

Craig Wiseman

Owner, Big Loud Shirt Industries

Name: Craig Wiseman

Company Name: Big Loud Shirt Industries

Title: Owner/Songwriter/Producer

Personal Bio: Craig has had songs recorded by country's biggest acts including Diamond Rio, Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Lonestar, Phil Vassar, Joe Diffie, Tracy Lawrence, Brooks & Dunn, LeAnn Rimes, Buddy Jewell, Deana Carter, Randy Travis, Aaron Tippin, Lee Roy Parnell, Tracy Byrd and Trisha Yearwood. He has penned fifteen number one country singles, including "The Good Stuff" and "Summertime" (Kenny Chesney), "The Cowboy In Me" and "Live Like You Were Dying" (Tim McGraw) and "Just Another Day In Paradise" (Phil Vassar).

Craig was ASCAP's Country Songwriter of the Year in 2003, 2005, and 2007, and in 1997, Songwriter of the Year for both the Nashville Songwriter Association International and Music Row magazine. His songs have earned him honors at the Grammy Awards and from the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music. Craig serves on the Academy of Country Music Board Of Directors, the Executive Board of the Nashville Songwriters Association International and ASCAP's Advisory Board. He has been married to his wife, KK, for 13 years.

Penny: I've heard from several people that you have always been great at networking.

Craig: Well, the idea of politics and networking — it's hard for me to look at it that way. To me, that's like complimenting your mom's cooking by telling her what a great chemist she is. I mean, chemistry is going on whenever you cook. Glutens are combining, or whatever, but it's more of an organic thing than it is a science.

Scott Gunter said that you encouraged him to pitch songs when he worked in the tape copy room at Almo/Irving.

Craig: Yeah, Scott had really good ears. Talented people are just talented people. We became friends because I worked with tape copy a lot, especially as a young writer. He was as familiar with my catalog as I was because I was coming in and dropping stuff off. But the thing that set him apart was that he just had really good ears. He'd pick up on things in my songs, and he would make suggestions that helped me out. As a matter of fact, Scott Gunter and Darrell Franklin both started out in tape copy. They got to where they are now because they had talent beyond that. If anything, I was just trying to give them room to do their thing. Back in the Almo/Rondor days, the way we avoided ruffling the senior plugger's feathers was to only pitch songs that were over a year old. I told Scott and Darrell to put my name on it, and just let me know, so I could at least speak intelligently about it.

Did your relationship with Scott Gunter and Darrell Franklin, in the Almo/Rondor days, help them get established?

Craig: This whole town is nothing but an ongoing effort to spot people with talent, and Scott Gunter, obviously, is extremely talented — as is Darrell Franklin. I really am thrilled that I knew those guys back when. It's not like I'm responsible for their careers or anything, because when you're talented, you make your own way. Even then, you have to prove it a hundred different ways to a hundred different people. But yeah, I've got a piece in that mosaic somewhere.

When did you first start pitching your own songs?

Craig: I've always been lucky because there was a team of people pitching my songs at Almo/Irving, including the tape copy guys. I've done the same thing with my publishing company here. I quickly assembled a team of talented people who do their jobs well, and they also pitch songs. Pitching my own songs isn't a major focus for me right now — I do pitch some. I think one of the big breakthroughs with me pitching my own songs came with Tim McGraw. It was right about the time that I was just starting to break as a writer. I ran into Byron Gallimore in a parking lot, and he said that he'd really love to cut some of my songs. He told me that Tim was looking for something with interesting, quirky lyrics, so Scott Gunter and I put together a tape of about five songs that fit that description, and Tim ended up cutting four of them.

Wow.

Craig: Yeah, I pitched everything from these strange, up-tempo things, like "Hard On The Ticker," to more mainstream songs like "Where the Green Grass Grows." Then I ended up writing "Everywhere" and it made it on that album as well.

That's awesome! Do you have any other success stories that came from you pitching your own songs?

Craig: Yeah, Toby Keith went number one with "Love Me If You Can." Toby and I were neighbors on The Row. I had a house over on 17th Avenue, and T.K. Kimbrell and Toby were next door. They started saying, "Hey, send over some of your stuff." Of course, the tendency is to send over all this up-tempo crazy stuff, which I did, but somewhere in there was this kind of a cool song that fit Toby to a T. It really was a no-brainer pitch. You really don't have to be a genius to pitch a hit song.

