

Buddy Cannon

Owner, Cannon Productions

Name: Buddy Cannon

Company Name & Profile: Cannon Productions

As a producer of chart-topping hits by artists including Kenny Chesney, Chely Wright, John Michael Montgomery, George Jones, Willie Nelson, and Reba McEntire, Buddy Cannon's talent in the studio continues to speak for itself.

Title: Owner/Producer/Songwriter

Personal Bio: Cannon's knack for picking and producing artists and their hits has helped launch the careers of mega-stars like Shania Twain, Sammy Kershaw and Billy Ray Cyrus, and his songwriting prowess has provided numerous hit songs for everyone from Vern Gosdin and Mel Tillis to Alabama and George Strait.

In the past few years Cannon has received, as producer, gold album awards for *Single White Female* (Chely Wright), *No Place That Far* (Sara Evans) *Brand New Me* (John Michael Montgomery) and *Room To Breathe* (Reba McEntire). He has received Triple Platinum awards for Chesney's *Everywhere We Go*, *Greatest Hits* and *When The Sun Goes Down*, and a Quadruple Platinum award for *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problem*.

Some of the hit songs written by Buddy Cannon:

"Give It Away" — Recorded by George Strait

"Set'em Joe" — Recorded by Vern Gosdin

"I've Come To Expect It From You" — Recorded by George Strait

"Dream Of Me" — Recorded by Vern Gosdin

"She's Not Cryin' Anymore" — Recorded by Billy Ray Cyrus

"I Believe In You" — Recorded by Mel Tillis

"I'm Still Crazy (But I'm Not Over You)" — Recorded by Vern Gosdin

Some of the artists produced by Buddy Cannon:

Kenny Chesney, Reba McEntire, George Jones, Sammy Kershaw, John Michael Montgomery, Chely Wright, Sara Evans

Penny: What do you think are the most important characteristics of a songplugger?

Buddy: I would say being prepared, and having a general idea of what the singer is about. Have knowledge of what the singer has recorded in the past, and try to bring something in that isn't exactly what they did on the last record. Just really being prepared and having an understanding that they can't cut the same thing over and over again.

Do you get re-pitched a lot of similar songs?

Buddy: Oh yeah, all the time. We did a record of island-themed songs on Kenny Chesney a couple of years ago, and now at least half of the pitches that are made to me have at least one song with something about the islands, a boat or Jimmy Buffett in it.

[Penny laughs]

Buddy: I don't want to hear it. I usually don't even listen to them. I'm just being honest with you. We're not going to do one of those right now.

Well, hopefully, people pitching songs are going to get something out of this book, because that's been said several times by other A&R executives and producers. They're getting re-pitched the same song that was a hit on the last project, just different versions of it.

Buddy: Yeah, the same thing.

What percentage of songs that you've cut came directly from a songwriter pitch versus a plugger or publisher pitch?

Buddy: I'd say it's a low percentage for writers, because most of them don't pitch their own songs. Just guessing, I'd say maybe ten percent would come from the writers, and the other ninety percent from songpluggers and publishers.

How was Kenny Chesney's hit song "Don't Blink" pitched to you?

Buddy: Kenny and I were finishing up his record. I think it was the day before our last tracking day. We were working on finishing up some overdubs on previous stuff we had cut. Troy Tomlinson from Sony/ATV Publishing called Kenny and told him he had a new Casey Beathard song that he wanted us to hear, and we always listen to those. He brought the CD out to Blackbird Studio where we were recording, and Kenny and I went out to my car, sat out there and listened to it. We just looked at each other when it was over, and we both had goose bumps. That's the second time that we've had the same experience with a song. The first time was on "There Goes My Life."

Wow!

Buddy: When we got pitched "There Goes My Life" I had listened to it here in the office, and I thought it was really good. I took it over to where we were working at the time, and Kenny sat out in my car and I played it again, and he totally got it. And I got it in a whole different way, sitting there listening with him. We just looked at each other and both physically got goose bumps — on both of those songs!

So you just knew.

Buddy: Yeah, we knew we had to cut them.

Who pitched you "There Goes My Life?"

Buddy: I think it was Lana Thrasher, because Neil Thrasher was one of the writers on it — along with Wendell Mobley.

Can you give me some inside advice on how to successfully pitch to producers?

Buddy: Just be prepared. I'd rather someone bring in one well thought out pitch, that's going to be close. I can tell after the first few lines of a song if I like it or hate it. I don't want to appear rude, so the less songs the better. I don't want to sit and listen to six songs, and I don't want to offend the plugger. Six songs may not sound like much, but unless they're all incredible, it's wasting my time.

