

FEATURES

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[THE WEEKENDER]

Lone star

John Rich plops into a chair, asks for two bottles of water and downs them both. "I'm trying to recover from a trip I just made to Los Angeles that was insanity, 36 hours of absolute insanity," he says, then goes into a story about drinking with actor Mickey Rourke, who appears with Kris Kristofferson in the video for Rich's latest hit, *Shuttin' Detroit Down*. It's no secret that Rich, half of the duo Big & Rich, likes to play hard and work hard. His latest project is a solo album, *Son of a Preacher Man*, out this week.

"That's who I am," says Rich, who grew up as a preacher's kid in West Texas. "I've got a King James in one hand and a Crown and coke in the other. I think we all know Jesus didn't turn the water into Dr Pepper." *Shuttin' Detroit Down* may be the fastest-rising song of his career, currently No. 13 on Billboard's country chart after seven weeks. It expresses his frustration with Washington's bailout of Wall Street.

"I think it's a way for people to vent," Rich says. "It shows what they are thinking so clearly and accurately that they crank that volume knob." The idea came to him backstage at a concert with ZZ Top. He was thinking that fans — not the CEOs and politicians — are the ones who represent the real America.

"I turned to my friend right before I walked on and said, 'Remember this line: In the real world they're shutting Detroit down,'" he recalled.

'UNIQUE PERSONALITY'

The 35-year-old singer, who recently married his longtime girlfriend Joan Bush, has the coiled energy of the kid at school that you knew was going to get you into trouble, but you couldn't stay away.

"John has a really unique personality. He has a way of talking about something and getting you excited about it," said singer Jason Aldean, who worked with Rich as a songwriter at the same publishing company. "He's done things that he's taken a lot of heat for, and then turned around and done things that made him look like a genius." Indeed, Rich seems to court controversy. He offended gays by speaking out against gay marriage. He's stumped for Republican candidates (in 2008 he released a song for Senator John McCain called *Raisin' McCain*). He scuffled with heavy metal bassist Jerry Montano in a Los Angeles hotel room. He riled an entire Nashville neighborhood by building a huge, incongruous house dubbed the "Villa Rich." It doesn't take long to find bashers if you Google his name and check the blogs.

"You find two different kinds of people: People who will lay down on the railroad track for me, and people who want to tie me down to the railroad track," Rich says. "Hopefully, more people are on my side, and there are. But some don't like it when a guy as loud and raging as I am comes blasting through town." Rich's first solo album, recorded before Big & Rich and after five years with the group Lonestar, was shelved in the late 1990s and released later without much success.

"I was all about the art of it and didn't realize I was being too brainy with the lyrics, saying stuff that people didn't care much about," Rich says.

He decided to do *Son of a Preacher Man* after his partner, "Big" Kenny Alphin, was sidelined for a year by neck surgery, the result of being hit by a drunken driver in 2001.

Country singer John Rich is charging ahead with a new solo album

BY JOHN GEROME
AP, NASHVILLE

With the new disc, he revisits the traditional country he remembers growing up the eldest of four kids in a doublewide trailer in Amarillo, Texas — a twist since Big & Rich give traditionalists fits with their fusion of rap, rock, pop and country.

"What I bring to the Big & Rich equation is country, straight-ahead, hard-core country music. I wanted to make a record like that," he said. "I had a lot of subjects I wanted to talk about that are personal to me that would never have found their way on a Big & Rich album." The record isn't as old school as Rich makes out. He closes with a quirky big band nod to Frank Sinatra called *Drive Myself to Drink* about a guy who puts a bar in his car.

"You're probably talking to one of the biggest Frank Sinatra fans on earth," he says. "One record I want to make before I die is *Let Me Be Frank*." Rich has written hits for Faith Hill and Aldean, produced hits for Jewel and Gretchen Wilson, and sung hits with Big & Rich (*Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy, Lost in This Moment*).

