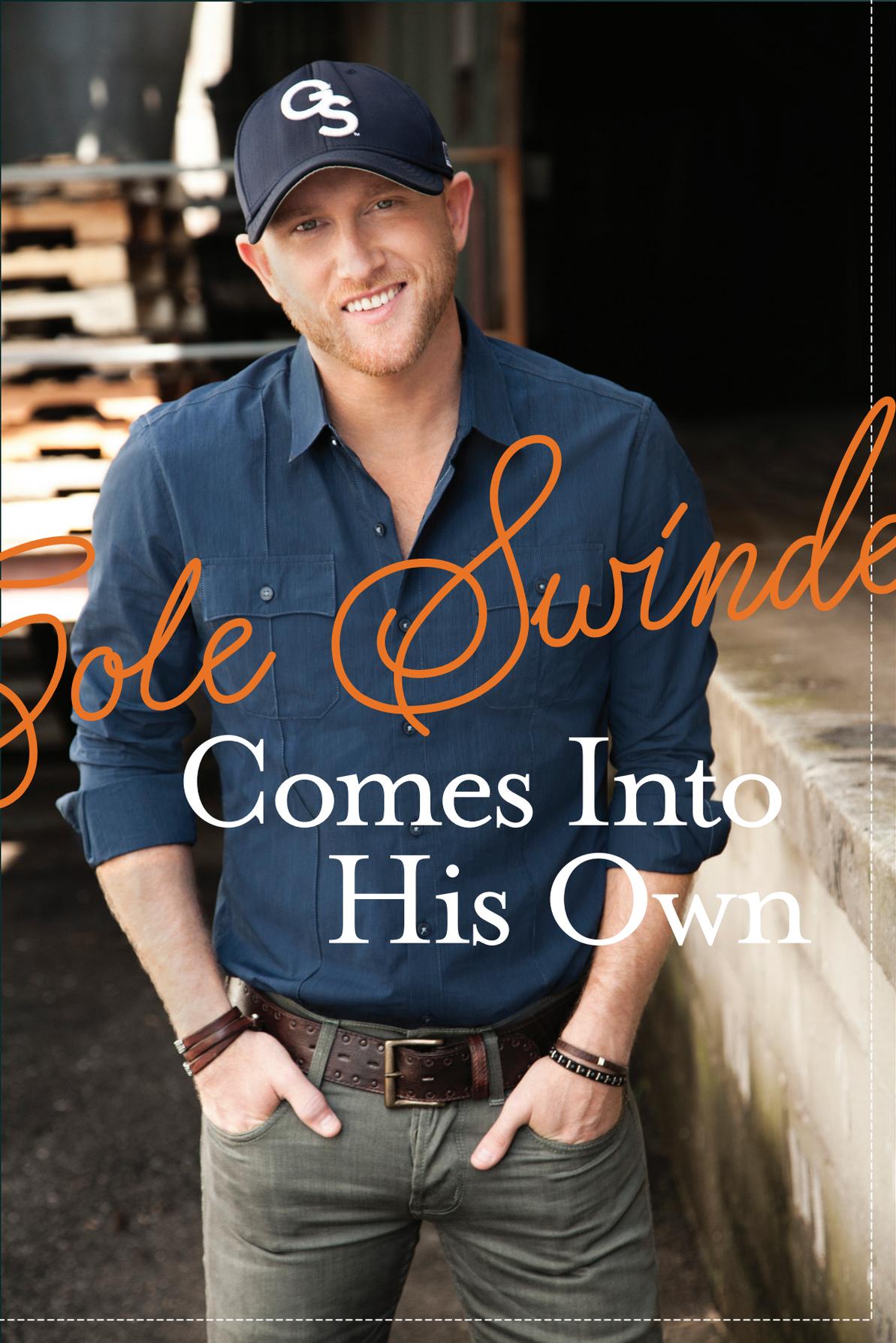
Swindell learned much from his experience with Bryan; he opened for the country music superstar before he became a success in his own right. On Oct. 13, 2015, the Recording Industry Association of America certified Swindell's self-titled debut album platinum.

As Swindell continues to propel his career forward, so does Rhodes. They share a friendship deepened by brotherhood and a love for music, just as Swindell does with Bryan and now with Rob Pennington, **2013**. The latter is an aspiring songwriter who hopes to follow in Swindell's footsteps. Swindell is taking what Bryan taught him about mentorship and applying it to his relationship with Pennington.

