



VOICES IN THE HALL: JIMMIE ALLEN

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall. Presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today is Jimmie Allen.

JIMMIE ALLEN This one guy was like, "Well why don't you dress more like George Strait?" Because I didn't grow up looking at people dressed the way George Strait does. He did. Hence why he dresses that way. You know you're influenced by what you see. That's why I think it's so important for every genre of music to show diversity.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Jimmie Allen.

"Make Me Want To" – Jimmie Allen (Mercury Lane / Stoney Creek)

PETER COOPER "Make Me Want To," by Jimmie Allen. Jimmie Allen is a formidable talent. He's the first African-American to score a number one country radio hit with his career-first single. He visited with us for a rare Voices in the Hall episode recorded outside our audio lair. Jimmie came during the annual CMA Music Festival, and he talked to me in the CMA Theater at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in front of a live audience, because a dead audience would be creepy.

[to audience] Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to our stage here at the CMA theatre, Jimmie Allen.

[applause]

And when Jimmie came on stage at the CMA Theatre, we had a CD right there next to him and his picture on a big screen behind him, and he thought that was kind of creepy.

JIMMIE ALLEN It's just, you know it's kind of weird sometimes when you walk in and you see your face staring back at your face.

PETER COOPER Yeah.

JIMMIE ALLEN It's a lot of face.

PETER COOPER Yeah. Well here you go buddy. [hands him his CD] How about that?

JIMMIE ALLEN Now I feel better.

PETER COOPER Jimmie welcome the Voices in the Hall. Thank you so much for being here.

JIMMIE ALLEN Thanks for having me.



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PETER COOPER In this CD, in the liner notes, you credit your father with allowing you to see that it's okay to be different. What did you mean by that? And what did he do to allow that notion?

JIMMIE ALLEN So my dad, you know he was in the military and he played slow pitch softball. And a lot of times growing up not a lot of people looked like him did a lot of things he did such as you know hunting, and the type of music he listened to which was Country, and you know playing ball different places throughout the country. Like in Delaware everybody plays slow pitch softball, but a lot of times when he would go to different places a lot of times he'd be the only person that looked like himself.

And then growing up my dad always saw that I was different than a lot of other kids as far as like my interests and stuff. And he just always told me the older I get man you know find ways to dig more into who you are, you know because you're no use to yourself or anyone else trying to be something that you're not. And the more you can dig into who you are a lot of times your struggles are what help other people get through the same struggles that they're going through that you already went through. So yeah.

PETER COOPER So you mentioned Delaware. You were raised in Milton, Delaware, a town that is smaller in population than most of the rooms and halls and arenas that you play today when you go on stage.

JIMMIE ALLEN Yeah. When I was there, I think in 1996 or 8, the population of Delaware was like 790. And then in like 2000-something it was like 800. And they say now the population is like 12 or 13 hundred, but that's just because people have summer houses there. So during the summer people come for about a few weeks or a month or so. And, but yeah when people leave it's right back to about 850. That's why when I moved to Nashville everybody was like "Yeah, you're moving to country music town where everybody's country." And I came here I was like, "Man this ain't country!" I said, "Y'all want to see some country? Let me take y'all home."

PETER COOPER So how did you do it? How did you get to Nashville? When did you get to Nashville? Why did you come to Nashville?

JIMMIE ALLEN So I'd been to LA before. New York. I knew who I was as a person and the type of music I wanted to do. Nashville was the place for me to do it. Moved here in 2007. When I first got here it was interesting. It was it was a little rough. I found this trailer on the way down on Craigslist. I would stop by different places and hop on a computer and use the Internet to find a place because I moved here, had no idea where I was going to live.

PETER COOPER And you're how old?



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JIMMIE ALLEN I was 20...I think it was 20. 20 or 21. Can't remember. Long time ago.

PETER COOPER Yeah you're old.

