

BILL GENTRY

BIO 2011

Wild and studied.

Crazed and responsible.

Sinner and saint.

Bill Gentry is a lot of things that don't seem, at first glance, to fit together. A businessman. A club owner. A preacher's kid. A former politician. And an artist who will not be denied.

If those descriptions sound like an odd assortment of current and past lives – well, they are. But they're also accurate fragments of Gentry, a complicated, driven soul whose personal contrasts are nicely summed up in *Baptized In Temptation*. The 10-track debut album captures both the rowdy party boy and the thoughtful mate, the country stylist and the blues-rocker.

Produced by Grammy-winner Chad Carlson (Taylor Swift, Trisha Yearwood, Chris Isaak, Sugarland, Cold Mountain soundtrack, Walk the Line soundtrack, etc), the project represents the first studio music that successfully captures the sonic thump of Gentry's pulsing, high-energy country shows. Those concerts have already seen him play to more than 1 million ticket holders and become something of a Georgia mini-legend, a romp-'em, stomp-'em, take-no-prisoners performer who got that way through relentless hard work and study of his concert craft.

"I'm not some getting-drunk kind of party animal," Gentry insists.

But he might appear that way to many of the fans who've locked into his let-it-loose stage persona, just one piece of the puzzle represented in his album. "Between Muscle Shoals And Macon," the collection's opening number, pays homage to many of the diverse sounds that form the backbone to Gentry's musical character: mainstream country, Aretha Franklin-brand gospel, Otis Redding-style soul. "Hell And Half Of Georgia" builds a dedicated pursuit of romance around the music of the Allman Brothers Band; "Why Can't You Forgive Me" draws on Gentry's ever-present humor to form a personal plea from public foibles of Bill Clinton, George Jones, Pee Wee Herman and the Dixie Chicks; and "The Letter"—the album's first single—demonstrates the depth of thought and self-examination that have made Gentry a success at nearly every pursuit he's attempted in a highly ambitious life.

"Once he'd become obsessed with something," his brother wrote in a lengthy piece for Atlanta's *Creative Loafing*, "there was no stopping him."

Even today, Gentry sees his drive as an attempt to grasp a portion of his identity he missed in his early years on a 250-acre cattle farm in Carrollton, Georgia. His father died at age 42, and Bill—who was just two years old at the time—has no memory of his dad, a Presbyterian minister. He does possess some of the elder Gentry's traits, though, particularly a persistent dedication to building a life that has meaning for both himself and those around him.

"I think I've been chasing a ghost my whole life," the singer/songwriter concedes. "I've been trying to please a man that's dead, and that's hard. But at the same time, I think it's made me be a better person because I'm never going to accomplish that goal. Still, in my heart I want to. If we find out that he was able to look in on my life, I wanna make him proud."

There have been several vocational diversions along the way, but the seeds for the creative part of Gentry's life were genetically sewn. Oldest sister Vesta taught art. Brother Lyle had a role in Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Phantom of the Opera*. Sister Celia decorates cakes. And sister Mimi, four years old than Bill, majored in voice at college and spent a year as his duet partner when they were adults.

Even in his first public performance—a fourth-grade talent-show rendition of John Denver’s “Sunshine On My Shoulders”—Gentry demonstrated an undeveloped sense for in-concert theatrics.

“I had one of my friends behind stage with a Zebco rod and reel with a hand painted sun connected to it,” Gentry laughs. “Every time I’d get to the chorus, ‘Sunshine on my shoulders,’ he’d hit the button where it’d go down to my shoulder. Then he’d reel it back up.”

Gentry didn’t win that talent contest, but he did earn the title in several other competitions. In the biggest of them, he took the local, regional and state 4-H crown during his junior year in high school, giving him a chance to perform his own songs with winners from other states at a celebration in Chicago.

Music was a constant pursuit during his school years. He played in the high-school band for two years before the director kicked him out. He performed solo acoustic shows statewide for the 4-H. He worked part time in a local music store owned by the CBS signed act Fortnox. And he had a rock band for more than two years that played a few dances and special events.

“The rock band was more of a phase-type thing where I owned my first pair of pleather pants AND was kidnapped by someone who definitely wasn’t a fan of our loud music,” Gentry laughs. “We were rehearsing in this old farm house, and me and two of my band members were kidnapped at knife point by this drug crazed man who somewhere along the way had already been stabbed and was bleeding all over the place. He heard the loud music from the road, and I guess came to investigate. We weren’t hurt, but the guy did go to jail. The lesson from this? Leave the pleather pants at home and don’t take Spinal Tap’s lead when it comes to volume.”

All the while, the success of local boy Alan Jackson provided something of a beacon for Gentry. Jackson’s hometown—Newnan, Georgia—is barely 20 miles from Carrollton. One of Jackson’s sisters was a teacher, and was frequently referenced in conversations at Gentry’s house when his older sister and stepfather, who was a school superintendent, talked about their work in the neighboring county school system.

