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Bailey Zimmerman

The story behind Zimmerman's rise to fame is the stuff of dreams. Within a few short months, he went from toiling on gas pipelines and wondering whether he could sing, to being at the center of a major-label bidding war. MC goes one on one with him in this exclusive interview.

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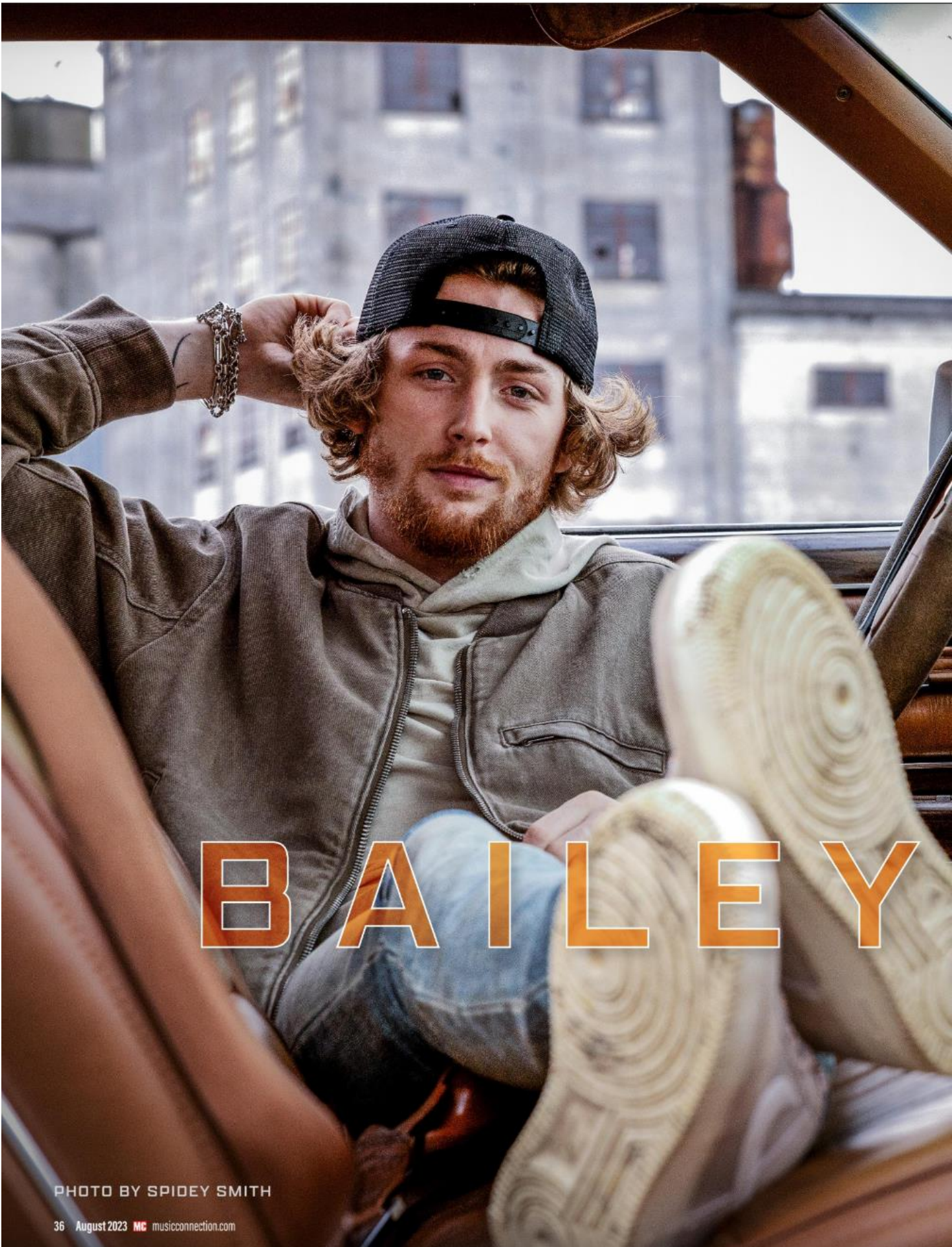


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BAILEY

PHOTO BY SPIDEY SMITH

THE STORY BEHIND country artist Bailey Zimmerman's rise to fame is the stuff of dreams. Within a few short months, he went from toiling on gas pipelines and wondering whether he could sing, to being at the center of a major-label bidding war. It's a scenario that seems pulled from the fevered imagination of a third-rate screenwriter.