JIMMIE ALLEN Yeah I know. I had a job set up already at this gym. I was just like, "Okay cool. Just got to have a place to live. I can figure that out." So I moved down. I found his trailer. This lady lived in Spring Hill off Green's Mill Road. This trailer sat on I think about 3,000 acres of nothing, except for her family's house that lived right in front of it. Whoa, it was country out there. They had wild chickens. They had kids, like babies- they used to run around outside with their diapers on and dirty feet. It was weird.

PETER COOPER Drinking Pepsi out of a baby bottle.

JIMMIE ALLEN Yeah it was weird man. It was interesting. I was like, "Oh, that's how they do it out here. Okay. All right." So I lived in a trailer with no electric for a while. Had an air mattress and like one of those box TVs. And I still had my PlayStation you know. Priorities you know. Got to have something to do. So I lived in that for a little bit but I couldn't even play the PlayStation because I had no electric. So I had to play it in my car. So I bought one of those little nine volt things that you could like plug something into then plug it into your cigarette lighter. Yeah, I ran a bunch of batteries down trying to play PlayStation in the car. But I had to get it done. You know priorities. You got to set your mind to it. PlayStation is important. You need it.

So then I lived there for a few months and then the lady said she was selling the trailer I was like, "Well how much you selling it for?" She said, "Three hundred dollars." And I was like, "I ain't got that." Man. So I was like, "All right. Do I go to home to Delaware or do I stay here?"

And then that's when the whole car thing started. So I lived in my car for a few months, about three and a half, almost four. I can't quite remember. You know it wasn't as bad as it sounds you know.

It did suck because it was winter though. And I would like warm up my Chevy Malibu for a little bit and then I would turn it off and then I'd put jeans on, sweatpants and have a blanket and I'd sleep from like maybe 12 to about 5:30/6, probably about 5:30. Then I'd go to the gym where I was working.

I'd get to the gym about 5:30, wash my clothes before people came in and shower and eat and then work my shift in the snack bar. And that's how I met Rodney Atkins, that's how I met T Rory from Montgomery Gentry, Brady Seals from Lil Texas, Aaron Benward from a Blue County. I met so many people there that became friends and mentors.



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PETER COOPER Did you let them know that you were interested in getting into country music?

JIMMIE ALLEN Not right away. Oh no, I'm a relationship person. Sometimes I feel like you just let the relationship develop naturally and you just kind of see what happens because also at the moment I wasn't ready. You know I knew I wanted to do it, but I had no songs recorded, didn't understand my sound, and I feel like you have one chance to make a first impression. I feel a lot of times people are in a hurry to rush to get to what we think we want, but yet we haven't done the preparation to be ready for the opportunity. And I wasn't ready for the opportunity yet. So I was just trying to learn as much from those guys as I could about the industry, and how to do it, and how it works, without them knowing that I want to be a musician. I would just act like I didn't know who they were. "Hey man what do you do for a living?" "Oh I sing." "Oh cool! That's great. You're a writer." I knew exactly who they were, but I wanted to learn. You know I wanted to learn without them feeling like I'm just trying to, another artist that's trying to mooch off of their success.

So I did that for a while. I kind of quit slash got fired from the gym because I would work, but then my body would tell me I need to work out. So I would just leave the snack bar and just go work out. And then my boss was like, "Hey there's a line." I was like, "Uh, I'll be right there." But again I was at my six month spot. So I had a thing where I would never work a job longer than six months. Because I feel like after six months you get comfortable. And it's easy to forget what you're chasing when you get used to being comfortable, you know what I mean if that's not your end goal.

So it was about my six month time and time to go anyway. So I just kept working out. After that I worked at Sperry's, this fine dining restaurant in Cool Springs. Great people, great staff, great customers, but I hated it because I had to iron a shirt and wear a tie all the time. I was like, "Yeah this is gross." So about five and a half months I said my goodbyes to Sperry's. I worked at Local Taco. About five and a half months I said my goodbye to Local Taco. I worked at so many places. But the hardest. I worked for waste management collected trash.