Yeah, but there's a lot of "hit" songs in this town that never get cut.

Craig: Sure, but hearing a song and knowing it's a hit — heck, my mom can do that.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: The way you know a song is a hit is when your friends call you and say, "Hey, my four-year-old is running around the house singing that song!" Even a four-year-old can tell if it's a hit! The best take I ever heard on that whole thing was something that the old president of Almo/Rondor, Lance Freed, told me. I had a song on Diamond Rio called "Walking Away." Lance came to the No. 1 party and I told him that so-and-so had pitched that song. He looked at me and said, "It was a hit! A monkey could have pitched that song, but it takes a real pro plugger to get the pieces of shit cut!" Which is kind of funny, but it's also quite true. If you have a hit song —

come on! It isn't that hard to get a great song cut! Now, getting the weirdos and the misfits cut — that's where the hard work comes in.

Well, to some degree, but if that was absolutely true, then all of the hit songs would be cut. Have all the songs you thought were big hits been cut?

Craig: Dear God, no! As a songwriter, you sign on and you realize that you're probably going to go to your grave with your best stuff uncut, which is why you have to love what you're doing. You're supposed to write songs that entertain people, which means you have to entertain yourself first and foremost. Ninety percent of the time, that's the only thing a song is ever going to accomplish — entertain someone. Still, I know so many songwriters who don't enjoy the writing process, and they don't like the songs they write. They run around complaining about stuff, and I think to myself, *man, if you don't like what you're doing, how can you expect anybody else to?*

I'd like to backtrack a little. Did you play your songs for Toby Keith and Tim McGraw, or were they drop-offs?

Craig: I rarely go in and play stuff. It's usually drop-offs. I know that Toby got "Love Me If You Can" directly because he was asking for some of my stuff, so someone brought him a CD.

Do you enjoy going to pitch meetings to play your songs?

Craig: Sure, it's what you do when you're a writer. There's a ninety-nine percent chance of failure when pitching your songs; if you choose to look at it like that — I don't. The rejection is just part of what you sign on for. There are some writers who are just devastated by it. All I can say is: You either need to do it a lot more, so you get comfortable with it, or you need to stop doing it altogether. Most of the time, it's not going to be a successful pitch, and it probably wouldn't be as rewarding if it was. There's just something about getting that one song cut, after enduring countless rejections — it's like you're walking on air.

You said that you put together a team for this company, do you have more than one songplugger?

Craig: Oh yeah, we have Greg Gallo, who we're very happy with. He's great, and he's been on board almost a year now. We have Kimberly Gleason, who I worked with at Almo. She started off as David Conrad's assistant, and she was kind of the mother figure of the publishing company. Her couch was for therapy sessions and motherly advice.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: Kimberly and I have become tremendous friends over the years and I love her like a sister. When we were both at Almo/Irving she would say, "You know, that song would be great for so-and-so." And I'd say, *yeah, it really would be great for them!* We worked so well together, and as fate would have it, the week I opened Big Loud Shirt was the week Lance flew into town and closed the Almo office. One day, Kimberly just kind of showed up at the door here saying, "I could go home and be a full-time mom, but I really don't want to just stop working. I said, *well, I don't even have half of my utilities working yet, but welcome aboard!* That's how Kimberly got

started here. What's funny about that whole thing is while she was getting my office started, I had all these super pluggers, like Steve Markland, Scott Gunter and Chris Oglesby — all these guys who have changed my life, and dozens of other lives, out there pitching my songs. But in the midst of Kimberly getting the office situated, and while I was putting together furniture, and everything else, she started running around with my songs, and got me a bunch of cuts. I'm talking about "That's What It's All About" and "Live Like You Were Dying," and others. She got more cuts than all my super-pluggers put together!

[Penny laughs]

Craig: She's actually got more songs cut in six months than the other guys combined, and all of these came from her dropping off CDs with her babies in the back seat.

Wow, that's a great story! So, "Live Like You Were Dying" was a drop-off?

Craig: Yeah, but Missi (Gallimore) had heard about the song through Chris Oglesby. He had called her and said that it might be a really good song for Tim (McGraw).

Tell me more about your team here at Big Loud Shirt.

