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Toby Keith's Sooner pride leads to Hall of Fame

By Brandy McDonnell
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Toby Keith's country music hits come out of Nashville, Tenn., but Oklahoma is the place he calls home.

"More so than anything, I'm just proud to be an Oklahoman. Everywhere I go ... I hear people say, 'You know, you're the face of the Sooner nation.' Or if I go overseas, or if I go into other states, people will wave an Oklahoma flag or a Sooner flag," he said in a recent phone interview from his Norman ranch.

Keith is set to receive two big honors from his home state. He and seven other Oklahomans will be inducted Thursday into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in a ceremony at the Cox Convention Center. Also, he will headline the Nov. 16 Oklahoma Centennial Spectacular at the Ford Center with Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, Vince Gill and Carrie Underwood.

Keith, 46, was born in Clinton while his parents were living in Arapaho and his father, an oil-field roughneck, was working on a rig in Wheeler, Texas. When he was a child, his family moved around because of his dad's job. Except for a couple of years in Fort Smith, Ark., Keith has lived in Oklahoma all his life.

When he was in middle school, his family settled on a farm in Moore. Keith worked as a rodeo hand during high school and in nearby oil fields after graduation. In 1984, he made music his full-time job, playing Oklahoma and Texas honky tonks with the band Easy Money.

His self-titled debut album was released on Mercury Records in 1993, and the first single, "Should've Been a Cowboy," which Keith penned, topped the charts. Since, he has sold more than 30 million albums, notched 23 No. 1 singles and won numerous industry awards, including BMI's 50 Million Spins Award. He recently released the two-disc "A Classic Christmas" album, which sold more than 18,000 copies its first week.

Keith said his Oklahoma Hall of Fame selection is the highest accolade he has ever received. Retired Gen. James Jones, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe and ex-commandant of the Marine Corps, will introduce him at the induction.

"I'm very honored that somebody would look at my accomplishments and deem me worthy of being there," he said. "I'm just a songwriter ... and all I've ever done is just write songs and try to get the world to listen to them."

Shannon Nance, president of the Oklahoma Heritage Association, which operates the Hall of Fame, said inductees must be nominated. The association receives 100 to 150 nominations a year, and a committee votes on the candidates.



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"This is the single highest honor an Oklahoman can receive from our state," Nance said. "It's a very thoughtful and deliberate process. ... It truly is about what someone's contribution is to the state or the country or the world."

In addition to Keith's country music stardom, Nance said Keith is a successful businessman, does charity work and volunteers with the United Service Organizations.

In 2005, Keith started his own record label, Show Dog Nashville. He also opened the first Toby Keith's I Love This Bar and Grill that same year in Oklahoma City; Keith announced this summer that the chain will add a Catoosa location.

He helped found Ally's House, a nonprofit organization that helps Oklahoma children with cancer and their families, in 2004 and the Toby Keith Foundation in 2006. Earlier this year, his fifth USO tour took him to Germany, Iraq and Afghanistan.

He and his wife, Tricia, have three children: Shelley, Krystal and Stelen.

"He's a lot more diverse in his qualifications than people probably think," Nance said. "I think, for the committee, he really exemplifies the Oklahoma spirit in that he could truly live anywhere, but he chooses to live here and raise his family."

For Keith, Oklahoma is where his roots are planted, and he has no desire to live elsewhere.

"When most people, you know, get in the music business and move to Nashville, L.A., New York or wherever business is ... I've never made that move," he said. "This is home to me, and I'll never have a home base anywhere other than here."

The singer-songwriter was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame two years ago and was named the Heritage Association's 2003 ambassador of goodwill. Keith said he is honored that people closely associate him with Oklahoma.

"If I'm in California or I'm in Tennessee, people will come up and tell you an Okie joke just because they know you're an Okie. And instead of being offended or taking it in a hard way at all, I take a lot of pride in knowing the fact that the reason they're telling me an Okie joke is that they know I'm an Okie," he said.

"Anywhere I go, people in the audience, whether it's Germany or Iraq or Afghanistan or Japan or ... all across the great 50 here, there's always at least one if not several people holding up some sign in the audience, or a flag or a shirt or a cap, that has something to do with Oklahoma on it, letting me know that they know I'm from here. So, you know, that alone in itself is worth it to me."