I lasted about a month then. I got paid to be a janitor under the table at this middle school. I won't say the middle school because I don't want to get the head janitor in trouble. But in 2012 I needed a job, and this girl I knew was a teacher at the school. I don't want to say the school because I don't want to get her in trouble either. But she knew the janitor and he knew I needed money so he would pay me cash money to come in and help him you know clean the school. So shout out to him if he's listening. He knows who he is. Just don't want to get you fired. You're way past six months. That was funny. I'm going to write that one down. That was a good one.



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Yeah so I think. I got hired as a mechanic too, for a few hours. Then they figured out I knew nothing about cars. Like I've never changed a tire in my life, like ever. But yeah. So yeah I think the roughest part was you know after my son was born I feel like as a parent it's your job to provide for your kids. No such thing as pride, there's no such thing as a bad job. It's about sucking it up and making the money.

PETER COOPER But always with your eyes on always on another prize.

JIMMIE ALLEN You have to.

PETER COOPER And I think most people, if they were in a situation like that, would be like, "Man, I don't hold a job for more than five and a half months. I've been living in my car. Things are not going well in my life. And this is just not going to happen for me." Did those thoughts occur to you?

JIMMIE ALLEN No never. Because for me, I compartmentalize everything. That's kind of how my brain works. And I look at things as in steps. You want step five and you're preparing for step five, but you need step one, two, three, and four first. And I felt like I was in the planning stage. My son came and you know not something I planned, but you know as a man you step up and you do what you got to do. So I collected cans from, sometimes I didn't have a job from 11 at night 'til 6 in the morning. I did that for a few months. And then I would still chase the music dream. Like I would write songs from 9 in the morning 'til about 3 p.m. Then I work at Bone Fish Grill from 4 p.m. to about 10. And then three nights a week I worked at Walmart overnight stock from 11 p.m. to like 6 in the morning.

Because I started this tradition of taking my son to Disney World. Ugh. And I love Disney World anyway. So I didn't feel like it was fair to him for me to be able to take him and then stop. So I said, "All right. Well I'll pick up this overnight job to work three or four nights a week just to just to keep that going." There were moments where I'm like, "Man, am I good enough?" was always my question. It was never if. I believed it would happen, but I started to question my talent level. "Am I good enough to compete with the guys that are on the radio? With the songwriters in town?" And then frustration sets in when you see people move to town six months to a year and they get a record deal and then blow it away because they don't take it seriously. And you've been here six, seven, eight, nine years struggling, meeting the same people they met but haven't been given that same opportunity.

But then again I think things happen for a reason. You know I think the people in my life now that helped make that happen, my management team, my band, my booking agency, the people at the label, my PR team. I think people. In order for people to be in a position to help you, they have to first get into a position where they're ready. For instance my manager Ash Bowers used to be an artist. If I'd have met Ash when Ash



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was an artist, he couldn't be my manager. He wasn't in a position to offer me a publishing deal to change my life. You know but and Ash just started writing again and pulled back on the artist thing. And he's a great songwriter which led to him having his own publishing company. To when we met, he was in a position to offer me a publishing deal that changed my life.

PETER COOPER What is a publishing deal?

JIMMIE ALLEN A publishing deal is where you get paid to write songs. A company gives you a monthly stipend. And you write songs whether it's four days a week, five days a week. But a lot of them have a thing where you have to write, you have to turn in 12 songs a year. Meaning, if you're one of three writers on a song that's only one third of a song. So you got to turn in twelve full songs. They pay you, sometimes you do a year deal, two year deal. And sometimes artists write for themselves or other people, but that's pretty much the gist of it.

PETER COOPER Why is it so important for somebody who's aspiring to get into the business as an artist?

JIMMIE ALLEN It's important because it's hard to focus on music when you have to worry about resting to go to work to pay the bills. So when you could just get rid of all that and just focus on music full time, it relieves a lot of pressure. And then once you're writing, a publishing deal helps because you're now respected signed writer. That leads to other publishing companies being open to set you up with writing with their writers. So it's kind of a community thing.