Craig: I'm proud of them. There's Greg (Gallo), we've got Amy Allmand at the front desk. Amy is a creative assistant, and she was also the assistant producer on the TV stuff. She's quite indispensable to everything we've been doing. We have a lot of creative hands on deck. I've already told you about Kimberly (Gleason); she's like my big sister and I can't imagine this place without her. Then we have Marc Sher in the London office. Scott Gunter and I forged our relationship with him back in the Almo/Rondor days. He was THE songplugger in London. Marc is sort of the English version of Scott Gunter, just that really hard-working, talented guy. He works out of our London office. It's been open about a year. Marc has three signed writers, and I'm heading over in about a week and a half to write, and maybe do a songwriters show.

Is the company in London a co-venture with a corporation?

Craig: No, that's Big Loud Shirt — straight up. There is no co-venture here. There's no corporate money involved whatsoever. We have the publishing companies, and our administrative company, Big Loud Bucks, has a staff of four. I'm very, very proud of that company. As I was putting that company together, I was able to hire Marc Driskill, who was at ASCAP. I brought him over to kind of run everything. He is just brilliant, and it's been fun watching him. He was one of the producers of our TV show, *The Hit Men of Music Row*. He sort of got roped into it. It started out with him looking at our contracts, and then because of the insanity, he kind of kept hanging around and helping out. We are all fans of the TV show *Entourage*, and when it came time to figure out the credits for our show, we got to thinking, *what's Marc's title?* He was doing the budget and just all kinds of stuff really — just everything that needed to be done. We thought, *he's kind of like that guy on Entourage — the guy who never gets drunk. He takes on all the headaches for us, and insulates us from that kind of stuff. So, he must be a producer!*

[Penny laughs]

Craig: Marc really has been our producer/manager, and just an all-around, super guy — he’s just amazing! Kele Currier is our director of administration, and she has a staff of three working under her.

Your company is really growing.

Craig: Yeah, We have over forty clients right now. Actually, you and I are here in the boardroom today, in between meetings. It’s statement time right now, so people are coming in for their statements — and their money. As a songwriter who is trying to pay attention to business, what we do and how we do it, and the money that flows through, we have crystal clear accounting here! We give unit sales, which a lot of companies don’t do. I have been to multi-platinum parties and then received checks months later for a fraction of the sales we had celebrated. Most of the time, as a writer, you have to figure that stuff out yourself, and it can be confusing because it’s scattered through the pages. Like, a hundred thousand units here, and two hundred thousand units there. You’ve got to keep this crib sheet going — writers don’t want to have to do that kind of stuff. So we break it all down on the front page, showing, “This is the album you’re on, and this is how many units you’re getting paid on.” We’re proactive about the money too, so we’re calling labels ahead of time, and letting them know that we know what we should be seeing on that next check. We’re on the phone at the end of the quarter saying, *SoundScan shows that you’re paying on two-and-a-half millions units sold, which means the check is for this amount — right?* So we’re letting them know what we’re expecting to get paid on, and if we don’t get that amount, then we want to know why.

Does a lot of money get lost?

Craig: Sure. Slow pay, no pay — all that stuff. For instance, we were entering a new client’s information and found tens of thousands of dollars that he’s still owed on those cuts. Just entering his information and cross-checking other payments made on the same albums

Wow! That’s a lot of money.

Craig: That’s just the business of music.

I understand you have six full-time writers here.

Craig: Yeah.

Does everybody in the office get together to listen to the new sessions?

Craig: Well, we try to get together for some listening sessions, but everybody’s running in a hundred different directions. We try to do that as much as possible, and take advantage of the “small house” things we have here. Even admin gets CD copies of all the new sessions, which really connects them to the creative aspect of what we’re doing. That’s why I bought this building: Everybody’s on the same floor — that’s the whole point. Whenever the admin folks are calling somebody about something else, they might have an opportunity to mention a song they heard on one of the CDs. They know we’ve got some new writers over here, so if they get a twenty-five-hundred-dollar sync fee, they’ll stick their head in the door and say, “Hey, guess what?” I think it adds a lot more enjoyment to their jobs, knowing the lives they’re affecting by diligently going after the money. Whenever they’re talking

to somebody about money they can say, “I know this writer. You fought to keep his song in your camp, so why are you messing around with his money?” The other great thing about having our own admin is we can connect things together. Let’s say we’re having some money troubles with a couple of the labels and my guys tell me about it. Then when the label is calling me and wanting more songs, I can say, *I’ve got some folks down the hall who are going to groan when I tell them you want my best work first, because they say I’m not getting paid correctly on the songs you already have — that makes me want to bring my new songs somewhere else.* It helps to be able to connect all those dots.

