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Jerrod Niemann Hopes His 'Donkey' Will Kick Ass



The sound of a braying mule, followed by a blanket of banjo arpeggiation, provided the opening for years to the syndicated music-and-comedy TV show *Hee Haw*.

That “ee-haw” sound is back, reteamed with a banjo, in the new **Jerrod Niemann** single “Donkey.” As with *Hee Haw*, where the cartoon animal sported a straw hat, “Donkey” is hardly awash in sober contemplation.

“It’s not one you want to sing at a funeral,” says Niemann with a smile.

Nope. This “donkey, donkey” rhymes with “honky-tonky” and provides a come-on to the ladies for a little “rollin’ in the hay, hay.”

It’s dumb, but it’s catchy as hell.

“My goal was to make people smile a little bit, and also the word ‘donkey’ is just funny in itself,” says Niemann. “We needed a song about a donkey.”

The donkey and the mule (the latter term is often used interchangeably with donkey, though a mule is the offspring of a donkey and a horse) carried negative connotations in country’s past. *Hee Haw* was loathed in some circles because of its silly one-liners and its use of rural stereotypes the genre was trying to play down. The mule also symbolized the back-breaking farm labor that country artists historically tried to escape by making music. As singer-songwriter **Fred Wilhelm** notes, that imagery provided a key line — “We left our sweat all over that land behind a mule we watched grow old” — in a 1970 **George Jones** single, “Where Grass Won’t Grow.”

The mule has played a role in the title of two songs with deep country ties: “Mule Skinner Blues,” associated with **Jimmie Rodgers**, **Bill Monroe** and **Dolly Parton**; and “Mule Train,” a 1949 **Frankie Laine** pop hit that **Tennessee Ernie Ford** appropriated for the country chart.

The word “donkey,” however, has never appeared in the title of a top 15 record on *Billboard*’s Hot Country Songs chart, though Wilhelm predicts that dry spell will end: “We’re going to kick down that door.”

If so, “Donkey” will do it with one similarity to “Mule Train”: a vocal effect is central to the recording. On Ford’s record, lead guitarist **Merle Travis** re-created the sound of a cracking whip through pursed lips. On “Donkey,” **David Tolliver** — a member of the former duo **Halfway to Hazard** — does his own vocal impersonation of a mule. And that odd talent is the main reason “Donkey” exists in the first place.

“David makes the most unbelievable donkey sound,” says songwriter **Kyle Jacobs** (“Dust,” “More Than a Memory”).

And Tolliver — **Dtox**, as he’s sometimes called — kept making that sound during a writing session with Jacobs and Wilhelm at Curb Music Publishing in Nashville. They were working on another song at the time, and Wilhelm took a short break. When he returned, the braying had turned into a “donkey, donkey” joke, and they started goofing with a rhyme scheme. While they were jamming on it a bit, Jacobs’ song plugger, Curb Publishing senior creative director **Colt Cameron**, came in and made a video of them.

When some people saw the video, they were insistent it be turned into a full song. Jacobs likewise played the “donkey, donkey” chorus at a few patio parties he attended with his wife, **Kellie Pickler**, and the reaction was always the same: Finish that song.

Making it work was an issue. The chorus was fun, but what do you do with a mule and a honky-tonk?

“Fred Wilhelm actually is the one who saved the day. He was superman,” says

Jacobs. “He came in with this rappish kind of verse, and all of a sudden it got real. Especially with ‘George Jones took a John Deere tractor/My donkey gets there faster.’ We were like, ‘Oh, my gosh, are you kidding me? Alright, what the hell?’”

When the song was finished, engineer **Matt McClure**, who co-produced **Lee Brice**’s “I Drive Your Truck” with Jacobs, was insistent that “Donkey” would only work if they attacked it full bore. So they booked Ocean Way — a rather expensive studio for a demo session — and McClure spent two more days adding loops and effects to drive it home.

Finding the right artist for a borderline novelty was the next task. Based on “Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy),” they considered **Big & Rich** a possibility. There was also some talk with Warner Bros. about **Blake Shelton**, though they’re uncertain if he ever heard it.

A busted songwriting session in early 2013 proved fortuitous. Niemann, Brice and **Josh Thompson** were working on a song when Brice got a call from home and needed to leave. Niemann and Thompson ended up going to the Tin Roof on Demonbreun Street in Nashville to watch the BCS National Championship Game on TV, and they bumped into Dtox, who told Niemann he needed to hear his song, “Donkey.”

“I said, ‘Why? You think I’m a jackass?’” recalls Niemann. “He said, ‘Well, if it fits, wear it.’”

The demo made Niemann laugh. He was skeptical about recording it, but he put it on his iPod to play as a joke for people on the bus in the coming months. “It stopped everybody in their tracks every time,” he says. So he decided to cut it.

The original version kicked off with a few lines about a DUI. Niemann asked the writers to find another, less offensive way into the song, and a minor car wreck provided the answer. Producer-bass player **Jimmie Lee Sloas** was both enthusiastic about the song and challenged by it.

“He actually called Matt and said, ‘How am I supposed to beat this demo?’” notes Jacobs. “But he and Jerrod made it their own.”

They got Tolliver to work his donkey magic in the studio, though it wasn’t as easy as it seemed. Dtox agreed to come in one morning, but partied late the night before and didn’t show. Four or five hours later, he texted an apology, confident that they’d found someone else to do the part.

“A guitar player maybe, but a donkey sound — you don’t just call the musician’s union and say, ‘Who have you got who’s a master of the donkey call?’” deadpans Niemann. “Well, he came in the next day and of course, he did a great job.”

Tolliver, Niemann and studio veteran **Russell Terrell** also did plenty of layered, intricate background vocals, mixing pure sounds and electronically altered parts, periodically changing the sound behind the “donkey, donkey”/“honky-tonky” rhyme scheme, as it gets repeated 11 times during its three-minute ride.

Arista released Niemann’s *High Noon* album on March 25, and when he rolled into Joe’s Bar in Chicago a month later, the audience had glommed onto “Donkey.” “People were screaming ‘Donkey’ the whole show,” he says. “We’re going, ‘What in the world?’ So we just knew something was there.”

Sony issued “Donkey” to radio on May 5, and it has bucked its way to No. 44 on Country Airplay in its fourth charted week. Niemann has passed a few videos to Jacobs of fans dancing crazily to “Donkey” — as with *Hee Haw*, there may be some “neigh”-sayers in the industry, but the public seems to get it.

“I like polarizing music, because it makes somebody feel something,” says Niemann. “I’d rather someone hate it than be indifferent.” ●