"Underdogs" – Jimmie Allen (Mercury Lane / Stoney Creek)

PETER COOPER "Underdogs," from Jimmie Allen," He was my guest at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's CMA Theater.

Jimmie, the first instrument heard on the Grand Ole Opry in 1927 was the harmonica of an African-American...

JIMMIE ALLEN Dee Ford Bailey.

PETER COOPER ...harp player, Dee Ford Bailey. Exactly. Also before your time, in the '60s when Nashville was full of struggle and strife in the middle of the civil rights movement that seemed to work in fits and starts, Charley Pride became a huge country star. And I know that you're a fan of his and you're featured in the PBS documentary about him, *American Masters*. By the time you're listening to country music though in the '90s you're not seeing, if you're watching the video channel, you're not seeing a lot



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of faces that look anything like you. Was that an impediment to you to getting into this? Did you think, "Well this must not be a place for me?"

JIMMIE ALLEN No. I again as I'm telling you it's, the crazy thing is growing up where I grew up, seeing people that looked like me into country music, I already saw that black people like country music and Mexicans and Asians you know. Even though it was not in the forefront of mainstream country music you know. So for me, now I think that can affect other people. Because someone asked me one time, "Are black people into country music?" I was like "Yeah." I said, "But honestly you got to understand if you're in the time, '70s right, Charley Pride is doing his thing. But if you're a kid in Detroit and there is no social media and you don't see Charley Pride that looks like you, but yet you see Motown looks like you and your family's into Motown, that's what you gravitate towards. You know that's why I feel like representation and the transparency of representation, like being able to see it, someone that looks like you doing what you love, is very important. You know.

So I was lucky enough that how is was raised had a lot to do with my mentality and never stopped me or made me afraid to chase a dream in a genre where there wasn't that many people that looked like me in the mainstream. Like even now. Like you know there's a black artist by the name of Tony Jackson. That's my homeboy. He's dope. He tours all over the country all the time. He's not mainstream, but he makes a living doing country music. And he's traditional country music. You know my stuff is like country, pop, rock, R&B, all my influences together, the country boy. But Tony Jackson? Yup. He's like Brad Paisley-type country. Then you got Aaron Vance. Aaron Vance is here in town. His office is right in the RCA building. And a few others. So yeah man I definitely feel like it can have an effect on some people for sure.

PETER COOPER I remember when you were interviewed after you had a number one billboard country radio hit right out of the box and you were the first African-American to ever have a debut single go to number one on the country charts. And you were asked by a reporter at The Washington Post how it made you feel and you said "Excited and sad."

JIMMIE ALLEN Yeah.

PETER COOPER What'd you mean by that?

JIMMIE ALLEN I was excited because you know as an artist I had a number one and I had worked so hard to get to that point. And I was excited and thankful for that opportunity, but sad because I'm like you know we're in 2019. Well 2018 at the time. And I was the first black Country artist to have a debut Country Song go number one. So that just showed me that. All right. I need to find a way to be one of the people that show kids that look like myself, or whether they're Asian or Mexican, hey if you want to



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do country music it's fine. Because I get messages from Black Country artists all the time that want to do it, but they don't know if they can. And I'm like, "Dude. You can do it." You know because growing up we were told, "You can do anything you want to do. You can even be president." And it sounded nice. But until Obama became president you haven't seen it before. And people don't understand there is power in sight. You know I don't mean like, what's the thing people say? "I don't want to hear words I want to see action." And to me action is the representation. And until you see it done that builds confidence in you. Because not everybody is a trailblazer. Like not everybody has the courage to be the first one to do it, to deal with all the criticism and the kickback and be thrown up in the spotlight to where everything you do is judged. Not everybody wants to do that. Some people want to send some people out in front, then will follow right in line. And yeah I feel like it's super important to make it be known, no matter the genre of music, no matter the color of your skin, if you want to do it I promise you there's somebody that looks like you doing what you want to do. So that's the part that made me sad about it.

PETER COOPER I've got my debut single coming out on the Korean pop charts.

JIMMIE ALLEN There you go.

