Hudson Westbrook isn't trying to be the 'perfect country singer'

BY MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times



DAVID BECKER TNS

Hudson Westbrook performs onstage during ACM Next Wave: Country's Beach Bash on May 16 at Mandalay Bay Beach in Las Vegas.

Provided he's got enough of his voice left by the time he walks offstage, Hudson Westbrook will occasionally keep the night going after a gig by rolling to a nearby karaoke joint. He might do something by John Mayer; if he's feeling brave, he might try "I Believe I Can Fly."

"I like to sing Taylor Swift too," says the up-and-coming country star. "I gotta be a little drunk, though."

What's his go-to Taylor jam?

" 'You Belong With Me' – that's my song, bro. I actually think it's a dude song – like they'd be the one to come on strong like that." He laughs. "I feel like a girl would be more chill about the approach."

Westbrook, 22, knows all about the dudely come-on: In 2024, just a year into his undergraduate studies at Texas Tech University, his song "Take It Slow" went viral on TikTok; not long after that, he signed a major-label record deal and began sending singles up the country radio chart, including "House Again," which went all the way to No. 1, and "Painted You Pretty," which led to a nod for new male artist of the year at this past May's ACM Awards.

By turns flirty and heartsick, Westbrook's 2025 debut album, "Texas Forever," established him as a clean-cut romantic in a ball cap and pearl-snap shirt – "lover boy vibes," as he puts it today. Now he's back with a sophomore LP, "Made You Look," that goes for something slightly grittier: In "Hits Me" he's "lonely with a side of misery" as he longs for an ex he compares to "a bullet from an old Colt 45"; in "Nowhere Bound" he's "out on the loose," eager to "go the wrong way, get a little lost / Find a roadside bar, get tossed."

Then there's "Odds of Getting Even," in which he deploys some classic country-music wordplay to describe the revenge he's planned to exact on a cheater.

"As you get older, you start getting that soul of: I don't care what y'all think," he says of the somewhat rascally character he portrays in songs full of ringing honky-tonk guitars. It's a recent afternoon at Warner Records' headquarters in Los Angeles, and Westbrook is kicked back between lunch and a headlining concert at the Novo; he and his crew rode to town last night after a show in Modesto, where he admits he wasn't sure what to expect in terms of turnout.

"I was worried they might not know me in California," he says. "But we sold it out – like 4,300 people going crazy."

Beyond the fact of growing up, Westbrook says "Made You Look" was shaped by the touring he did over the last year and a half as an opening act for Parker McCollum and for Morgan Wallen, both of whom have found success with songs in which the narrator isn't necessarily the good guy (which only means of course that nobody understands his pain).

"What are you giving – perfect country singer?" Westbrook asks. "OK. But I want to show the imperfections. I want it to be: This kid messed up, and what's he gonna do about that? Is he gonna be honest with us?" The tunes on his new album, he adds, "are the most vulnerable I've ever written" – something to be proud of, as far as McCollum is concerned.

"Hudson's songwriting comes from the right place, which is numero ... uno," says the fellow Texan, who brought Westbrook onstage last year at Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheatre for a duet on his song "Rest of My Life." "He's just being whatever he feels Hudson is, and I think that's the purest way to make art."

Westbrook grew up in Stephenville, a small ranching town about an hour from Fort Worth. In high school, he played football and baseball – "I was throwing 87 in ninth grade" – but picked up a guitar after he tore a rotator cuff. Music was never his life plan: Folks in Stephenville thought it was "weird," he says; at college in Lubbock, he got involved in student government as a way to bolster his resume for an eventual career in oil and gas or commercial real estate.

"That's what my brother does," he says of the latter, "and he made a bag off that, so I was like, Yeah, that's the move."

Yet things changed after "Take It Slow" exploded overnight. "When I put out the song, I'd been planning on going to class all week," Westbrook says. Instead, "we accepted a tour and just rolled." His decision to drop out is hardly one that tortures him; this past April, he returned to the Texas Tech campus to play the university's football stadium with George Strait and Miranda Lambert.

Though Westbrook understands the crucial role social media played in his ascent – he can tell you about the difference in impact of 4 million views on Snapchat versus 4 million uses on TikTok – he says he tries to stay off his phone these days as a way of contending with what he calls a "microwave society."

"People my age, we can search up the answer to any question instantly, whereas my mom had to go look through a book," he says. "I wish I grew up like that because y'all have so much more patience."

For similar reasons, Westbrook opted to stay in Texas after he signed a deal rather than head to Nashville as most young country stars do. "Warner wanted me to move there, and management wanted me to move there," he says. "They were like, 'You could write and do interviews every day.' But too much music is no bueno for me – it makes me overthink everything."

Indeed, as delighted as he is to encounter enthusiastic fans like the ones who turned up in Modesto, Westbrook says he's still getting used to playing music in front of an audience.

