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ChattanoogaNOW Mind Coffee: A career made of 'in-your-face country soul'

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As a songwriter today, the goal is pretty simple.

"You want to get the song that's in the singing fish on the wall at Christmas," Marc-Alan Barnette says, followed by a huge laugh.

He's only half-kidding. After 30 years in Nashville, he's written about 5,000 songs and landed cuts with Frankie Ballard, Shelby Lynne, David Ball, John Berry and others. None, though, have been popular enough to deserve the dulcet tones of Big Mouth Billy Bass.

Shawn Ryan

Photo by Staff File Photo /Times Free Press.

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But Barnette is soldiering on, warbling wall fish or not.

"You stay in; you hang on," he says. "Visibility is viability."

To stay in sight, he recently released a CD with nine songs that he wrote or co-wrote. "A Life Well Lived" highlights Barnette's rock-solid understanding of what it takes to write a quality song. A couple of them have been recorded multiple times by other artists, he notes.

"'Can't Blame Nobody But Me' has been recorded 13 times; 'Old Memories' 11 times," he says. Unfortunately, none were chosen as singles.

Most of the songs fall into the old-school soul that Barnette grew up hearing — Motown, Philadelphia International, Stax. But country is there, too, and it all blends into a style he calls "in-your-face country soul."

These days, the world of songwriting and selling records is radically different than in the past. With online streaming services such as Spotify and Pandora, the money earned for a hit single, whether songwriter or singer, has plummeted, Barnette says.

You can still make bucks if your song is a hit on national radio and especially if it's used in a TV commercial, where millions of dollars are tossed around. But for the majority of songwriters, those opportunities are as rare as hen's teeth.

So Barnette, who started his music career in his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, has turned his focus in another direction. Although he still writes songs on a regular basis, he's leading songwriting workshops and seminars to help fledgling writers learn the skills. He also writes for hire, penning songs for specific events, for instance, a father asking for a song for his daughter's wedding.

As part of his "musical niche," Barnette also takes clients on tours, driving around Nashville to point out offices where music business is conducted and venues where it's played. But most of the tour takes songwriters on a trip through their lives past, present and future.

"I work with writers and artists in the creation of a song, the presentation of song, networking and business," he says. "I can tell them how to fail in the music biz; I've done it every way."

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Topics

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