PETER COOPER When did you feel like you found your sound and understood who it was that you needed to be as a recording artist?

JIMMIE ALLEN 2015. In 2014 my son was about to be born in June. My grandmom had just died February. I had no clue what I was doing with my life. I was scared, confused, upset, depressed. There was a time where I literally didn't get out of bed. Like I didn't leave my house for about a week and a half. Like I didn't go outside at all because I got depressed. The Depression was that bad. Because I had my friends from college that were living their dream and their careers, married with kids. And I'm sitting here trying to figure out what my next step is.

So, went to LA, stayed with my uncle for a little bit. I'm a surfer so that helps me sometimes being out on the water. I went to a L.A. Kings game, their hockey team. And right before I went in I was like, "All right God. I got a test for you. If this music thing is what I'm supposed to do, and what I have to say has value and can help at least one person, give me a sign. And I don't want a sign like a fallen star. I want a trophy. I want you to give me a trophy somehow that I can have." Because I knew there was no way. I wasn't playing any sports to have a trophy. I wasn't doing anything to get me a trophy. So I was like, "Alright, show me something." Oh did he show me. As soon as I went in to the game I found out that was a game that the L.A. Kings were celebrating their Stanley Cup win. And everybody that was in the suites got a replica ring. I was like, "Ah, All right cool. All right. That's my sign." Shut me up.



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So I called my dad. And my dad was like, "Look son, I know you're frustrated. Go home back to Nashville, get your guitar and write what you want to write. Don't try to write a country record. Don't try to write a rock record. Don't try to write a hip hop and R&B record. Write what naturally comes out." And that's what I just started doing. That's what led to "Back in Your Mind," the song that's on my album. Ash said when he heard me play that song at Puckett's that's what made him want to sign me. And then the songs that I've been writing lately are what comes out naturally whether it's "Like You Do" whether it's "American Heartbreaker" whether it's "Warrior" whether it's "All Tractors Ain't Green" and whether it's "Best Shot" whether it's "Make Me Want To," these are all things that are just coming out me naturally. And I never have in my mind, "Let's write a country song." Because I feel like the worst thing you can do is put limits on yourself, put yourself in a box. Because when you put yourself in a box, you only got so much room to move and you limit the ability of the song as well to be able to touch people that might be outside of the genre that might not normally listen to that style of music. You know. So yeah.

PETER COOPER When did you realize that it was going to work? That "Best Shot" was going to be a great shot?

JIMMIE ALLEN I'm not quite sure when I knew it would work, but I started to feel the song differently. So we wrote the song and I headed to the, headed to write the song that day. I had the melody and the first line of the chorus in my head and I couldn't stop singing...[sings] Like it was stuck in my head and I couldn't get it out. I was like, "What is this?" So then we wrote it. We did a demo. The demo sounded like Matchbox 20 meets Florida Georgia Line slash Nickelback. Set individually it would have been great. Together it was all bad.

And then I turned it in. Ash doesn't remember it. But then I played the song at the Bluebird Cafe acoustic, just me. And Ash was like, "Man, what song is that?" I was like, "It's 'Best Shot.' I sent it to you." He said, "No you didn't." I said, "I sent you that." He said, "You ain't sent me that song." I said, "Man." And then I listened to them now they're completely different. So then Ash decided to strip it back. Ash was like, "Let's pull the song back and just focus on the lyric and the vocal and kind of let the song just do its own thing." Because we felt too at the time everything on radio was so loud. Every song was up tempo or a ballad. And if it was a ballad it had a lot of guitar parts, it was just so loud. And it sounded completely different.