What inspired you to put together this team?

Craig: I think this is the way a company should be set up. It’s the old Rondor model. The ill effects of the corporatization of the music business in the last fifteen years are obvious. Everybody has been bought up. All of the main publishers are now a part of labels, which have their own admin. But admin should be on the other side of the table from the label asking, “Where’s our writers’ money?” But all the administrators are owned by these labels. It’s a very obvious conflict of interest, and a conflict of loyalties, and royalties, with regard to the writer. Given that the labels are handling the publishing and admin on the songs they should be paying for, the typical things you would fear could happen ...are happening. Nobody is being very diligent and going after the money. We have a client who’s had a number one song on a group that would have been downloaded and ringtoned like crazy, and the digital part of his statement was five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars when it should have easily been ten times that amount. Where’s the accountability?

Wow!

Craig: Yeah, wow indeed!

I guess on a happier note... [laughs]

Craig: Like I said, such is the music business.

I guess that a lot of creative people don’t look closely at the business side of things — they just want their songs cut.

Craig: I know it, and I’ve been trying to tell writers, especially hit writers, *c’mon, a certain amount of your time is going to have to be spent going after your money. You just have to wrap your head around that. You have to take care of business.*

Do you think that every songwriter should at least learn the basics of the music business?

Craig: They need to. It’s like owning a house: Every couple of years you have to get up there and nail the gutters back on, and all that stuff. You have to do it — that’s just the way it is. Music business is this big, old, weird, complicated thing — with lots of moving parts. The honest mistakes alone, require you to get up on the roof with a hammer. And then there are those not-so-honest-mistakes, which means you need to have a tool belt handy at all times.

Did you handpick the songwriters you signed here?

Craig: Yeah, I handpicked them. The first writer we signed was Betsy Ulmer. Ours was one of those horrible first-meeting things. She’s from Jackson, Mississippi, and

a friend of the family called me up on this one. I was leaving on summer vacation when he calls and says, “Hey, can you take a meeting with this girl while she’s in town?” I was just, like, *man, you don’t know how it works*. But I said, *fine*. So, she came over to the office and I said something like, *welcome to town. You don’t know what the hell’s going on. Nothing I would say now is going to make sense. We’ll continue this conversation in six months – if you’re still here*, sort of thing.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: *I’m glad you’re here. That really is the first and most crucial step, but it’s very self-learning at this point. So there’s nothing I can tell you now that’ll make sense*. So she hands me her CD, and I’m thinking to myself, *this is going to suck*.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: But I listened to her album on the way out to our river house, and I actually had to call her back and say, *okay, I’m sorry! You’re awesome!* It was a great pop album, but totally pop. She wasn’t a country writer at all, but as soon as I knew I was going to open my London office and therefore could do something with her, I signed Betsy immediately. And she’s done great! She and I have a Dolly Parton cut that’s supposed to be her next single. Dolly is supposed to sing it on *American Idol*. Betsy is really doing great — she’s brilliant.

Oh wow, awesome!

Craig: I should say, after telling that story, that I was a fan of her pop stuff from the beginning, but I didn’t sign her right away. So she got a job here, and started sending me songs, and then started trying to write country songs — but her country stuff was just horrible! *[laughs]*

[Penny laughs]

Craig: I didn’t even sign her and here she is — she’s working nine hours a day, and she’s still just cranking out these songs and sending them to me. And I just had to think, *there you go, man — there you go. That’s it, the heart of a writer*.

Yeah.

Craig: That’s what I want this company to be about. My job as a publisher, ultimately, is to find and encourage genius. That’s why I wanted to open my own office. If we find somebody great, we can do something with them. We look for writers who write outside of the box. That’s why Kara DioGuardi is one of the writers we work with. She’s BMI’s 2007 pop writer of the year, and we represent her here in town. She’s an independent writer and we were able to streamline stuff for her. We got her a Faith Hill cut, immediately. We got a Carrie Underwood song — I don’t know if it’s going to make the album, but regardless. And we’re doing that with a few other European people, more or less being their writer manager here in Nashville. If there’s somebody great that we click with, we just see what we can do, and figure out the business stuff later.