Yeah.

Buddy: I don't like to be offensive to people, but I'd rather they only play the songs they are sure of.

So you sit and listen to it all?

Buddy: I don't listen beyond the point where I know I don't like it.

Oh. [laughs]

Buddy: I don't listen to them, because it's a waste of time, and I think the songpluggers should have a better idea of what will work for an artist, and what won't work. Some of the songs that get pitched to me are so far off, not necessarily from being a good song, but stylistically, from what I need.

Why do you think that is?

Buddy: I think a lot of people who are pitching songs should be doing something else, to be honest with you.

So you think that quite a few of the people pitching songs aren't really doing their homework?

Buddy: I just think you've got to love the songs. You've got to be inside the songs before you can passionately pitch them.

How do you think being a songwriter has helped you be a great producer?

Buddy: I don't know, other than over the years you come to realize that every song you write isn't great — or I did anyway. I've written probably five or six hundred songs, and there are maybe eighty or ninety of them that are cuttable. The rest of them I don't even want to hear myself. Let alone have anybody else hear them.
[chuckles]

What is the best song ever pitched to you? Who pitched it, and who cut it?

Buddy: That's a tough question, because every time you have success with a song that you like, it's the most important one. I guess the last, biggest one.

[laughs] What are your expectations from the songpluggers you meet with?

Buddy: I don't know how somebody can bring in a CD with six, five or even four songs to play me, and really believe that they're all great. To me, they are just taking shots. I've been in a meeting before with three or four pluggers at a company, and I sat in there for forty-five minutes listening to songs without hearing anything that was even close to what I wanted. Then one of them said, "Why don't we just take a shot with this?" It was the last song, and they were on the fence about playing it for me. And it was great, it was the song that we cut. Until that last song, I really felt like it was a wasted session. I can't remember the title, but I can remember the place.
[laughs] I'm not going to say it.

Was this experience with new songpluggers or with pluggers who had been around for a while?

Buddy: A group of songpluggers, and they've been around for a while.

Wow, that is surprising. What would you say to a fairly new songwriter about what not to do in a pitch meeting with a producer?

Buddy: I would say to keep the small talk down. That's a waste of time, you know. When you come in to pitch songs, a lot of the time we're in a real time crunch. Our mind is on making the record, not small-talk conversation that is irrelevant to anything we're trying to think about. I mean, it's business. We're in here trying to find that next great song, and not overlook something in the process. Talk can be distracting.

Do you ever do those marathon-type pitch meetings, where you have a meeting every thirty minutes for a couple of days?

Buddy: Sometimes I do that. When I'm trying to find songs and we're two, three or four weeks away from tracking, and I still can't find what I need. Then I'll give Shannon Scott a list of names to call, and I have them start coming in every half-hour or so. Or I'll go to the different publishing companies.

Do you usually find something that way?

Buddy: Eventually, [chuckles] before you record, you do.

What are your biggest challenges in finding songs for the artists you're producing?

Buddy: Trying to find something as good as the best we've done before, and trying to not repeat ourselves.

Is there ever the temptation to follow the same recipe that you've done on something else?

Buddy: I try not to. I know that when you look back on the record you made, there may be something on there that's similar to something you've done in the past. But I think there's more that's not similar. It's all right if I have a common thread running through the music, but I don't want it to just be a repeat of the last record.

Any pet peeves about songpluggers? Other than what you mentioned earlier about not come in with five or six songs, or randomly try to take a shot in the dark with a pitch?

Buddy: There was this one company I used to go to and listen to songs. There were two pluggers there that would sit at the desk while they were playing me songs, talking and whispering to each other. It was so distracting. I tried not to pay any attention to them, but it was hard with them sitting right across the desk from me. I mean, get down to business and meet somewhere later to talk.

I've also heard from a couple of producers that a songwriter has directly said to them, "You're just not getting it," or something to that effect, which surprised me. Has that happened to you?

Buddy: I had one blow up on me one time. [chuckles] But I don't care. I mean, I do care, but they should have played me a better song.

Any unusual or strange stories about how a song got delivered or pitched to you?

Buddy: Well, the funniest thing I ever had pitched to me wasn't a song I cut. When I was working over at Mercury a few years ago I got a package in the mail, and when I opened it, it was a shirt sleeve with a rubber hand attached to the end of it. And the note said, "I'd give my right arm if you'd listen to this song." [chuckles]

[Penny laughs]

Buddy: Which I thought was cool. So, I listened to it, and it wasn't anything I could use. But it was a funny way to be pitched a song — I'll never forget that.

