

Scott Hendricks

Senior Vice President of A&R, Warner Brothers Records Nashville

Name: Scott Hendricks

Company Name: Warner Brothers Records Nashville

Title: Producer/Senior Vice President of A&R

Personal Bio: Scott Hendricks was the former head of Capitol and Virgin Nashville. As a producer his credits include Brooks & Dunn, John Michael Montgomery, Faith Hill, Trace Adkins, Restless Heart, Clay Davidson, Gary Nichols, Chris Cagle, Crystal Shawanda and Alan Jackson to name a few. He is the owner of Big Tractor Music, and on the board for NARAS. He is also a member of ACM, CMA, and Leadership Music.

Some of the highlights of Hendricks career include: Producing Alan Jackson's first two multi-platinum albums; producing the first two albums for Faith Hill resulting in seven million sales and several No. 1 radio hits; producing Restless Heart for RCA from 1984 -1989 which resulted in several gold and No. 1 records; produced Brooks & Dunn's first three albums; producing John Michael Montgomery on Atlantic Records resulting in seven million units sold, including two ASCAP songs of the year with "I Swear" and "I Can Love You Like That." He also produced the first dance mix in country music with "Boot Scoot and Boogie." Hendricks has won several ACM and CMA awards for album and single of the year, and an Emmy for producing the theme for Hank Williams Jr. for several seasons of "Monday Night Football."

Penny: *Do you have any great stories about songs that were pitched to you; ones you ended up cutting?*

Scott: Sure. There was this one song that was pitched to me, and every time I'd listen to it I'd think, *man, I love this song!* But I just didn't think it would work for the country market. For one thing, the demo sounded way too pop. Still, every two or three days I'd put that CD in and listen. This went on for weeks and weeks — almost a month. Every time I'd see it lying there, I'd put it back in and think, *I just LOVE this song!* Well, I was working with an artist at the time that I thought might sound great on it. But I was a little apprehensive about bringing it up at our song meetings, because at the time, the artist was very country, and I was pretty sure I'd be laughed out of the room if I played everyone this pop song.

Yeah.

Scott: But the idea just kept nagging at me, and at the end of the very last song meeting, before we went in to record, I said, *listen, I don't know if I should play this song or not, but there's just something about it that I really love. I don't know if it's right for this artist, but I think you should hear it.* So I played it, and the artist goes,

“I’ve heard this song. I really like it!” So the label head at the time said, “Well, I guess it’s worth a try. Let’s record it and see what we get.” That was about the extent of our excitement. I mean, literally! It wasn’t like, “Oh my God, this is going to be a hit!” It was like, “Well, it might be worth a try.”

[Penny laughs]

Scott: But once we cut the track on it, it really came to life. It turned out a lot more country than the demo version, and it was only at that point that I realized, *this could be a big song!*

And the song was?

Scott: “I Swear,” by John Michael Montgomery.

Wow. Yeah, that did turn out to be a huge song.

Scott: That’s one of my favorite stories, but there are so many other ones. “I’ll Still Be Loving You” is one of my favorites, with Restless Heart.

That’s a great song! My friend Mary Ann Kennedy was a writer on that one; along with Pam Rose and Pat Bunch

Scott: There’s a bunch of those Restless Heart songs that were great. Oh, and “Arlington,” which was a song I cut on Trace Adkins. That turned out to be one of the most moving songs I’ve ever cut.

Oh, I love that song!

Scott: And there’s a song on a new artist named Crystal Shawanda that I’ve got coming out on RCA. It’s called “You Can Let Go.” It took me several listens before I could even hold back the tears on that one — it’s that powerful!

Wow.

Scott: There have just been so many great songs. It’s hard for me to say this is my favorite, or my best.

Since this is a book about songplugging, can you remember who pitched some of them?

Scott: Hmmm ... I’m thinking, but I’m not sure that I could tell you who pitched what song. I mean, I owe the writers and the pluggers a great deal. They’ve been great over the years to bring me their best songs. But typically, I’m not focused on who writes them or who pitches them. All I’m looking for is a great song. I may not always have the artist for it at the time, but if it’s great, I’ll stick it in my song drawer and hold on to it — sometimes for years.

Really?

Scott: I had the song “Wild One” in my song drawer for over two years, before I finally cut it on Faith [Hill].

Oh wow.

