

Singer-songwriter Rogers' career takes a major turn

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With Texas Music heavyweights Pat Green and Jack Ingram breaking out and blazing the trail on the national country charts, the timing couldn't be better for the Randy Rogers Band's major-label debut.

The release of "Just a Matter of Time" last week on Mercury Records Nashville helped the sultry lead single "Kiss Me in the Dark" squeeze Ingram out of the No. 2 position behind Green on the Texas Music Chart while it climbed into the 40s on Billboard's country chart.

The album follows the 2004 independent release "Rollercoaster," which caused a buzz with such tunes as "Tonight's Not the Night (For Goodbye)" and led country megastar Kenny Chesney to record Rogers' "Somebody Take Me Home" on his "The Road and the Radio" CD and Lee Ann Womack to cover "Down & Out" on her upcoming disk.

While "Rollercoaster" got Rogers' foot in radio's door nationally, "Just a Matter of Time" is swinging it open.

"So far so good," Rogers said. "The radio stations that were behind us regionally and in Texas on an independent level, and several national ones, have gotten behind this new project, and I'm very thankful for that."

Far from sounding like a wide-eyed debut artist when talking business, the 28-year-old New Braunfels resident comes off like a seasoned pro — which he is.

Some six years after getting his start on open mike nights at the Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, Rogers and his band had five independent-label albums, thousands of gigs under their belts and a burgeoning regional fan base before shopping for a major deal in Nashville.

It didn't hurt when Rogers teamed up to write songs for his two latest albums with Radney Foster, including "Tonight's Not the Night (For Goodbye)" and "Somebody Take Me Home"; Foster and George Ducas co-wrote "Kiss Me in the Dark."

Foster, a Del Rio native, is one of Nashville's leading writers and an icon on the Texas scene since the late 1980s and his days in the duo Foster & Lloyd. Foster also brought his keen ear for country rock and clean instrumentation to bear in his role as producer for both CDs.

"He has the swagger of Steve Earle and the grit of John Fogerty," Foster says of Rogers in press materials.

Hooking up with major labels — which stereotypically make the artist fit their mold — long has been a worry for independent-minded Texas artists, but all Mercury wanted was for Rogers to deliver the goods and do it his way.

He and the band signed with the label as a group and recorded in Austin's Cedar Creek Recording — Rogers lead vocals and acoustic guitar; Geoffrey Hill, lead guitar; Brady Black, fiddle; Jon Richardson, bass; and Les Lawless, drums.

"We split everything even—Steven and we work as a family, and Mercury was cool with that, too," Rogers said. "They said go make us a record, we turned it in and they liked it.

"I'm glad they didn't say that it sucked."

With the money and muscle of Mercury behind "Just a Matter of Time," Rogers spent three weeks in the studio instead of one and will have the marketing and radio promotion clout of the major label from coast to coast instead of the shoestring budget of an independent artist.

After appearing at Jack Ingram's fourth annual Real. American. Music. Festival. on Sept. 30 at John T. Floore Country Store, Rogers will head out on his first major tour with Dierks Bentley, a Country Music Association nominee for male vocalist of the year, and Miranda Lambert, who's up for video of the year and horizon award.

The new album finds Rogers' music, which he still calls "country rock with a fiddle," building upon his acclaimed foundation of solid writing (he co-wrote all but two of the new songs).

Like other Texas country storytellers, Rogers avoids the Nashville music machine's sharp hooks and polished poignancy, preferring lyrics that sound like someone just talking naturally while pouring his heart out and exposing the secrets of his soul in matters of searing love or cold sorrow.

"While I'm not taking anything away from 'Rollercoaster' — it's probably going to be my most prized record because my whole life changed after we put it out — I think 'Just a Matter of Time' is a bolder statement, the best collaboration with songwriters, the best musicianship in the studio and the best work ethic on the road," Rogers said. "Building these songs together as a band is the greatest collaborative effort I've ever done in my career, and I'm very proud to say that."

He's also proud to be with Mercury under the Universal Music Group umbrella, whose roster includes Womack, Toby Keith, Shania Twain, Reba McEntire and Vince Gill.

"It makes me feel really cool when I look on the Web page and right under my name it says 'George Strait,'" Rogers said. "It's an honor, and works pretty well to show off to the grandparents."