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Throw in his gigs as a judge on *Nashville Star* and host of Country Music Television's *Gone Country*, and it can seem like he's everywhere.

"John is an artist, so he's eccentric. He's a writer, so he's going to be fiery and passionate and full of contradictions," said Jewel, who co-produced her 2008 album, *Perfectly Clear*, with Rich and was a judge with him on *Nashville Star*. "I think writers, especially, tend to want to feel their emotions because that's where they write from. He's certainly that way." This summer, Rich and Alphin will return to the road as Big Rich and begin work on a new album.

Rich says he's spent his life wanting to do exactly what he's doing and has no intention of letting up.

"This is not a hobby. This is not a stepping-stone to something else. This is my destination and all I care to do," Rich said.

"The last thing I want to do is take a vacation from it."

John Rich has drawn flak for his ostentatious house and statements against gay marriage. PHOTO: AP



Mariinsky ballet stages sublime 'Sleeping Beauty'

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

I was all set to see prima ballerina Diana Vishneva as Princess Aurora in Mariinsky Theater Ballet Company's *Sleeping Beauty* on Friday night at the National Theater but the fates were against us. Vishneva was ill/injured, forcing a readjustment of the cast lists.

First soloist Anastasia Kolegova, after a somewhat unsteady start, was everything a fairy-tale princess ballerina should be: beautiful, sparkling and light, with flawless 180-degree extensions. As her prince, Evgeny Ivanchenko didn't really have all that much to do, but he was nobly grand all the same.

The most memorable were those in the supporting roles. Prima ballerina Irma Nioradze was captivating as the Lilac Fairy. Islom Baimuradow was pure slime as the evil Carabosse Fairy; he simply oozed wickedness. And Aleksey Timofev stole the wedding party diversissements as the Bluebird. He was only on stage for a few minutes in the final act, but he made every minute, every jump, every turn, count.

The other scene stealers were the local youngsters recruited for the garland dance at the beginning of Act One. Ranging in age from 6 or so up to 12, clad in blond wigs, they were incredible cute, but also performed well. Eight additional, slightly older youngsters played the part of court musicians. All 24 were handpicked by Taipei Royal Ballet director Wu Ching-yin, who trained them for more than a month before a Mariinsky balletmaster arrived to do the final coaching.

LAVISH SETS

The *Sleeping Beauty* sets were extraordinary, especially the huge silver filigree and flower gates to *Sleeping Beauty's* kingdom. You knew you were in for a magical evening as soon you saw the gates. The autumnal glade in the opening of Act Two was a symphony of russet reds and golds, the perfect setting the 18th-century court ladies and gentlemen. And the forest that grows up behind the castle gates looked so realistic that one friend swore he thought the branches were moving.

The costumes were equally amazing. Almost everyone aside from the two leads was bewigged, with long, curly hairstyles for the men, and corkscrew clusters of curls for the women. It's hard to imagine any company besides the Mariinsky would have the resources to restage a ballet with this degree of detail.

The one weakness was in the storytelling. The mime that moves the stories along — in *Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse's cursing Aurora to die an early death from a pricked finger, or the king's banning of all needles from the court — are pretty sketchy. Ballet mime can look silly, but it is an essential component for the narrative classics, even more so when performing in countries that don't have a history of Western fairy tales.

VIRTUAL REALITY

Saturday night at the National Concert Hall was all about new worlds — and the wonderful mind of Austrian digital artist/choreographer Klaus Obermaier.

His *Le Sacre du Printemps* — *Interactive 3D Media Dance* had dancer Julia Mach moving around a box set to the side of the orchestra as her avatar danced on the screen suspended above the heads of the National Symphony Orchestra, and thanks to 3D glasses, out into the space above the audience. One woman in front of me reached out to try and touch Mach's hand as it floated toward her.