“Since we grew up in small towns so close together, it almost felt like Alan was writing songs about my life,” Gentry notes. “‘Chattahoochee’, family, and other things that he writes about, they were things I did, too, when I was growing up. Even in the song ‘Drive (For Daddy Gene),’ the lake that he’s talking about is called West Point Lake, where my stepdad used to take me fishing, too. So I looked up to him and still do.”

Success in the music business, though, is anything but guaranteed, and Gentry tried several other vocations during his college years. He thought he could succeed in politics and headed down that road for a time, becoming student-body president at a junior college, running for city council of a small college town at the age of 19, then becoming executive vice president at Atlanta’s Georgia State University, where he worked with an almost \$2-million budget. In addition, Gentry interned in Washington, D.C., for Senator Sam Nunn when he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

“I got to walk into some very important meetings with his coffee,” Gentry winks.

Gentry got just enough experience in politics to realize he didn’t want to follow that vocation anytime soon. In the meantime, he gained a job with a data-compiling company that handled information for the insurance industry. He and one of his co-workers saw the potential for a data-collection agency, and they pooled \$500 each and no pay for almost four years to start their own data company, a firm that gathers, cleans and interprets data for politicians, small businesses and even some well known Fortune 500 companies.

It was a lucrative business, though that success was not enough to quell his hunger for music. He formed a duo with sister Mimi, the Gentrys, and worked at it aggressively in his off-hours for the next year—so aggressively that she simply walked away.

“I love you as my brother,” she told him, “but I don’t want to sing with you anymore.”

Bill likewise debated if he should quit with her, but that internal argument did not last long. Instead, he kept the band together and rebranded himself as a solo act. And he went at it full-force. He used the marketing knowledge he’d picked up in business and politics to get his name out in the community and made certain that every show was threaded with an

undeniable energy. He quickly developed a strong following and was able to sell out nearly every club of stature in northern Georgia, though one particular hold-out refused to book him because he wasn't a national artist.

That owner might have thought he was protecting his establishment's reputation. But what he really did was motivate a new competitor. Gentry decided to build a venue of his own – not just any club, but the biggest country music club in the nation. He did his homework, too, visiting 13 hot spots around the nation to see what worked and what didn't.

Gentry mortgaged his house and found a coalition of investors to refurbish a massive old Service Merchandise store as Wild Bill's, a suburban attraction (Atlanta destination) with multiple bars, a lounge area and an arena size concert stage. Gentry walked a narrow line in developing the atmosphere, creating a night club that's visually alluring but doesn't compromise the church values with which he was raised.

"I've tried to make the Wild Girls as sexy as I can without being trashy," he explains. "If you see the whole outfit, it's midrift, jeans and chaps. And they don't dance like strippers. Over 100 people work there, and every single person knows if they cross the line into lewdness or bad behavior they're gone."

Wild Bill's was an instant success, selling out in its first night and building him an even bigger audience as he played the club regularly for three years. In the years since its opening, Wild Bill's has also received five Academy of Country Music nominations.

In the meantime, it attracted most of the biggest acts in country music—Brad Paisley, Keith Urban, Toby Keith, Brooks & Dunn, Rascal Flatts, Miranda Lambert, Trace Adkins, Jamey Johnson, Tracy Lawrence, Chris Ledoux, Little Jimmy Dickens, Eric Church and Joe Nichols, among them. In addition to cementing the club's reputation, these performers also gave Gentry a chance to study firsthand what did and didn't work as he built his own act.

"It was an eye-opening experience to see a lot of other artists," Gentry says. "Some artists had great CDs but couldn't deliver it live, and that told me I don't want to be that guy. But you could also see how they treat other people, how they perform, how they build their set list. It was a real education."

One of the biggest impressions made upon him was the importance of having a dynamic live show. The best performers turned an appearance into a high-energy event, and he takes it as a personal challenge to connect with every member of his audiences.

The best Gentry ever saw at that was Garth Brooks, who he watched from the seats at the top in Atlanta's Omni Center in 1996.

"I really felt like he was singing to me, way up in the nosebleeds," Gentry recalls. "From that point forward, I had a yearning to understand how he did that and what type of energy he was able to throw out."

Not surprisingly, *Baptized In Temptation* was made with a live show in mind. Brimming with honky-tonk, southern-rock and blues elements, it provides a muscular sonic foundation for his concerts.

It's also something of a personal journey, one filled with references to such musical inspirations as Wilson Pickett and the Allman Brothers Band. And one song, "Wild Bill's Rock And Roll Revival," even tips a hat to Gentry's ultra-successful club.

The album as a whole captures the energy of a Bill Gentry concert, which inevitably finds the audience pumping fists and singing along in loud voices. It's a reminder that all those different parts of his personality—the saint and sinner, the artist and businessman—make him extremely connected to the lives of the fans he's trying to reach. That connection, and the way it's achieved, is everything.

"It's not about where you play, who you open for, or how much you get paid to do it," Gentry surmises. "It's all about the music."