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St. Jude patient Braxton, brain cancer, pictured with his mom



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Tennessee Flatts Top Box: Trahern (third from left) with Rascal Flatts' Gary LeVox, Jay DeMarcus and Joe Don Rooney (l-r) prior to their onstage Q&A at CRS 2020.

Sarah Trahern

More than 25 years into her Nashville-based country industry career, CMA CEO Sarah Trahern continues to expand both the organization's involvement with and her personal profile at CRS.

I moved to Nashville in 1995 to oversee music specials for TNN and was assigned to *Turn Your Radio On* filmed during CRS in 1996. By the following year, I knew CRS was a can't-miss event. It's always been a place to see and hear people in an unguarded situation. During my time with GAC, we set up a camera at the Bridge Bar at the Renaissance during CRS and had our *GAC Nights* radio show, for which I was responsible. With CMA, it's a completely different level of engagement. The week is an opportunity to see our radio friends and CMA members we don't get to see throughout the year.

This is a relationship-driven business, which is evident at CRS. Someone you sit next to may be your boss someday. The relationships you form in this industry carry you throughout your career, and CRS is a fantastic way to form and fortify those. Radio continues to be an important constituent for our fans in finding the music. Now we can add DSPs into that mix. Any way fans can discover artists and music, it's important for the CMA to be there.

When we brought Ken Burns' *Country Music* documentary preview and [series writer/producer] Dayton Duncan to CRS, I loved walking through the hallways the rest of the week and talking to attendees about how much it impacted them. I was able to listen to stories from radio professionals who helped tell those stories in real time as the artists' careers were developing. And, I can't tell you how nervous I was to do the Rascal Flatts Q&A last year in front of a room of people who make their living interviewing artists! It was a fantastic panel, and if that opportunity were to present itself again, I would love to host another session.

Every year, I leave CRS thinking I need to make more time to attend everything. I'm excited to see this year's virtual platform, as it may lend itself more easily to consuming every bit of information offered up during CRS. I worked with [former CRB Exec. Dir.] Bill Mayne on the very first special I did in 1996, as he was with Warner at the time, and I continued to work closely with him during his tenure at CRS. Now, [current CRB Exec. Dir.] RJ Curtis is bringing new vision to the table and has done a fantastic job at pivoting to program this year's virtual event. That growth and evolution excites me, as I've seen CRS move from the Opryland Hotel to the Renaissance to its current home at the Omni.

CRB President Kurt Johnson called to tell me I was receiving this award, and I was both surprised and honored. There are so many people I know, respect and have been honored to call friends and colleagues who have previously received this recognition. I'm humbled and appreciate the sentiment.

Rascal Flatts

Since their founding in 2000 and breakout Top 5 song "Prayin' for Daylight," Rascal Flatts have racked up 17 No. 1s; amassed more than 6 billion streams; and sold more than 23 million albums, 35 million digital downloads and 11 million concert tickets. Gary LeVox, Jay DeMarcus and Joe Don Rooney have also earned more than 40 trophies, making them the most-awarded country group of the past decade.

JD: My earliest memories of music are sitting around in the living room on Friday and Saturday nights with my entire family singing and playing everything from bluegrass to gospel to country. I'd pick up whatever instrument was laying around and figure out how to play something on it.

GL: For me, it's singing "The Old Rugged Cross" at seven years old with my Grandpa. He played the guitar, and we would duet for hours.

GL: The first time I remember performing in front of an audience was at a Christmas play in church, *He's The Reason For The Season*.

JD: I was five years old singing "Green Acres" and an old bluegrass song called "I Know" at a retirement party for one of my mom's friends that she had been asked to sing at.

GL: We were all together on the bus the first time we heard ourselves on the radio.

JD: We were coming back from a leg of our first radio tour, and it was on WSIX/Nashville's "Shine the Light or Turn The Lights Out" segment. I've never been more nervous in my life. The first call was good, the next three were negative, then the next five or six were all positive. Whew!

GL: When "I'm Movin' On" came out and we saw the true impact of what that song was doing in people's lives, I knew we'd made it. Alcoholics Anonymous used it in their 12-step programs, churches were using it in their sermons, and it was life changing for people and us.

JD: Our first couple of singles were kind of ditties ... a lot of fun, but not much meat on the bone, so to speak. One night, standing on the *Opry* stage performing "I'm Movin' On," I was stopped in my tracks by the crowd singing our song back to us, word-for-word. So loud, in fact, I couldn't hear our monitors.

JD: There are no immediate short-term plans. The tour was canceled last year, and we were heartbroken. I don't believe we will ever just quit. We'll make music, in some capacity, for the rest of our lives together; our fans and music mean too much to us to just walk away from it forever.

GL: The Artist Career Achievement honor is a product of our hard work, sacrifices, relationships with our fans and Country radio and the two record labels that took a chance on three boys who were hungry and had passion.

JD: It represents the tenacity of a brotherhood; a brotherhood that had a dream, and absolutely would not stop, even against early criticism that we were too different. For better or worse, we were committed to each other, believed in what we were doing and believed our music could literally touch and change people's lives. In the end, after all of these years of hearing stories from our fans, I know we've accomplished just that, and I am forever and eternally grateful.

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