We just want this palce to be led and inspired by the creativity. If you have that, then you walk down the road and see what business makes sense from that perspective. I think the music business is so bereft of the creative focus right now, with all this corporate stuff. The creativity has to work first, and then we figure out the business

thing from there. A great example is a friend, Charlie Ryan, from Memphis. He owns Little House Music, one of those millionaire guys — great person. He’s been in publishing a long time. He had a writer, Chris Tompkins, and they had gone through all these attempts at opening and closing two or three publishing companies. We were just trying to give him a break because he had attorneys pitching him solutions like, “All you need is another half a million dollars, and sign five writers, and go for this thing.” We told him, *look, just put Chris upstairs. We have a creative department — we’ll just handle him.* Everybody here just loved Chris from the start. He is just a very likable guy, and Chris loved being here. We have a great relationship with Charlie, so we figured out a way to buy his catalog and get Chris over here. That catalog ended up having songs like “Before He Cheats,” which Carrie Underwood cut, and “Stupid Boy,” which Keith Urban cut. So we bought two of the five songs up for CMA song of the year for 2007. We didn’t buy it because we knew those songs were in there. We bought it because, creatively, it made sense. It was the thing to do, and something good came out of it. That has always been my motto: *Do your best stuff. Do what speaks to your heart, and that’ll work its way down to your wallet.*

That’s a great motto.

Craig: The other hundred and eighty degree approach is what typically happens: People operate from their wallet and, every now and again, it works out that they actually like what they did.

What do you think are the main differences between pitching to a pop project versus pitching to a country project?

Craig: The pop projects are a lot more closed. It’s still the same odds — poor. Pitching songs is like a one-in-a-million thing. It like trying to hit the lotto, and with pop, there are a lot more politics in the way, so it’s even harder to get things placed. But when it comes to songplugging, it’s still all about relationships — it’s a relationship business.

Absolutely, for a songplugger, the relationship is everything!

Craig: Yeah. I have a great relationship with my pluggers, but it’s the relationships those pluggers have with everyone else that get the job done. Darrell Franklin is upstairs listening for Rascal Flatts and Keith Urban. Because of our relationship, I can go up and play him stuff, and he might pass on everything today, but if I believe one of those songs is right for the project, I can come back later and try again. Our relationship is such that I can wait six or eight weeks and then come back and say, *I really, really feel pretty strongly about this song.* And he’ll usually go, “All right, let me listen to that again.” But if I did that every time, or the very next day, he wouldn’t be as open to doing that. So, it’s really a very selective thing. That’s probably the one thing that a lot of songwriters don’t get. Whenever somebody is plugging their songs, the writer is like, “Okay, go pitch my entire catalog to everybody cutting — every single day.” And what the writer doesn’t realize is this songplugger has to have some credibility, and they have to be seen as a filter between the songwriter and the rest of the industry. We all know the songwriter would be happy to just “fire hose” the world with everything they’ve written. But the

plugger's relationship has to go on, and their credibility has to be maintained. There are a lot of songwriters who complain about not getting cuts, and not getting holds and stuff. Okay, fine, you want to put your reputation on the line, then go pitch your own songs! That's what I did. I came to the point where I thought, *wait a minute, my plugger isn't pitching ALL my stuff. If I pitch my own songs, I'll get more cuts.* But when I set up some pitch meetings and I realized the B.S. involved — it's not easy! Of course, if you happen to get some cuts, the next time you go to your plugger and say, "I think this song would be good for so-and-so," they're more likely to grab a pen and write stuff down. And for the songplugger who thinks they know it all, I think maybe they should try to write a song someday and see how tough that is. It'll be like, "Jeez, you do this every day?" And the writer will go, "Uh-huh, yeah. I pretty much stare at a blank piece of paper — every day!"

What do think are the most important characteristics of a great songplugger?

Craig: The thing that drives this business is just a love and a passion for music. It's the ol' high school coach thing, where if all you see are obstacles, then you're not focused on your goals. So the goal is to love music, and be committed to that part of it — the music creators. That has to be the main thing, because the rest of it is just so hard. Ninety-nine percent of the time people will hear your songs and go, "No, I don't get it." And you just have to say to yourself, "Whatever man, I believe in this song. I believe in this songwriter, and there's a place for this song somewhere."