Scott: I’d heard it and loved it, but I just didn’t have anybody to cut it on. The first day I met Faith — literally — I played her that song and said, *I think you’re the one to cut this song.* She ended up cutting several songs from that drawer.

That's awesome that you'll hold on to great songs like that.

Scott: I think one mistake a lot of publishers make, especially the bigger ones, is they forget about some of the great, older songs they have in their catalog. I totally understand how it can happen. Every week they get dozens of new songs turned in, and it's all they can do to keep up with the new stuff. So it's just real easy to lose sight of songs that start to get a little age on them. They may have even been on hold a couple of times, but for whatever reason, the stars just never lined up. After a while, they get passed over for newer songs. But I think publishers should make a point to go back and dig up those older songs. At Big Tractor, we will occasionally have some fresh ears come in and listen to our back catalog. I can't tell you how often we hear, "Man, I can't believe this song hasn't been cut!" And we'll go, *oh yeah, we forgot about that song.*

Do you have any inside advice on how to successfully pitch to producers?

Scott: It's really about relationship, to a large degree. And you build those relationships by bringing in great songs. After one or two meetings, if you haven't played one song that's even close, it's hard to see why I should take a third meeting.

Understandably.

Scott: I usually give people the benefit of the doubt, but if they are consistently playing average songs or still don't get the direction of the project, I have to move on. So I would just say: don't play mediocre songs, and the more homework you do, the better off you're going to be.

What is your idea of "doing your homework"?

Scott: Well, I think you need to learn more about the artist. You need to listen to more than just the single that's being played on your way into work. If I'm looking for a specific act, it would do you well to listen to their record – more than once. Try to get a feel for the artist. Write down the topics he or she tends to sing about. Is there a common thread? Does the artist have a certain style? Learn what those are, and try to match that with the songs you have. If you don't have a decent match, don't make the pitch. Don't waste someone's time just so you can go back and tell your writer, "Oh, by the way, I had a meeting with so-and-so but nothing happened."

Right.

Scott: You know, don't do it just so your writer will know you're pitching his songs. I understand needing to get your writer's songs heard, but try to understand that wasting people's time is never a good idea. If you don't have a song that fits the project, don't set up a meeting.

What would you say to a fairly new songplugger about what not to do?

Scott: That ... what I just said. And also, even if your song has the right topic or style, don't play an average song. Play the songs you absolutely believe in. I realize everybody has their own plugging style, and I can appreciate that you're just doing your job, but if you managed to get a face-to-face meeting, make sure you're playing great songs, and not just appeasing the writer. You'll build better relationships that way.

Do you prefer CD drop-offs over MP3s, or do you like to use song links?

Scott: You know what? I seem to be doing more song links lately. I mean, more than I have in the past. But for some reason, I still prefer CD drop-offs. I will do some MP3s, but you just have to be careful that you don't get too many, or it will bog down your email. As a rule, I only allow people who have proven they're not going to send me a bunch of junk to do the MP3s.

Oh yeah. Those files can be huge. What are the biggest challenges in finding songs for the artists you are producing?

Scott: Finding stuff that is better than average.

Wow.

Scott: I mean, there are so many good songwriters in this town, and there are a lot of good songs. Finding one that's better than good is hard.

That is a sentiment that I've heard over and over again as I interview for this book. I'm just surprised to hear there are so many average songs being pitched. Doug Johnson was saying it's like some songpluggers are coming in and just taking a shot at it. His thought was some pluggers should be doing something else for a living, because they're not thinking, they're just delivering — and a pizza guy can do that.

Scott: I concur with that. [*laughs*] I mean, I want to be encouraging, but average songs are just not going to get cut. The competition is just too tough.

Okay, a spicy topic for everyone has been on the subject of "holds." What is your take on them?

Scott: Well, I don't know. It depends on the relationship I have with the publisher, but I don't typically put a song on hold unless I'm fairly serious about cutting it. I've actually missed out on a few songs that way. I waited till we were sure, only to find out they were on hold with someone else. Of course, there are people I know who will put a song on hold before they even hear it. They know it's from a hit writer and they just don't want to miss out. But I don't think that's fair to the writer. I don't want to tie up a song unless I'm pretty sure we're going to cut it. Sometimes you can't help it, but I hate when a song gets put on hold for six months, then inexplicably gets dropped. Meanwhile the writer has lost out on other potential cuts.

