

DARREN WARREN

Most artists feel like they've "made it" in the music business when they have a song reach No. 1 on the chart or are performing in front of a sold out crowd at a major arena. Darren Warren's definition of success is different.

"I'll feel like I've made it when I'm able to go to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital with my guitar and have 30 kids around me and we all singg 'Old McDonald Had a Farm,'" says Warren. "That might sound so small to a lot of people, but to me that's what it's all about."

Each January the top artists in country music visit patients at St. Jude during Country Cares for St. Jude Kids, a seminar to aid fundraising efforts and bring a little cheer to the Memphis-based hospital. As he took his place among the celebrities at the event, Warren was all too familiar with the hospital and the emotions of its young patients. He used to be one.

"That was the most humbling experience in the world, to walk back on that stage and look at all those little bald heads out there and tell them 'you can make it,'" Warren says. "It wasn't that long ago, I was the one sitting there, looking up on that stage at Travis Tritt, Martina McBride and Aaron Tippin, so it was quite an experience to go back to St. Jude and be able to wrap my arms around those kids."

These days looking at the strapping young singer/songwriter with the broad smile and infectious laugh, it's hard to envision him as a scared kid battling cancer. Survival is a gift he doesn't take for granted, and the trials this small town Kentucky boy endured add a deeper measure of empathy to his art as well as an unbridled appreciation for family, friends and a rowdy night on the town.

It's that zest for living that informs his raucous anthems "Kentucky Friday Night" and "Cowboy Up and Party Down," yet Warren is equally comfortable delivering such poignant ballads as "Go Get My Angel," the story of an eight-year-old girl losing her fight against cancer. It's his ability to write and record songs that capture the full spectrum of the human experience that make Warren's NuCorp Entertainment album one of the most impressive debuts in the country format in many years.

"I'm meant to do this. I feel that way with all my heart," Warren says of making country music. "Performing is absolutely hands down my favorite thing in the world to do. I just get chill bumps from my head to my feet when I go out on stage."

Warren knew from an early age that he wanted to pursue a career in country music, even though it wasn't his parents' music of choice. "I grew up in a Pentecostal home and mom and dad didn't listen to country music," Warren recalls. "They wanted us to listen to gospel music so we listened to the Kingsman, the Florida Boys and a lot of groups like that. I wrote my first song when I was 11 and it was a song called 'Lord Help Me Know.' The lyric was gospel, but the melody was just as country as you can get. I picked up the guitar and played it for mom. I'll never forget, she looked at me and said, 'Son, we kind of went from Jesus to the jukebox, didn't we?'"

Despite his mother's efforts to steer him toward gospel music, country was Darren's passion. "I grew up without a TV in the home. Mom and dad said they didn't want us to be influenced by things, so we'd sneak around and listen to country music because I liked it," says Warren, who was heavily influenced by Garth Brooks, Travis Tritt and Brooks & Dunn.

At 16, Warren was just like any other country boy whose thoughts were usually on girls, music, school and his new pick up truck. He wasn't at all prepared to look in his truck mirror one day and see something that would change his life. "I will never forget sitting in that truck, eating a cheeseburger and I kept looking in the mirror. I had this lump under my chin," Warren recalls. "I told my brother, 'Man, I'm getting a double chin, but it's really, really hard.' He felt it and he said, 'that's a knot. You need to get that checked out. It might be cancer.'"

Warren's parents took him to a doctor, who removed the lump, telling the young boy and his family it was most likely just a cyst. Unfortunately, a biopsy revealed the family's worst fears. "I remember the doctor looking across the table at me and said, 'Darren you have Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma and you have less than a 50% chance to live,'" he recalls.

"We went to St. Jude and I started my chemotherapy treatment January 5, 1999. I'll never forget walking into St. Jude. I stopped at the door and I looked straight up at that hospital, and I remember saying to myself quietly, 'God why are putting me in this building?' but I can honestly tell you, that that hell became a heaven on earth. I would not take anything for the experience of cancer. I don't care if you have cancer or you don't, there are things that come at you that are stumbling blocks. If we can take them and make them stepping stones, we can help more people and do things to change people's lives."

For nearly three years, Warren had weekly chemo treatments, but he beat the disease. “I’m a lucky guy. I really, really honest to God feel that way,” he says. “Yes, there have been bumps in the road. There’s been bumps in everybody’s road, but I feel like I’ve been blessed beyond measure.”

Armed with that upbeat attitude and a talent for writing songs that connect with an audience, Warren began pursuing a career in country music. WKYQ in Paducah began playing Warren’s song “Kentucky Friday Night” and getting great response to the upbeat party anthem. Other Kentucky stations began playing the tune and his live shows became the hottest ticket in the bluegrass state. Soon he was opening shows for Travis Tritt, Emerson Drive, Vince Gill and other acts, and a record deal followed.

Industry veteran Doug Grau, who worked with Travis Tritt, Little Texas, David Ball and other during his lengthy tenure at Warner Bros. Nashville, produced Warren’s NuCorp debut album. The album is filled with slice-of-life tunes that audiences can relate to instantly. “Southern Belle” is an engaging portrait of Southern womanhood that Warren’s young daughters like to sing along with. “The Way God Made Me” is an autobiographical number Warren began writing one day while standing over his grill.

“Some of the songs you write come from the heart. Some come from thinking them up and some come straight from above,” he says citing “Go Get My Angel.” “It’s probably the most emotional song that I’ve ever written. When I was at St. Jude, there was a little girl about eight-years-old. We’d come in the waiting room pretty much every day to get our treatment. They would wheelchair her in and she would get out of the wheelchair, get on the couch and lay down. About two weeks went by and she didn’t come in the waiting room anymore and I wondered about her. I’ll never forget walking up to the telephone in the hall at St. Jude to call my dad and I noticed a lady standing beside me with her head just buried in the phone booth. She was crying and shaking uncontrollably. She said, ‘I just called to let you know that my little baby has her wings.’ It was that little girl’s mom.”

Later that night, Warren kept thinking about the little girl. At 2am the 17-year-old cancer patient/aspiring songwriter got up and wrote “Go Get My Angel.” It continues to be one of his most requested songs and the video is garnering attention at major outlets. Warren has seen first hand the power music has to deeply affect people whether it’s a poignant ballad that moves someone to tears like “Go Get My Angel” or an upbeat number that incites them to party like “Kentucky Friday Night.”

“When they come out to shows, you don’t know what people are going through,” Warren says. “If we can make them smile and can make them feel like they have hope for one more day, that’s what it’s all about. It really is.”