That's definitely not your everyday pitch [laughs]. Do you prefer somebody drop off a CD, or email an MP3, or send a song link?

Buddy: It really doesn't matter. I'm more accustomed to either getting stuff dropped off, or in a face-to-face meeting. I'm adjusting to, and I like the convenience of, the MP3s. However people send me songs, I listen. Although, it's kind of hard to get into the routine of checking your email for MP3 song pitches, because you can get a song email in the middle of a lot of other correspondence, and they're easy to overlook.

Tell me a few more stories about some of the songs that you've cut. Do you have anything that might have been interesting or unusual, or almost didn't make it?

Buddy: Well, this isn't really a plugger story, but one of the biggest records we ever had on Kenny Chesney was a song called "The Good Stuff." Kenny and I were like, *nah*. We didn't really want to cut it. We had done a song not too long before that called "That's Why I'm Here," which was another alcohol-related song, so we were just both reluctant on that song. Joe Galante [chairman] at Sony/BMG just kept pounding us on that song until Kenny said, "Ok, let's cut it." And we did, and I'm glad we did! It's just another example of when everybody has the same goal in mind, you'll eventually make the best choices in agreement. That's the way Kenny's career has been; everybody has tried to do whatever would bring him the most success.

Yes, his career has definitely been handled well, and built on some huge songs.

Buddy: He's a great song guy. He's one artist where you never have to worry about him bringing in a mediocre song that he wrote, because he wants the best songs in town. The new album we've got out, he doesn't have a song on it, and he just came off of a No. 1 Rascal Flatts song that he wrote. Kenny can write some good songs, but he just didn't have what he thought fit the project better than some of the things we cut.

I'm representing Chris Wallin now, the other writer on "Don't Blink."

Buddy: I've just gotten to know Chris, actually — through that record. He seems like a funny guy though.

Chris is very down to earth. There are no airs about him, he just is who he is. Just a fair and honest guy, and he's a great writer. I'm really lucky to be pitching for him. Okay, moving on to the topic of holds. Everyone has a different take on holds and how they should be treated. What are your thoughts?

Buddy: I have kind of a different perspective on it than some people, being a writer myself. To me, it's a matter of honor because there are no legal rules that I know of, so I guess it just comes down to doing what's right. I'm sure eventually somebody is going to sue somebody over a hold. If we put a song on hold, we've got to really like it — by “we,” I mean me and the artist. I have to really like a song before I'll pick the phone up and call somebody to put it on hold.

I've got a couple of things over here that I like for an independent label project I'm doing, but I'm not going to call somebody and tie their song up on a project that is one level above speculation. I just have more respect for the songwriters than that. If it's something that I've really got a fire for that says, “This could be really right,” then I'll go after it.

I've had to fight for songs before. You just have to be honest with whoever puts the song on hold, and with whoever is pitching the song. You run into problems with songs being split between so many publishers. I've had situations where I'll call one publisher and tell them, *I want this song on hold*, and they say, “Okay, I'll call the other publishers.” Sometimes they don't call the other publishers, and the other guy is out runnin' with it. Then you end up with two or three people fighting over the same song — A&R, producers, assistants — everybody gets in a battle over it, and people can get really angry about it. Eventually, most of the time, it gets resolved and everybody gets over it. But sometimes those things carry over for a long time.

Yeah, that can be tough for everyone concerned. You started out as a writer and a bass player. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Buddy: Yeah, I moved here as a musician, a bass player. I was playing with a guy named Bob Luman, and we were touring. I started writing songs on the bus, came off the road after about three years, and got a club gig here in town with a group that was on the Opry. I played the Opry and their club. I kept writing, and Mel Tillis heard some of my songs in 1976 and signed me to a publishing deal. I worked for him for twelve years, and played in his band the Rhinestones for about a year and a half.

[laughs] That's great!

Buddy: Let's see ... after that, Mel sold his publishing company to PolyGram in '87 or '88. PolyGram hired me because I had been with the catalog so long. I worked at PolyGram publishing for about a year maybe, then moved over to the record side. I was actually working as a writer and a plugger for Tillis' company. Mel didn't care. These days people usually don't want their pluggers writing songs. I can think of maybe one exception in town, which is Carnival Music. Travis Hill over there writes under the name of Scooter Carusoe.

[Penny laughs]

Buddy: I really like the way Carnival is run. Frank Liddell runs that company the way Mel Tillis used to run his company. He doesn't care what you do, as long as everybody is in there trying to get things cut.