Yeah.

Scott: Of course, there are times when I put a song on hold that I love, but the artist just doesn't connect with it.

Sure.

Scott: And I'm crying inside because I *know* it's a great song. That happens all the time. Then I have to call the publisher back, or email them, and tell them the artist passed on it. At least the publishers know that when I put something on hold, it will be heard by the artist. And they know I won't put a bunch of stuff on hold just for the sake of putting it on hold. But there's the other side of holds too: where songs end up with multiple holds. There are times when we've had "hold fights", where you've got three publishers pitching and they get three different holds from three different people ... at the same time! I've had those too. [*laughs*]

Do you think there's a better way for the industry to approach holds? Everyone's take on it is just so different; depending on whether you're talking to the songwriter, the publisher, the producer or A&R. I mean, we're all talking about the same thing, but everyone is just seeing it so differently.

Scott: Totally understandable. I mean, how would you like to be a songwriter with what you think is one of your better songs, then someone puts it on hold for a year or a year and a half while they try to find more songs for the project? It finally gets cut, only to lay there for another year, waiting for the project to be released. Then out of the blue, you get the call that says, "Well, we cut it, but it's just not going to make the record ... sorry." Believe me, I understand those frustrations. I very *much* understand those frustrations. But I'm not sure I have an answer for that.

It's a tough topic to find answers for.

Scott: Yeah, that's a real sore topic with a lot of people. Regrettably, I've had to be the one, many times, to call with the bad news. A while back I had put a song on hold that was written by some pretty new writers; and, of course, they got excited. After we tracked, I even called them back to say we think we got a pretty good cut on it. Only to have to call a month later and go, *well, we tried to sing it but the artist just isn't into the song anymore.* Unfortunately, in spite of your best intentions, sometimes it just happens.

There are a lot of out-of-town songwriters paying a lot of money for indie songpluggers, or "so-called" indie songpluggers, to pitch their songs. But the reality is their songs just aren't ready. The writers are being told their songs are getting pitched to A&R, but when I ask certain A&R friends, they may say they've never even heard of the plugger, or they don't remember those songs. So my feeling is that many songwriters are being lied to. But they are just so desperate to get in the game, that they aren't doing their due diligence.

Scott: Well, there's only a handful, and I mean *literally* a handful of independent songpluggers that I consider legitimate. There are probably many more than that who aren't.

I agree.

Scott: My advice is: If you're an out-of-town songwriter and you're going to hire a songplugger, you simply have to do your homework. Ask SESAC, ASCAP or BMI. Ask NSAI or SGA if they've heard of them. If you *are* an outside writer ... I'm not saying there's no way you can have success at it, living in Des Moines, Iowa ... but the reality is: If you are going to play baseball, you're going to have to go to the ballpark to play. I mean, yes, you can play it in your backyard, but if you want to play in the big league, you have to go to the ballpark. Country music's ballpark is Nashville.

That's a great analogy.

Scott: Again, that's not to say that it can't be done, but it's pretty unlikely. I know several examples of out-of-town songwriters who've had success, but typically, they've had some success while they were living here, and then moved away. That being said, I don't encourage every songwriter to move to Nashville, because it's a lot harder than what most people think.

Do you have one or two interesting stories about how a song got cut on one of your projects; one that was brought in by a publisher or songplugger? It could be funny or unusual.

Scott: This isn't answering your question, but I'll tell you one thing that has changed, compared to a few years ago. I can remember vividly — and this would happen a lot — we would be tracking a record, and a song would come in from a reputable songplugger. We would listen to it while we were eating lunch, and end up cutting it that day. Those days are pretty much gone. And the reason that they're gone is there are so many more layers of approval now. Last-minute pitches just can't get through the system quick enough. These days you have to get it to the artist's camp, the producer's camp — whatever — at least three days before the last tracking session. Everybody involved has to sign off on a song or it won't get cut.

Oh wow.

Scott: That's an unfortunate change, you know. So I have to tell songpluggers now: *Don't even try to show up at the session. Even if you have a great song, there's no way we can cut it on the session. Drop it off later, and if it's a hit, we'll book another session.* But the spontaneity of walking in there at the last minute and getting a song cut just doesn't happen anymore.

Tell me more about when you cut "Arlington" on Trace Adkins.