And yet it's true. The unassumingly handsome Illinois native's barrel-aged vocals struck an instant chord with listeners when he shared a single verse through social media. Listeners practically demanded he give them more. Overnight, Zimmerman went from making car-tuning videos to pursuing music as an occupation.

Perhaps as important as his voice and artistic presence is Zimmerman's pure heart. In an industry where calculated artifice thrives, the budding superstar possesses an innocence that's beyond rare. Audiences clearly sense his realness and no-bull nature, critical character qualities in the country genre. Despite his rapidly building fame, it appears Zimmerman isn't about to forget who he is or where he came from.

That said, he's also standing on the precipice of mega-stardom. *Religiously. The Album.*, Zimmerman's full-length debut, was released on May 12th. He has performed at CMA Fest and opened for Morgan Wallen. Next year, he'll be doing an international tour with stops in England, Scotland and Ireland, in addition to major North American cities. Things are about to change in a big way for this diamond in the rough. **MC** spoke with Zimmerman about discovering his artistry, industry advice (both giving and receiving), plus his musical influences.

Music Connection: You've blown up fast. You're 23, right?

Bailey Zimmerman: Yes, sir.

MC: How have you had to adjust?

BZ: I've gotten used to everything as I'm going. Getting blown up is kind of like living in the biggest small town. When I lived in my small town, my truck was known to everybody. Everybody would swarm up and want to talk. It's kind of like that if you timesed it by the world.

could sing. You just sing it like they do. I put it on Snapchat, because I thought maybe I would get some girls. [Songwriter] Gavin Lucas, his dad drove my bus when I was a kid, so I've known him. He said, "I didn't know you sang." I said, "Me, neither. I just tried yesterday." He's like, "Everybody's been sending around that video. You want to listen to the songs I've written?"

We got together, and two or three weeks after that we sat down in my uncle's body shop. He goes, "You think you can write a song?" And I was like, "Yeah, dude. I think I could." So, we wrote the first verse of my first song, "Never Coming Home," and videoed it. I listened to it over and over, because I was so pumped. I wrote a dang song! I got home and called Gavin. It was one or two in the morning. "Hey, man. Do you care if I post this on TikTok?" The next day, my phone was going crazy. This is about five hours since it had been posted and it had almost two million views.

MC: How did you wind up at Warner Music?

BZ: That's a crazy story. I almost signed this real bad deal in Miami that would've ruined my career before it even started. But before that, I was singing for maybe a month and "Never Coming Home" had millions of streams. This dude Rohan [Kohli], that is an A&R at Warner Nashville, DMed me. I didn't know what the hell Warner was. He goes, "We'd love to have you down here for a meeting." I hung up the phone and was like, "I wonder what they want to have a meeting about."

Drew Baldrige is a country artist who had some hits back in the day. He'd been mentoring me for the last couple weeks. I called him and said, "I'm going to Nashville." He said, "What for?" I said, "I'm meeting with some company. Warner or some shit." And he's like, "Warner Nashville?" "Yeah, I think that's what it is. They want to have burgers." He said, "You're meeting with one of the biggest labels in the world." I'm like, "Badass. What does that mean?" I met with Cris Lacy and Rohan. Best burger I ever had.

I paid my mom back. She gave me \$1,500, because I didn't have no money. I said, "Mom, I quit my job. I'm going to be a singer." I put my phone in her face. "Look, this song is going big." It was the day it came out. I quit my job the day the song was put on TikTok. I

treated me. I get on the call day of decision. "Bailey, where do you want to be, label-wise?" My manager, Chief [Zaruk], had done this before with Nickelback and Florida Georgia Line. I was scared to go against what he was wanting. But I grew some nuts and said, "I want to go with Warner, because Cris has treated me with nothing but respect. It feels like Warner is more of a family and they're going to take care of me."

And Chief goes, "We're glad you said that, because last night we flew in for a meeting with UMG and all they wanted to talk about was fishing stories." He said, "Cris Lacy called at midnight. She said, I know you're in town and want to talk to you about Bailey." So, Chief goes, "Meet us at Miranda's." Cris Lacy showed up with a binder full of BZ motives. This is what I want to do. This is what I think he is. I think he can do this. I think he can do that. I think we can change the world.

I'm getting chills right now. I give it to God. I love my family here. They treat me so damn good.

MC: You're in the best place in the world for country songwriters. Did Warner hook you up with cowrites?