So, two of the most important characteristics are: the tenacity to stick with it, and the passion for the music! It's the same thing for a songwriter; you have to have the passion that will override the sea of crap that you're going to encounter. That's why, every day, and I mean every day, I'm in at nine-thirty trying to write songs. You know, the London offices, the admin stuff and the TV shows — that's all great, but I write songs every single day. That's how this TV show came about to begin with: A group of us were going out on these road gigs — me, Jeffrey Steele, Bob DiPiero and Tony Mullins — just so we could get out of town and focus on the writing. We'd written ourselves to a point of success that we could never seem to find time to write with each other anymore. So we started taking these out-of-town gigs, and showing up three days early so we could write together. Then somebody said, "Why don't I start bringing a camera along?" And we were like, *okay, but don't screw with our writing time.* And of course, it did!

[Penny laughs]

Craig: Songplugging is like writing: It has to be the passion that drives you. And like I've already said, it's a relationship thing. Songplugging, when it's all said and done, is sales — it is serious sales. I guess that's why a lot of salespeople get drawn to it. But if you're that cheesy, used-car sales guy — forget it! And there are a couple of famous ones in this business that make people roll their eyes — like you just did. There are a couple of those that get on the phone and come at you with their B.S., because, for some reason, they think it's about them. To them, it's not about the songs, it's about them and their smooth moves. So if you are that kind of plugger, then ultimately, I predict your undoing. Because this is still is a very small, Southern town, and people talk. There are very real and swift consequences for people who are annoying.

[Both laugh]

Craig: If you want to last in this business, don't go the slick salesman route. Your passion and love for music is what's going to get you through. That's what's going to impress people. And people say the same thing about young pluggers as they say about young writers, "Man, they were running around with these horrible songs, and just playing every one of them as if they could change the world." But if people see you're honestly passionate about it, at some point they're going to think, "I need to keep an eye on that guy. He's going to do something in this town." The same thing goes for a songwriter: This guy might be writing horrible songs today, but if he's stubbornly passionate, people are going to think, "One of these days that guy is going to mess around and write a hit."

[Penny laughs]

Craig: When it comes to songplugging there is a certain selflessness to it. It's like you literally just sacrifice yourself to it, like you're just in service to this thing called *music*. And the ones who are ultimately in service of music do great! And again, it's the same for songwriters. I've got a healthy ego and all that, but it's not about me. When I go into that room every day, it's about the song. I try to make the song the most important thing in that room. And I think, ultimately, the songpluggers who come from that mindset will always do well. You know, the Scott Gunters, the Steve Marklands, and the Chris Oglesbys.

Rusty Gaston is another really great plugger — and Greg Gallo. I work late here, and there are nights when I'm walking out at 9:30 pm and Greg's coming back from a show. He's doing three or four of these things a night. He's just eaten up with it! I don't even have to understand why he does what he does. The only thing I need to get is that he's passionate and committed.

As an indie plugger, I do monthly pitch reports, and before starting these interviews, I didn't realize that staff writers don't know which of their songs are being pitched by the pluggers.

Craig: No, not usually. Here, we have a customized database where anyone can pull up the plugger's comments and everything else related to a song. So someone can go about pitching intelligently, and the writer can see what's being pitched. When you have a team, you have to have communication. So if Greg wants to go in and play something for Darrell Franklin, he can look and see, "Oh, Kimberly pitched him that a month ago." That way he can go into the meeting and say, "I know you've already heard this song, but..."

On the other hand, I think that's one of the problems with being an indie plugger. Somebody wants to see who you've pitched their songs to. Consequently, indie pluggers are often accused of pitching everything — regardless of quality. That's why it can be harder for them to get into places. They're having to satisfy their client's demands, and they end up compromising their integrity. If a writer is paying you a monthly fee, there is the tendency for them to say, "How come you didn't pitch this to so-and-so?" But the relationship the plugger is trying to nurture on the other end suffers when they're pressured into pitching lesser-quality songs. There has to be some integrity there, and if all you're trying to do is fulfill the writer's need to see that these nineteen songs have been pitched, it can be very damaging. Nobody

is going into somebody's office and playing them nineteen songs — are you kidding me? And what about your other nineteen clients? That's nineteen times nineteen. I can hear them setting up the meeting now: "Okay, I'm going to need a couple of hours of your time." Yeah, right.