Scott: It was just an amazing song. I mean, we've had bigger songs on Trace, in terms of chart success, and things like that. But "Arlington" is just one of those songs that... when you listen to it, it just blows you away; it's written so well.

So you knew you had something the minute you had that song in your hand?

Scott: We were pitched a work tape. It wasn't even a full demo. It was just, literally, a boom-box recording

Oh wow.

Scott: Honestly, I didn't think it was a single when I heard it. But I just thought, *what a brilliant piece of writing.* It's written from a dead person's viewpoint. It's just so different, and it's just so well timed, and just ... powerful! Regardless of what its radio success was, it's just one of those great songs.

Yeah.

Scott: Thirty years from now it will still be a great song.

Do you have any stories on cutting songs on Faith?

Scott: Sure. Sometimes there are songs that you really believe in, but the artist doesn't quite hear it. But they allow you, as the producer, to make that call. Typically, those songs don't work out. [*chuckles*]

Yeah.

Scott: In Faith's case, there was a song that she really wasn't crazy about called "It Matters To Me." I begged her, *please cut this.* And she did.

[laughs] Thankfully!

Scott: Yeah. But there are all kinds of stories like that. There is a song on the first album with Alan Jackson that we weren't supposed to cut. We were only approved to cut fourteen songs. Well, we had cut all fourteen, and there was still fifteen minutes left on the tracking session. But there was one more song that both Keith Stegall and I really liked. It just wasn't approved by the label. But we had fifteen minutes, so we thought, *why not?* And we cut it. The next day, the president of Arista Records, Tim DuBois, calls and asks me, "How did it go?" I said, *it went great!* Then he asked, "Which song do you think is the hit?" And I told him the title of the fifteenth song. [*chuckles*] He was just livid! "You weren't even supposed to cut that song! It wasn't on our approved list." And I said, actually, *we cut all fourteen on the list, and we had time, so we cut this one as well. Your question was what song I think is the hit, and my answer to you was that fifteenth song.*

Wow.

Scott: Believe it or not, while he was on the phone he told me, "Not only is that song not a hit, it's not even going to make the record!" Well, we finished all fifteen songs and turned them in to the label, and to Tim's credit — and I admire him greatly for this — he let everybody in the office listen to every one of the songs ... all fifteen.

Oh wow.

Scott: And pretty much, everybody in the office liked that fifteenth song best. Still, he didn't want it as the first single. So Alan came out with "Blue Blooded Woman" as his first single. But when it came time for the second single, again to Tim's credit, he said, "Okay, maybe I'm the only guy that's missing this. Everybody seems to like this other song, so I'm going to go with it." And that's the song that broke Alan Jackson as an artist. It was a song called "Here In The Real World." That really taught me a lesson. Sometimes even the best ears in the business don't hear it initially. Since this happened, the story has been reversed for me; when I was in Tim's shoes.

Oh wow, that's a great story!

Scott: Yeah. I have so much respect for Tim because of that. We've all had those similar situations, but it takes a big person to go, "You know what? I could be wrong about this." I admire him for doing that, and I learned a valuable lesson that helped me later on.

That's awesome. Have you ever had to be convinced about a song? One you didn't think it was anything special, but later turned out to be amazing?

Scott: Oh yeah! When I was president of Capitol Records Nashville, the A&R team was helping shape an album by a new artist by the name of Deana Carter. We had asked her to go back in and record some additional sides. She had already cut quite a few, but we didn't feel like we had what we needed. So, she went back in and cut seven more songs. And when it was all said and done, in all of our infinite wisdom — us being professionals at a record label — [*laughs*] we identified the three or four songs we thought would be the big singles. We were so confident in our decision that we put a sticker on the front of the CD with the titles of these three or four songs. I don't remember if it was three or four, it was something like that. But the sticker said, "New artist, Deana Carter, featuring ..." and then listed these four songs.

For the song we had slated as the first single, we had shot a seventy-five-thousand-dollar video, we had already pressed five thousand CDs that were ready to be shipped out to country stations all across America, *and* we had paid for two full-page trade ads in *Billboard* and *R&R* — which weren't cheap.

Wow.

