

Strait talk

He doesn't exactly "give it away," but we have roped press-shy superstar George Strait into revealing some sweet memories about his family and career. **By Dennis McCafferty**

More than 25 years ago, George Strait was an unknown singer playing for beer and pocket money in Texas honky-tonks. He worked at a ranch during the day and made some demos in hopes of getting a recording contract. There were times, he admits, when he had doubts. "I was getting a little nutty. I questioned whether my attempts at getting on a Nashville label were doing any good," Strait tells USA WEEKEND. "Today, Nashville signs up artists all the time. But, back then, every four or five years, they'd sign just three or four people."

Fortunately for Strait — as well as country fans everywhere — he didn't give up. In 1981, MCA signed him. In 1982, his *Fool Hearted Memory* landed at No. 1 on the country charts, launching an astonishing streak; 53 of Strait's songs have gone to No. 1, an all-time record.

The 53rd one, *Give It Away*, is from his latest album (another No. 1), *It Just Comes Natural*. The album title neatly summarizes Strait's lasting appeal: He doesn't force anything, and fans know what he'll bring to the occasion. He's always the singer in the Resistol cowboy hat. The band is nearly always Ace in the Hole, dating

the Country Music Hall of Fame, live on TV. He then headed back to his ranch, which is about 150 miles south of San Antonio, the city where he lives with his wife, Norma. Their son, George Jr., also lives near San Antonio. (The Straits' daughter, Jenifer, died in 1986 in an auto accident at age 13.)

He seldom gives interviews. "You will *not* get George Strait," a Nashville publicist told me two years ago. "He doesn't do media because he doesn't have to." This made me even more determined, but, sure enough, getting the singer to do a cover story was an on-again/off-again affair — inevitably ending in off.

Until now. When we chat, I am pleasantly surprised to find that Strait is far more affable than aloof, with a gentle Texas drawl and an easy laugh.



"I get asked all

■ You just wrapped up your winter break at the ranch. What is it like to celebrate the holidays on the Strait homestead?

There's no place I'd rather be. The ranch is brush country. It's desolate-looking. I love it. During the winter break, we're all together as a family. It's me and Norma and our son. On Christmas, I get up early, while it's still dark, and make a big fire. The rest of the family is still asleep. I have presents hidden all over the house, and I'll bring those out. I'll get out the cookies and milk. I still like to do that for Santa because he's always hungry.

■ That's very sweet. How old is your boy?

He's 25! (Laughs.) But it's tradition, ya know.

■ How do you feel about getting into the Hall of Fame?

You're in awe to be in that kind of company. I've gone to these awards, and I've seen so many get in. "Hag" — Merle Haggard. Dolly Parton. Kris Kristofferson. I never thought about it until I got a record deal, and even then, not until the 1990s maybe.

■ Why have you kept your original band? Even Springsteen goes without the E Street guys at times.

I like people who are loyal to me, and I like to be loyal, too. Plus, they're great players. We started out at the Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, Texas, a honky-tonk by the railroad tracks. We'd play Wednesday night, 50 cents

Strait's other passion: rodeo. The singer, left, tries to lasso a steer in competition.



ATA

Name/vitals: George Strait, born 1952, in Poteet, Texas

Vital stats: a record 53 albums, a record 32 platinum albums, 10 Grammy wins for Entertainer of the Year

New release: *It Just Comes Natural*

Other pursuits: hunting, skiing and rodeo; an active member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. Strait presents the 25th annual Strait Team Roping Classic in San Antonio March 23-24

Tour: launched this fall. Website: georgestrait.com and venues



Strait was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame at November's CMAs