"When I'm onstage and I'm playing an acoustic set or something – playing any song, really – I close my eyes and I just kind of imagine being back in my dorm room with my guitar," he says. "That's when I sing the best."

'Rings of Power' is a dream for Jamie Campbell Bower

BY FRANCESCA HALLIWELL
Reuters

LONDON

British actor Jamie Campbell Bower said joining "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power" fulfilled a childhood dream as the cast gathered in London for the global premiere of the fantasy series' third season on Tuesday.

Speaking to Reuters, the "Stranger Things" and "Harry Potter" star recalled receiving the email offering him a role in the series.

"It felt like home. It felt very warm and loving," he said. "Of course, there's the inner child in me who watched the films growing up, who's screaming."



DANIEL COLE Reuters

Cast member Jamie Campbell Bower attends the premiere for the final season of "Stranger Things" on Nov. 6, 2025, at the TCL Chinese Theater in Los Angeles.

The new season jumps forward five years after the events of season two and thrusts viewers into the heart of Sauron's war against the Elves.

Co-showrunner J.D. Payne said the first two seasons focused on introducing audiences to key characters and storylines across Middle-earth before bringing them together in season three.

"All roads lead to Sauron this season," Payne said. "He's forging the One Ring, and as a fan, seeing the volcano, seeing Charlie Vickers there with the hammer ... it's a really, really special moment."

Vickers, who plays antagonist Sauron in the series, said filming the forging scenes was physically demanding.

"It took a lot out of us. But then you just have to pinch yourself and be like, what an incredible job and incredible thing to be a part of," Vickers said.

One of television's most expensive productions, "The Rings of Power" is known for its expansive sets and large-scale world-building.

Welsh actor Morfydd Clark, who plays Elven commander Galadriel, said the number of people involved in bringing the fantasy world to life often goes unnoticed.

"It's a whole village," she said. "If you don't know what to do when you're leaving school, look into the types of things that are needed on a film set. You will find the perfect thing for you."

But for actor Cynthia Addai-Robinson, the enduring appeal of the series lies not in its battles or visual spectacle, but in the relationships at its heart.

"I think what keeps an audience engaged and coming back is the relationship between brother and sister, father and daughter, best friends, lovers. Even though it's fantasy, it feels very humanistic."

The series has also resonated beyond the screen since its debut in 2022.

Actor Ismael Cruz Cordova reflected on the role "The Rings of Power" has played in wider conversations about diversity, representation and fandom. The Puerto Rican actor was among cast members who faced online backlash because of the color of his skin when the show first launched.

Cruz Cordova said he feels the discussion has now moved beyond those criticisms.

"The focus has shifted into how impactful it has been and how real this character has been able to touch people's lives."

"I belong everywhere, and we belong everywhere. And no one should feel like they should be limited for any reason whatsoever to dream and to actually achieve it."

The first four episodes of season three were released on Prime Video on Wednesday.

Cage transformed 'from within' for 'Madden,' co-star says

BY DANIELLE BROADWAY
Reuters

LOS ANGELES

Nicolas Cage so fully transformed himself into NFL legend John Madden for the new biopic "Madden" that co-star Kathryn Hahn says she spent an entire production with him without ever feeling she had met the real Cage.

Hahn, who plays Madden's wife, Virginia, said Cage remained covered in prosthetics throughout production, transforming him into Madden more than just physically.

"I do feel like he fully embodied John Madden," Hahn told Reuters. "I would even venture to say that I haven't really met Nicolas Cage yet because the prosthetics do something to you. He was definitely transformed from within."

Directed by David O. Russell, the sports film arrived in select theaters on Wednesday and lands on Prime Video on Nov. 18.

The movie follows Madden from his years as a Super Bowl-winning coach of the Oakland Raiders under owner Al Davis to his role in creating Madden NFL with Electronic Arts, one of the most influential video game franchises in history.

After retiring from coaching, Madden became one of the most recognizable voices in American football during a three-decade broadcasting career before retiring in 2009.

The cast includes Christian Bale as Davis and Sienna Miller as Davis' wife, Carol Davis.

Miller, who grew up in Britain not knowing about Madden or Davis, said she was struck by the strength of the Davises' marriage.

"He was devoted, completely devoted to her, and likewise," she said. "And that was inspiring."

Hahn, who played the witch Agatha Harkness in "WandaVision" and "Agatha All Along," said the film needed to examine the challenges in the Maddens' marriage and family life.

She said exploring the less visible parts of the Maddens' marriage and family life helped make them more than two-dimensional characters. "That's what makes it such a human story," she said.



MARIO ANZUONI Reuters

Cast member Nicolas Cage attends a premiere for the film 'Madden' on Nov. 4 in Culver City, California.