And somehow in the midst of all these great songs, "Best Shot" found its way, it found its way to number one for three weeks on Billboard, man. Which is it's crazy. To this day it still doesn't feel real. Like I'm still amazed every time, every opportunity I get a chance to step on a stage and there's anywhere from five hundred, to a thousand, two thousand, to fifteen thousand, to twenty thousand, to thirty thousand people out there that come early enough to hear me sing before the headliner get there, and sing "Best



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Shot" back to me. That blows my mind. And like even with the new single. You know, I'm not sure what number on the chart it is maybe like 38 or 39. Like hearing people sing that song so loud this soon, it's amazing. You know and it's definitely something I don't take for granted. I'm thankful every opportunity I get on a stage. That's why literally when I get off the stage I take five minutes and sit down. Like I'm exhausted. Like I'm sweating. I can't breathe. I can't talk. Because I love it so much you know. Every time I step on stage I performance as if it's my last time. 'Cause it could be. You never know. So yeah, the feeling will never get old for me.

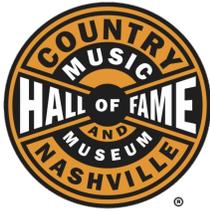
"Best Shot" – Jimmie Allen (Mercury Lane / Stoney Creek)

PETER COOPER "Best Shot," by Jimmie Allen. That was a number one song on country radio, and it introduced Jimmie to a national audience. Jimmie spoke with me in the CMA Theatre at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. He is an important and resonant voice in the Hall. Though that importance and resonance does not come without a cost.

[to Jimmie] Did the pressure go up or down after you established yourself as a hit country artist? I guess I just mean once you once your dreams come true does that seem like the finish line?

JIMMIE ALLEN No not at all. I think most of my pressure sometimes can be the pressure I put on myself to try to maximize every opportunity. Because I feel like once you hit a certain level, people expect you to maintain it or surpass it. Anything beneath it, in society's opinions, you're considered a failure. But in my opinion you're not a failure. That's why I think it's so important to value your own opinion of yourself and what success is to you over others. Because say I put out a number one song. Say this next single just goes top 30. Say the next single just goes top 30. The next single just goes top 30. But I'm still touring. I still get to do what I love for a living. I still get to take my son to Disney World. I still get to do all the things I love. And to me I'd be happy. To me I am successful, but by society's standards, "Well he only had one number one, other songs went top 30." You're a failure. So I figure the pressure is always on yourself.

Now people might try to put pressure on you, but you know the more you're in this business and the more you keep people in your corner to help you again stay level headed, you keep the pressure off you. Because at the end of the day I get to travel the world and sing songs I made up. Know what I'm saying? It's something that I love to do. And I talk to friends of mine that are touring musicians that y'all probably never heard of, but they sell out clubs of a thousand people and they have a six bedroom house with three vehicles and they go to Disney World in peace. They're happy. They're successful. But by society's standards, they're not. They didn't make it. That's why I think it's important before you get into any career set a standard for yourself when you make it. What's making it to you. What's success to you. And don't base that opinion off



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of social media. Because most stuff you see on there is fake. You know some of the happiest people in the world are the most depressed people in the world.

Yeah. So I think it's important to set a goal for yourself of happiness and success. Because happiness and success again, it's a heart thing and it's a mind thing. Yeah. It has nothing to do with how much money is in your bank account or how many Instagram followers you have or how many people scream for you at a concert. No. You know for me it's just about, I get to provide for my son and sing songs. And I love performing whether it's a hundred people. I literally perform the same whether it's 50 people in the audience or 30,000. They get the same show. The 50 people were smarter because they don't got a bunch of people trying to push them out the way. So.

PETER COOPER Jimmie I hope you live this life of the heart and the mind for a long long time. Thank you so much for being here on Voices in the Hall.

JIMMIE ALLEN Thanks for having me. Thank you.

[applause]

PETER COOPER We're doing things, educational programs, events, all kinds of things here at the Museum every day. Come by and visit.

Learn more about Jimmie Allen at our website, VoicesInTheHall.org and use the handle @VoicesInTheHall to find us and follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. And please check out our next Voices in the Hall. It's a two-parter with the legendary Sam Bush. You can hear his "New Grass" music and more on a playlist I put together for you. It's on the website.

Voices in the Hall is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in collaboration with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. This show is recorded by Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper. Thank you for listening. We invite you to visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.