BZ: I've cowritten, but not with a lot of random people. I usually write with my producer, Austin [Shawn]. I met him when I moved to Nash, because I needed a producer. I kept writing with Gavin Lucas and Austin Shawn for a long time. And then Heath Warren came into the mix for "Rock and a Hard Place" and Jacob Hackworth and Jet Harvey. Chandler Walters is one of my really good writing buddies. Chandler plays steel for ERNEST. He's 20 years old and the most talented dude. Then Tucker Beathard came and now he's a part of my writing scene. There's an artist from TikTok named Matt Schuster I write with. I can't do, "Hey, at 11:00 AM you're going to go into this room and write a hit with these people." I cannot do that.

MC: What's your writing process? How do songs come out of you?

BZ: It's usually in the morning. Me and my dog Marley, we'll do our stretches outside and then I'll take a shower. And when I'm showering, I'll throw on lo-fi beats just to get a tempo in my

ZIMMERMAN

BY ANDY KAUFMANN

MC: Why was TikTok the social media platform that worked for you?

BZ: I started watching TikTok just because everybody was [saying], "You need to get TikTok." So, I started watching. I followed people like Zach Bryan and TooTurntTony. At the time, my buddies were all doing TikTok [videos.] And I was like, all right, I'll try to do TikTok. So, I built my own lifted truck. I always wanted to build one, but never had the money. Somehow, I got some money, so I built one with my brother. I started filming it and putting it on TikTok.

I was in my brother's shop listening to "Stay" by Black Stone Cherry and tried to sing it. I'd sing in the truck and shit. I thought everybody

was like, "If you give me \$1,500, I think I can be a country artist. I just need \$1,500 so I can record this song for \$3,000."

MC: You hadn't performed.

BZ: No, I'd never performed. I didn't even know if I was going to be an artist. [Laci and Kohli] said, "What are you going to do? Write more songs?" I said, "I guess. I don't know if I can." And it's worked out since.

MC: What made Warner Music win the bidding war?

BZ: Everybody wanted to go with UMG, and I wanted to go with Warner. I loved the way Cris

head. Usually, I just think about shit I'm dealing with. That's kind of where my ideas come from. I'll get out of the shower and have a melody.

Then I'll go to the couch and grab my guitar. If I don't play a cool riff within the first five minutes, I'll set it down and won't write all day. But I'll know if it's good, because I'll play something and go, "All right, there it is." I'll get the feel of that chord progression and then start putting the words, melody and thought that I had in the shower into that.

I'll write a first verse and maybe a chorus melody, and then I don't mess with it. I'll try

to get a hook, a first verse with a fire first line, and a vibe for the chorus. And then I take it to the writers I trust. I don't trust myself to write by myself and not mess it up. I've got all these boys that really know how to write songs. Why would I mess around for four hours trying to write a song when they can do it in 20 minutes?

MC: All your songs are based in real stuff? Nothing is fictional?

BZ: It's feelings and thoughts. "Fix'n To Break" is like a feeling. It says—are we fixin' to break up? Are we fixin' to lose what we've built? That one is a real feeling, because it's so hard to ask that question in a relationship. You're both thinking it and usually it's like, "Are we good? Do you not love me anymore?" And then it's the beginning of the end.

Every song I sing, I relate to or I wouldn't sing it. I don't think they could come off as sincere if I didn't believe it. I couldn't have that punch.

MC: You're playing Fenway.

BZ: We're going to play Fenway. We played MGM [Music Hall at Fenway] with Parker McCollum, which was badass. But then we go back with Morgan [Wallen].

MC: What's it like playing venues of that size?

BZ: Just like playing anywhere else. My stomach hurts like a mother trucker before I go on. And then about two lines into "Religiously," I feel really good. I'm ready to jump around. It's fun as hell. It's something I'll never take for granted. Waking up every day and getting to play shows like that is the reason you do music. It's the craziest feeling.

MC: Your album has two songs that are on your EP.

BZ: Three songs from the EP are on the album. "Fall In Love," "Where It Ends," and "Rock and a Hard Place."

MC: Why are they on there?

BZ: Just because they've been such a big part of me. "Rock and a Hard Place" is what I am. This is the reason I'm doing what I'm doing. "Fall In Love" is the reason I'm doing what I'm doing. "Where It Ends." Man, that song came so easy to me. I just felt like there's no way it can't be on the record. And it's such a bop. They're all cool songs that fit into the album very well.

MC: You've got a bunch of videos. On "Never Leave" you do a bit of acting. Did you take lessons?

BZ: No.

MC: Do you want to act?