Scott: Basically the trade ads said something like, “Here comes new artist Deana Carter, featuring her new single “I’ve Loved Enough To Know.” In the mean time, while we were getting all this stuff ready to go to the market, we were also taking the record around to radio stations. Some of the radio program directors, but primarily a lot of their wives, would comment at the end of Deana’s four- or five-song set, on a song called “Strawberry Wine.” It wasn’t even one of the four featured songs! It was a song we all loved, but we just thought it couldn’t be a single for several reasons. It was over four minutes and thirty seconds long, which is taboo in the “single” world of country radio! Every program director will tell you, “Don’t give me anything over four minutes, we just don’t have time. I’ve seen many a great productions cut to pieces because they’ve got to get it down to under four minutes. The second reason was, it was a ballad, which was also a no-no. And lastly, it was a waltz — in 6/8 time!

[Both laugh]

Scott: We all loved the song but we thought, *you can’t launch an artist on a ballad, on a waltz, on a song that’s four minutes and thirty seconds long!* But as we were going to these radio shows, nobody was commenting on the song we chose for our first single, “I’ve Loved Enough To Know.” I mean nobody! Everybody was talking about “Strawberry Wine,” and how they loved that song. Granted, nobody ever said, “Oh, that ought to be your first single.” They just said, “I love that ‘Strawberry Wine’ song.” But what made me rethink what we were doing was, at one point, I lost my advance CD. I was a little bit panicked, but I thought I might have left it at the barn I have on our farm. There was a guy working for me at the time, who eventually became an artist. His name is Trent Willmon. I called him and said, *Trent, have you seen my advance copy of Deana Carter’s CD?* And he said, “Oh yeah, we got it right here.” And I said, *thank goodness. I thought I had lost it and I was starting to panic.* And he goes, “Yeah, we got it, but you can’t have it back.”

[Penny laughs]

Scott: And I said, *really, why not?* He said, “Because we’ve been wearing it out.” *Well great! Do you like it?* And he goes, “Well, there’s one song we like a lot. We’ve had it on repeat for three days in a row now.” I said, *what do you mean?* He goes, “Man, this one song, we can’t get it out of our head. We just keep playing the same song, over and over and over. This song is killing me.” Finally I say, *well, which one?* And he says, “Strawberry Wine.”

Awesome!

Scott: So, I picked up the phone and called Deana Carter. I was pretty new at the record company, so I said, *Deana, I may be making the biggest mistake of my life here, but nobody is talking about “I’ve Loved Enough To Know.” All people talk about is “Strawberry Wine.” I’m not going to do this without your permission,*

*but would you even consider letting us change the first single? There was a long silence, and then she finally said, "You know ... I love that song." I said, *that's not good enough, I need a yes or a no.* [chuckles]*

[Penny laughs]

Scott: And she says, "Okay, I'll go with it." My next phone call was to my bosses in New York, letting them know that the seventy-five-thousand-dollar video, the five thousand singles, and the two full-page ads in *R&R* and *Billboard* were all a moot point; because in two weeks, when the single is supposedly going to be shipped, we were changing the single to "Strawberry Wine."

Oh, wow!

Scott: The funniest part about that was when I called the head of promotion to tell him. I said, *are you sitting down?* And he says, "Uh ... yeah?" Then I say, *well, we're going to change the single for Deana Carter to "Strawberry Wine."* He was in shock. I mean, you could have knocked him over with a feather.

[Penny laughs]

Scott: All he could say was, "You've got to be kidding me!" I told him all the reasons why. I mean, it was a very, very tough decision. I really believed it was the right one, but we released it as the first single, and after six weeks it still wasn't performing very well at all. It took six weeks of struggling with the record before it started to kick in.

Wow.

Scott: And let me tell you: those six weeks were really, really tough weeks. [chuckles]

I guess so. [chuckles]

Scott: Of course, it turned out to be a huge hit. But that just shows you the power of a song.

Yeah.

Scott: The thing is: I wouldn't even have considered changing the single had it not been for Tim DuBois teaching me that lesson with Alan (Jackson).

Wow, that's a phenomenal story!

Scott: Yeah.

Well, thank you so much for talking with me. I really, really appreciate you doing it so early in the morning. I can only imagine how busy you are, being just a week into your new position at Warner Brothers Records.

Scott: You are very welcome. I enjoyed it!

Me too!

Scott: Now, when it's all said and done, can I get a couple of books?

[laughs] Absolutely!

Scott: I have two wonderful daughters who will probably want a copy. [chuckles]