I'm glad you pointed that out. This can be a real integrity issue for some indie pluggers. The pros I know only take the clients they truly feel can compete, but we have all heard about other "so-called" pluggers who make up false pitch reports just to appease the writers.

Craig: Oh yeah!

What advice do you have for out-of-town songwriters?

Craig: Move to Nashville. And I know that's such a knee-jerk thing to say. It might sound a little flippant, but if you don't live here, you turn a one-in-a-million odds, to a one-in-ten-million. At least get to Nashville for a few visits. Between NSAI and hearing some of the amazing songwriters we have here in Nashville, you'll get the picture. I get emails all the time on MySpace saying, "Come and listen to my stuff." And I'm like, *man, I'm not listening to your stuff. My lawyer would sue me! And he's the only person who hasn't sued me at this point.*

[Penny laughs]

Craig: I'd like to tell people, *if you want your songs critiqued, go out and play them. If people don't shut up and listen, keep writing. If people do shut up and listen, damn sure keep writing!* It's just about that simple.

One topic that is always interesting is holds. What are your thoughts on holds?

Craig: I'm a producer now, and every camp has its own guidelines. There are some people who just put everything on hold, then don't get back to you. It's like some people just don't like to call with bad news. In defense of producers and A&R, sometimes there's a situation where you put a song on hold for six months, you love it, love the hell out of it, and then you go in and try to cut it, and it just doesn't work. If you've ever demoed a song, you know this can happen. You have this song that has so much potential, and you go in and try to cut it, and it's like, "Jeez, what happened?" It was supposed to be this amazing dish and it just turned into this pot of goo.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: That happens, even at the highest levels. The song is supposed to be great, and the track just doesn't have the magic. The problem for songwriters and pluggers is when somebody puts something on hold, it doesn't guarantee it will make the project. So, when there's this opportunity to get it placed somewhere else, what do you do?

Do you keep on pitching a song that's been put on hold?

Craig: I try to be upfront with everybody. I'm like, *listen, Tuesday morning this song is going on a CD to so-and-so. Are you really going to cut this?* You try to honor your holds, but, in the end, you've got to do what's best for your business, and if they can't give you an answer, sometimes you have to move on.

Do you have any stories that are unusual or funny or whatever about a song that got cut?

Craig: Oh gosh, I can tell you one right now. Scott Gunter will love this one. Montgomery Gentry just cut a thing I wrote called “Harder Cards.” It’s a song that’s at least ten years old. Gunter has loved that song forever, and I know he’s pitched it to Montgomery Gentry several times over the last ten years. Now, he has gotten it cut a couple of times with Collin Raye and Kenny Rogers, but it was always a “no-go” with Montgomery Gentry. So here comes Greg Gallo sailing in here, and Greg takes that song over there one time and ... boom! Gets it cut! And Troy Gentry is calling me saying, “Man, I love this song!” Like it’s the first time he’s heard it.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: You know, the right song, the right person, on the right day.

Oh yes, I know it too well! [laughs]

Craig: There you go. And that’s funny in the fact that I know Chris Oglesby has pitched that song to those boys several times. I can see Scott and all the other pluggers who pitched that song standing around going, “What the hell?!” I mean, I don’t know that for sure, but I can imagine. But who’s to say that all those times Troy and Eddie (Montgomery) heard that thing in the past didn’t play a part — I’m sure it did.

I think that it happens that way a lot.

Craig: The weird thing is, even the most outlandish stories are just another day at the office. It’s all just crazy, unpredictable stuff. And I know pluggers are an important part of that. For example, last night there was this thing I couldn’t go to because I was writing with a girl from London. Scott Gunter is taking over the catalog at Universal, so he decided to put together a Mel Tillis tribute. He actually got Mel to come down and sing some of the songs. I think Eddie Montgomery and Troy Gentry were there, and Troy and a couple of other artists are huge Tillis fans. So Mel did this cool little showcase down on Broadway — at The Stage. Man, I wish I could have been there.

That sounds pretty cool.

Craig: I’m sure it was. The thing is, five years from now, somebody will be doing a project and remember this cool Mel Tillis song. Maybe they’ll be working for a movie or something that needs a cool country song, and they’ll remember a song they heard last night, and there will be this twenty-thousand-dollar sync license on a Mel Tillis song that comes out of nowhere. And whoever is working at Universal at that time will take credit for it, but it was really Scott Gunter, last night at The Stage. And you know what, Scott knows that, but that’s what he signed on for.