We hope you enjoy reading about these Sigs in this issue.



Photo by Rick Diamond



*Cole Swindell*

Comes Into  
His Own

By Susan Lorimor

Years after taking a risk and moving to Nashville, Tenn., with the dreams of becoming a songwriter, Swindell, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 2005**, has a Warner Bros. record deal and an impressive country music award.

Before Cole Swindell, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 2005**, went onstage last year to open for chapter brother and Significant Sig Luke Bryan, **1999**, he paced the floor. Surrounding the stage were thousands of fans, ready to be entertained. Swindell prepared to warm them up for Bryan, whose then-current album, *Crash My Party*, was certified platinum in September 2013 by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). It was the third-best-selling album that year, according to Nielsen.

The stage was a far cry from the smaller ones at county fairs where Swindell had played in the past or in the intimate clubs where he enjoys singing. Swindell, who hails from Bronwood, Ga., which has an estimated population of 392, was excited to perform on the larger stage as part of Bryan's tour. However, he grew nervous at the thought of doing so. That's where Bryan stepped in, helping him to relax. Bryan encouraged him to loosen up and enjoy his country music success.

"[Luke] laughs at me and tells me to chill out," Swindell says, looking back on the year with his mentor.

Swindell came off of a tour with Jason Aldean in October, and is on his second-annual Down Home Tour, this time sponsored by Monster Energy. He is amassing fans; they and members of the Academy of Country Music (ACM) voted for him to win the 2015 New Artist of the Year Award. The RIAA has certified his self-titled debut album and two singles off of it platinum. Another single has been certified gold.

Now Swindell is more comfortable on the stage within stadiums and large amphitheaters, where he just wants to have fun and allow his fans to do the same. "I get to sing music and help people escape what they're trying to escape," he says.

#### UNCERTAIN PLANS

For as much of a part of Swindell's life as country music is now, it was not such a big part of it when he was growing up. Sure, there are those times as a young child when he would

gather around as his father pulled out his guitar to play, says Swindell's mother, Carol Rainey. But she did not groom her child to become a musician, with vocal lessons and the like. In fact, he has never had a vocal lesson. That's why he and his mother both marvel at the fact that he has made it where he is now.

Swindell grew up in Bronwood, Ga., where he played football and other sports. His mother says he was good at just about anything he tried to do. She does not remember him singing much—other than in the car when they were riding around. She remembers him being good, but says, "I didn't think he could make a living at it [one day]."

Rainey does say that when Swindell was in high school, he would go to the beach with his guitar, playing music as people gathered around him.

The summer before he went to college, he met Burke Allen, **2005**, who would eventually become his chapter brother. While at school, they became a two-man acoustic group called Burke and Cole. They played local gigs, and soon booked shows across the state. Eventually they added a full band and went by the name "Cole Swindell."

Swindell moved home with his mom after college. He says he was trying to decide what to do with his life, and doesn't seem to be able to imagine what it would have been like if he would have stayed in Bronwood. He was determined to make a go at a career in country music, though his mom was not a fan of the idea.

"My thoughts were, 'Cole, you have to use this as a hobby,'" Rainey says. "I worked hard to get him to college."

Rainey explains that they were a hardworking family, and that over the years, she had seen people move to Nashville, Tenn., with dreams of making a career out of music, only to have their hopes dashed and move back. "I didn't want him to be heartbroken [if he went to Nashville and it didn't work out]," she says.

Rainey knows what it's like when life doesn't turn out as planned. She and Swindell's father

Right: Significant Sig and country music star Luke Bryan, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 1999**, at left, took to Twitter on April 19, 2015, to rally people to vote for chapter brother Cole Swindell, **2005**, in the bid to become the Academy of Country Music's New Artist of the Year. Swindell, at center in the photo, won the award later that night. Also in the photo is country music star Blake Shelton.



divorced when their son was 10 years old; that led them to Bronwood, Ga. "After his daddy left, we moved home," Rainey says of her transition back to the farm where she grew up. "That broke my heart."

Yet Swindell had his dreams, and kept telling his mom he would be OK if he left for the country music capital of the world

***"It was really scary for me to send one to school and then see him go sell T-shirts," Swindell's mom Carol Rainey says.***

without a job. In the meantime, he received encouragement from Bryan. When Swindell was at Georgia Southern in 2002, Bryan had stopped by the chapter house for help with his guitar. The latter man had not yet made it big and was in Statesboro, Ga., because of a show. The two began a friendship and kept in touch. Then, Bryan began to make it as a country artist. He was launching a career as Swindell was deciding what to do with his life.