BZ: Yeah. I've never acted before. I just took what I saw in movies and tried to do it myself. I do want to act, though. To be on *Yellowstone* or some shit would be really cool, to be a cowboy or something. I think I could crush it, baby.

MC: What did it mean to you to play the Grand Ole Opry?

BZ: Honestly, I didn't even know what the Opry was. When I came to Nash, I learned quickly. I made sure I knew what I was talking about, but I didn't know before 2021.

MC: Do you have musical influences?

BZ: A lot of old rock is kind of my thing. Obviously, country. Like Craig Campbell,

"Outskirts of Heaven." Craig Morgan, "Wake Up Lovin' You." Great song. FGL [Florida Georgia Line], "Cruise." I listened to a lot of that stuff. But when I was younger, my mom was a rocker, so we didn't listen to country music. We listened to Linkin Park, Tesla, Hinder, Nickelback, Three Days Grace, Three Doors Down... There are so many. Puddle of Mudd, Velvet Revolver...

MC: You could've been a rock guy.

BZ: I wanted to, at first. Now that I've learned who I am as an artist, I don't want to do that anymore. But I wouldn't mind doing it a little bit. Like, if me and HARDY came up with some crazy rock thing, that would be a lot of fun.

MC: You could pull a Garth Brooks and switch it up.

BZ: I would. I'd do it, too. I had a song called "Change" that was basically Nickelback. I could do rock stuff. It's just tough on your voice.

MC: Do you have advice for artists?

BZ: If it seems too good to be true, it's probably too good to be true. A lot of people out there are going to blow smoke up your ass.

"Every song I sing, I relate to or I wouldn't sing it. I don't think they could come off as sincere if I didn't believe it. I couldn't have that punch."

QUICK FACTS

- "Fall In Love" and "Rock and a Hard Place" have both gone platinum.
- "Fall In Love" is also the fastest debut album single to reach number one on country radio since 2015.
- In June, Billboard presented Zimmerman with the inaugural edition of the trade publication's Rookie of the Year award.
- The rising star's debut LP is the most streamed country album from a new artist ever.
- At the 2023 CMT Music Awards, Zimmerman was nominated for Male Video of the Year, in addition to Breakthrough Male Video of the Year.

They're going to tell you one thing and mean something else. And they're going to give you the runaround.

You have to be your own best cheerleader. You have to be the one saying, "You can do it. Your songs are good enough. You're good enough." Because nobody is going to champion you until you champion yourself. If I wouldn't have believed in myself, I wouldn't have gone nowhere.

I got to hang out with Colin Stough from *American Idol* today. I was trying to give him insight. I'm a straight shooter and see shit for what it is. There's a lot of sketchy-ass stuff in this business. A lot of people will make you believe something and it's not really that. They give you the runaround. You sign and then you're fucked for however many years. One of my buddies, he just got out of his deal. It's been four years where he couldn't release any music, because they had him so tied down.

Don't be too quick to give everything away. I had to, because of what was going on. I had to have a label. But if you ain't got a couple singles popping through TikTok, don't be signing record deals, because you won't make money for a long time.

MC: It sounds like you dodged a bullet with that deal in Florida.

BZ: They were going to give me \$20,000 for 87% of my masters. And they were like, "We're going to give you an apartment. We'll get you a brand-new Range Rover." And it's like, hold the fuck on. I called Chief from my front porch. He's like a dad to me now. I said, "What's a 360?" My thought was a 360 deal means they take care of all my stuff. That's not what a 360 deal is. I said, "You're telling me I can sign with you AND a label?" And he's like, "Yes, dude, you HAVE to sign with me, because I'm not going to let a label take advantage of you. And first order of business is you're not signing that damn deal."

MC: You could fight and win, but then you'd be indebted to lawyers.

BZ: There are some shady people out there, man. Being self-aware is one of the biggest things. Who are you around? What are they talking about? This guy that's trying to sign you? Watch how he treats that guy who opens the door for him.

MC: Have you met artists who've given you advice?

BZ: Morgan [Wallen] gives me advice all the time. I was talking to him about how I don't want to take an advance for my tour, because they're going to make more money in the backend. "Should I tell them I don't want any money up front and just bet on myself?" He said, "Absolutely."

ERN[EST] had one of my favorite mottos ever. I was having a hard day. He said, "Take your shoes off." "What the fuck is that going to do?" And he's like, "Take your shoes off and stand in the grass. Just chill out." I'll go outside and sit in the grass for 30 minutes praying, talking to God. That's one of my favorite things I've ever heard—"Take your shoes off." It grounds you and puts you back on earth.

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