Wow, so you were actually pitching songs?

Buddy: Oh yeah. I pitched “Lord, I Hope This Day is Good” to Don Williams. A song called “Beautiful You” to the Oak Ridge Boys. We had a great run over there at Mel's company.

Would you just play them one or two songs? How did you do it?

Buddy: I tried to just take stuff I really believed in. And I believe that I did that, because I could always get back and do it again. Our company was on the short list of people when they were looking for songs. We were a small company, but we had a good group of people, a good bunch of writers.

I didn't realize that you were a songplugger at one time!

Buddy: Oh yeah, I started writing for Tillis in '76 and immediately started pitching songs too. That was '76 to '88, I guess.

Was songplugging a lot different than what we're doing now? I would imagine that there was more listening to songs in someone's car.

Buddy: Well, not really, because back then you pitched songs on reel-to-reel tapes, you know.

[Penny laughs]

Buddy: So, not many people had a reel-to-reel recorder in their car. *[chuckles]*

Oh, that's right. I didn't even think about that. [laughs] Were the relationships more directly with the artists?

Buddy: Not any more than today, really. I mean, there were a few places where we'd go hang with the artist, but there still are places to do that today. It's not really that much different today. It's still a matter of not wasting somebody's time. I could pick up the phone and call Duane Allen of the Oak Ridge Boys, and just tell him, *I've got a song you gotta hear.* And he'd say, "Come on out." It didn't matter if they were recording next week or six months from now, he was looking for songs all the time. He might not think it was for him, but he knew I wasn't going to waste his time.

Is that part different today? Are you always looking for songs?

Buddy: Oh yeah. I don't put the word out that I'm looking for songs, but if David Lee Murphy or Neil Thrasher, or Craig Wiseman, or somebody calls me and tells me, "You got to hear this thing I just wrote," then I gotta listen to it. Because if they believe in what we're doing enough to call me when they know we're not currently looking for songs, then I gotta listen.

You're kind of like a renaissance man, because you've done writing, pitching, publishing, producing, and you're a musician. Is there anything you haven't done that you still would like to do?

Buddy: You know what? I produced a record on Willie Nelson this year, and for me, that was like the pinnacle. He's been my hero ever since the first time I heard him. Everything else is gravy.

Did you have to find songs for Willie?

Buddy: Yeah, he wrote two or three on there. Kenny Chesney and I co-produced the album, and it was released in February 2008. I found some songs for the project. I had a couple of old pitches that I had hung onto, another one I wrote, Kenny wrote one, and I had a Dave Matthews song I liked. I went to an event down at the symphony hall about a year ago for a tribute to Emmylou Harris. Dave Matthews

was there. I'd never listened to Dave Matthews in my life, and he sang this song called "Gravedigger," and it just knocked me out.

Oh, wow.

Buddy: A couple of weeks later, we started talking to Willie about doing this record, and I said, *that's the song we gotta cut*. So that's how I found that song. You gotta keep your ears open all the time.

It must have been pretty exciting the first day you got Willie in the vocal booth.

Buddy: Oh yeah. I had done a couple of things with Willie where I'd have a track with somebody like Kenny Chesney or George Jones, and you'd get Willie to come in and sing on it. Willie will come in and sing on anything for anybody. I've done that four or five times, but then you're only in there with him for thirty minutes, because he's fast! He does his thing and then he's gone, you know, so you don't really get to know him. But it was really, really fun getting to be friends with him.

Wow. Are you still writing?

Buddy: Oh yeah, I wrote a song yesterday.

Do you have somebody that actively pitches your songs?

Buddy: Right now I've got a guy I hired independently for my own publishing company. I just got a cut on George Strait's new album, which they cut maybe a month ago, so I get a cut every once in a while.

This is after your No. 1 hit "Give It Away" on George Strait?

Buddy: Yeah.

That's awesome. Who pitched that one?

Buddy: We wrote "Give It Away" here in my office. I've got a little Pro Tools studio here. We went in that night with Bill Anderson's guitar player, I played bass and did a little drum loop. We put down a little three-piece demo with Jamey Johnson singing it, and the next morning we took it to Erv Woolsey. Erv sent it to George, and that was it.

Awesome!

Buddy: Yeah, that one got nailed down fast. It got put on hold within three or four days of when we wrote it.

2007 has probably been really magical for you. Even though you've had a lot of great highlights over the years, it seems like there are so many great things happening right now. You are getting recognized for being a great producer, and you're being recognized at the same time for being a No. 1 writer. Whew!

Buddy: Yeah, it's been unbelievable.