"I remember asking Luke for advice," Swindell says, adding that Bryan told him if music was what he really wanted to focus on, he just needed to give it a go.

Bryan told him he would one day need a merchandise guy to sell his items while on tour; Swindell moved to Nashville in 2007, and Bryan followed through on getting him that job. It eased Rainey's mind knowing that Swindell would have some income, but it was still challenging for her. "It was really scary for me to send one to school and then see him go sell T-shirts," she says.

#### **A DREAM REALIZED**

Eventually, Swindell signed a publishing contract with Sony and wrote songs for Florida Georgia Line and Thomas Rhett. Swindell

Left: Carol Rainey helps her son, singer/songwriter Cole Swindell, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 2005**, celebrate his first No. 1 song, *Chillin It*, at the Nashville offices of BMI on May 27, 2014. BMI licenses artists' music. Photo by Rick Diamond/Getty Images.



also began to write songs for Bryan before he created the single *Chillin' It* and released it in 2013, without the help of a record label. The digital download led to a Warner Bros. record deal and Swindell's February 2014 launch of his self-titled debut album. The week of March 1, *Chillin' It* peaked at No. 28 on Billboard's "Hot 100" chart.

Swindell says that he keeps in touch with Bryan, but acknowledges that it's been more difficult to do so since they are both so busy. Swindell keeps in regular contact with his mom, texting her about once a day and talking on the phone with her every week. She, of course, has become one of his biggest fans. Both she and Swindell now see the conflict about him moving to Nashville in a different light. "I can't believe I ever got upset at [her] thinking I was crazy [for moving]," Swindell says.

As for Rainey, when she sees him on TV or hears him on the radio, she is thrilled. "It's just amazing. It's so hard to believe. I am so proud," she says.

Millions of people across the country were able to see Swindell on the small screen when he accepted his New Artist of the Year Award on April 19, 2015. Earlier that day, Bryan tweeted a photo of himself, Swindell and country singer Blake Shelton. Swindell was sandwiched by the two men, and appeared to pull away from Shelton, who was trying to kiss him on the cheek. Above the photo, it read, "Don't forget to vote for our boy."

Whether it was due in part to Bryan's social media push, or the support Swindell already had from fans and the members of the ACM, he won the award. Later that night, Swindell took the stage to accept it. Bryan then tweeted a photo of himself, his arm around Swindell. "Proud of you bud," the tweet read.

Right: The night that Cole Swindell, 2005, was named the Academy of Country Music (ACM)'s 2015 New Artist of the Year, his mentor, Significant Sig Luke Bryan, 1999, tweeted this photo of the two of them. The Georgia Southern Sigs had known each other for years; Bryan did not waste time expressing his pride in Swindell after his April 19 win of the ACM award.



## Country Music Success is All in the Chapter



When Rob Pennington, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 2013**, shown above, moved to Nashville to begin what he hopes is a successful songwriting career, he had the support of the Academy of Country Music's 2015 New Artist of the Year, Cole Swindell, 2005, who is from his chapter.

"If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be in Nashville," Pennington says of the man who has encouraged him to follow his dreams. "You strive and you look up to these guys [Swindell and Significant Sig Luke Bryan, **GEORGIA SOUTHERN 1999**]."

Swindell joins Bryan as a Georgia Southern Sig with country music success who is helping one of his own. When Swindell was a student at his alma mater, he met Bryan, who had not yet made it big as a country star; however, he had a publishing deal to write songs. He and Swindell became friends.

"From that point on, I was infatuated with who wrote the songs [that I heard]," Swindell says, adding that Bryan would send him ones that he was working on, asking for his feedback.

Now Swindell is doing the same for Pennington.

"Some of [the songs], if they weren't good, I had to tell him," Pennington adds with a laugh. " ... It's tough love."

Pennington says that Swindell's requests for song critiques influenced his desire to become a songwriter — and now Swindell has a fan who hopes to continue to follow in his footsteps. "Cole's doing it," Pennington says. "He's living [the dream]. You always want to be like someone you look up to."

Additionally, the Georgia Southern chapter is home to Bryan's guitarist Michael Carter, 2001, and Blain Rhodes, 2008, who is manager of artists and repertoire (A&R) for Universal Music Group.