Yeah, Scott has a great attitude about songplugging. In his interview for this book, he said it doesn’t matter much to him who gets credit for the cut, as long as the song gets cut.

Craig: I have so much admiration for Scott, and Chris Oglesby. Chris signed me to Almo/Irving, and then fought to get me my first demo sessions. You can just imagine how it was back then. David Conrad had these great writers like Mike Reid and Kent

Robbins, and here I am, writing this crazy stuff. Chris really fought for me. To be honest, that's the reason I went to BMG when I sold my catalog: to be around Chris again — I just love him to death. I have that same respect for Steve Markland, who I've worked with through other writers. All those guys are just as passionate, just as committed, and just as in the line of fire for the heartache and bullshit as any writer. The tough part is they're not always in the line for the rewards. So, being a songplugger is a calling of sorts, and it can be just as complicated and frustrating as anything. As a plugger, you're on the creative end of the business — you really are. And it takes a special weird personality. You put yourself in between the classic "rock and a hard place" kind of thing. On one side you've got these crazy, weird, myopic songwriters, who can only see their side of it. And on the other, you've got the raw, cold end of the music industry intake pipe. And a plugger has to mesh both of those worlds.

That's a great quote! Did Chris get you your first cut?

Craig: No, I got the first one!

[Penny laughs]

Craig: It was on Roy Orbison. But it was Chris who signed me at Almo — he got me my first real publishing deal. He signed me at Almo in 1990, and when he left in '93 to go run Bob Doyle and Garth Brooks' publishing company (Major Bob) it was heartbreaking, like getting broke up with.

Was that because he was "your guy" at the company?

Craig: Yeah, and it was devastating. But he told me, "Man, you're doing fine — you're doing great. Believe me, you're on the radar here." And true enough, by that time I was getting cuts and doing well, and they were happy to put my stuff in that stack with Mike Reid. I'm sure Chris timed his leaving Almo around that. He was making sure that I was taken care of. These are great, serious, cool guys to go through life with. I know them and they know me, in some ways, far better than my brother and my wife ever will. We're in this thing together. And the great thing about it is, as the industry changes, I might be working for them one day. I might be working for them or they might be working for me, or we might be working together in three or four years. And I may actually make plans for that to happen — in some way or another.

Scott and Chris in particular, are a big part of this company. They're in the fabric of this company because of what we've all been through together. We worked at Almo/Rondor, which was a really very special company. But within that, the relationships we had, the access, the intimacy and the trust! Man, that's here — that's here! Those guys are here, in everything I learned from the strength of their heart and their integrity, their passion and their commitment. That's what impressed me about them then, and that's what I'm emulating and re-creating in this company now.

Awesome! Do you have any final words on songpluggers, or any questions you wish you would have been asked?

Craig: Well, it's a tough gig, as anything in the music business is. I guess the most important thing I want to say is for the songwriters: If you want to sit there and

complain about your songplugger, then fine ... go plug your own songs! Try to set up a meeting, and then squirm in your seat as you wait for the verdict. I guarantee that your respect for your plugger will go up. And if you do happen to luck out and get something cut, maybe your songplugger will respect you a little more.

Oh, yeah.

Craig: I say “luck out” because it’s really a hard thing to do. You’ve got to earn the opportunity to meet with people. I hear songwriters complain all the time, “Well, I tried to go pitch my stuff, and I couldn’t get in anywhere.” And I’m like, *yeah, exactly! It’s tough!*

[Penny laughs]

Craig: Maybe the toughest thing about playing basketball against Michael Jordan is getting to the point where you *get* to play basketball against Michael Jordan. He’s not holding open auditions by the way.

[Penny laughs]

Craig: You need to play for the San Antonio Spurs, which is another journey in itself. So, best of luck with that!

[laughs] Well, thank you so much! This is a great interview, and it’s going to help a lot of songwriters and songpluggers. I wish you so much more success. It’s obvious how much you care about all of the people in your company, and I know it takes a lot of everything to build what you’re building.

Craig: Yeah, we’re feeding babies at this point. So there’s a lot of incentive to come in every day and write songs. *[chuckles]* We’re having a blast, we really are. I feel very, very blessed.

Well, thank you so much.

Craig: My pleasure!