



Tried and true:
RODNEY
ATKINS

COUNTRY BY DEBORAH EVANS PRICE

To 'Hell' And Back

Rodney Atkins Stays Real With 'It's America'

When Rodney Atkins hit pay dirt with his last album, 2006's "If You're Going Through Hell," some were quick to brand him an overnight success. In reality, Atkins spent nearly a decade in music industry purgatory after signing with Curb Records in 1997.

After several singles were released, Atkins' debut album, "Honesty," was finally issued in 2003. It didn't set the world on fire. But when he recorded "Hell," he ditched the cowboy hat, put on a baseball cap and sang songs about his life. The

music resonated with the country audience in a big way—to the tune of four No. 1 singles.

The March 31 release of Atkins' third Curb album, "It's America," continues the momentum. The set debuted at No. 3 on Billboard's Top Country Albums chart, selling 34,000 units its first week, according to Nielsen SoundScan. This week, "America" stands at No. 12 on Top Country Albums, and the title track is No. 4 on Hot Country Songs.

First-week scans were fueled by ap-

pearances on "The Today Show" and "Larry King Live" as well as a presale campaign on Atkins' Web site and through iTunes. The iTunes pre-order offered an exclusive track, exclusive video and an immediate download of the single "It's America."

Staying true to the musical core of "Hell," the East Tennessee native says he sought songs about real life. "I wanted songs that make you feel grounded," says Atkins, who co-wrote three songs and turned to songwriters like Kim Williams, Dave Berg and

Casey Beathard for others. " 'Watching You' [Billboard's No. 1 country song in 2007] did that. Songs like that remind you to count your blessings, not your problems. We all forget that sometimes. But when you remember, it's a great feeling."

Also drawing strong reaction is the album track "Fifteen Minutes," where Atkins sings, "I gave up smokin', women and drinkin' last night/And it was the worst 15 minutes of my life." "We've been playing 'Fifteen Minutes' for a year-and-a-half or so and it always seems to work," Atkins says. "People just laugh."

"America" also features more serious fare. One example is "The River Just Knows," a song about healing and coming back to your true self.

Curb VP of marketing Jeff Tuerff attributes Atkins' growing success to a unique ability to relate to fans. "Rodney is more approachable than any artist I've ever seen," Tuerff says. "He writes and sings songs that are relateable to his own life—and fans appreciate his music more for it."

Atkins is the artist of the month at cable channel GAC. Online listening parties at CMT.com, AOL, MSN and other outlets were complemented by a prerelease TV ad campaign; a follow-up campaign was launched in top sales markets during the Academy of Country Music Awards show.

Capitalizing on the synergy between NASCAR fans and country music, Atkins will be featured on the No. 13 Curb Records truck in the NASCAR Truck Series. His name and album title grace the hood of the yellow truck, while the album cover is emblazoned on the bed. ●●●