With her cap of white-blond hair, pale skin and champagne-colored shift, Mach was both a goddess and the perfect sacrificial victim for *Sacre*. Her long legs and arms morphed into even longer tentacles, or kept her balanced as she rode a grid through waves and earthquake rolls. Sometimes she moved as if playing a solitary game of twister, but then the fun ended as she crawled on her knees and elbows, one arm stretching out into space in a mute appeal for help. When her virtual world exploded, her avatar was left curled up in tight ball amid a swirling asteroid belt — until you realize that each asteroid was a small curled Mach.

From the beauty of an exploding galaxy, Mach fragmented into a collection of legs and feet for the sacrificial section of *Sacre* — with a foot at either end of each leg, then just the feet.

Obermaier will be back in Taipei at the National Theater in early May with *Apparition*. I can't wait to see that world.

PLANETPOP

Rapper T.I. was sentenced to a year in jail on Friday for violating federal weapons charges by attempting to buy unregistered automatic weapons and silencers.

The sentence was part of a plea deal under which T.I., whose real name is Clifford Harris, has already served more than 1,000 hours of community service.

T.I., 28, is also starring in an MTV reality show called *Road to Redemption* in which he speaks out about the pitfalls of guns, drugs and violence.

On the show, which is to start airing tomorrow, T.I. tells viewers that fear was the reason he tried to buy the guns. His best friend, Philant Johnson, was killed following a post-performance party in Cincinnati in 2006.

"Today I would like to say thank you to some, and apologize to all," the rapper said at the sentencing, according to MTV. "Everything I learned was through trial and error. I've learned lessons in my life to put in my music so people won't make the same mistakes as me."

Rihanna also seems to have



T.I. is sorry he played with guns. PHOTO: AP

taken an interest in firearms of late. The 21-year-old singer of *Disturbia* and *Take a Bow* has chosen to have the image of a handgun tattooed on her rib cage, according to a photo of her posted online by her tattoo artist BangBang.

On his blog, the New Yorker said that Rihanna had flown him out to her Hollywood home to ink the design, which they decided to put on her rib cage rather than her arms to avoid jeopardizing her lucrative modeling deals.

The tattoo appears to be a sort of message to boyfriend Chris Brown, who is awaiting trial on charges that he assaulted Rihanna last month.

In other celebrity news involving weapons, prosecutors have charged a man with stalking *Dancing With the Stars* contestant and Olympic gymnastics champion Shawn Johnson.

Authorities charged 34-year-old Robert O'Ryan of Florida on Thursday with one felony count of stalking and two misdemeanor counts of carrying a loaded gun in a vehicle. Authorities say O'Ryan was arrested on Tuesday after he tried to jump a security fence at a studio where the ABC show is filmed. Police say they found a loaded shotgun and handgun in his car. If convicted, he could face up to four years in prison.

And a judge has dismissed a charge against Grammy-nominated singer Wayna after she was arrested at a Houston airport for trying to bring a collapsible police baton through security.

Wayna was charged with possession of a prohibited weapon on Wednesday. The third-degree felony was dropped Friday. Wayna,

who attended the hearing with an attorney, uses the baton as a prop while performing.

Houston police said Thursday that security guards at Bush International Airport discovered the 61cm baton in her carry-on bag.

Wayna released her second album, *Higher Ground*, in 2008. One song on the album is *Billy Club*, a ballad about police abuse.

She twirls and points the baton when performing it live.

Wayna, who thanked prosecutors for not pursuing the incident further, said she forgot the baton was in the carry-on bag, along with CDs, makeup and "other materials she carries to performances." "Obviously, the past 48 hours have been life-altering," she said. "I'm incredibly relieved and grateful that it's over and that justice prevailed."

Lindsay Lohan is going straight — straight to DVD, that is.

The actress is falling almost as fast as the balance in her bank account, and in the midst of news about her excessive partying and overspending, it was reported last week that her latest movie *Labor Pains* will not even get a theatrical release in the US.

The *Los Angeles Times* said that in the movie Lohan plays a woman who fakes being pregnant in order to avoid getting fired — but then she finds that she has to keep up the pretence for nine months and more.

The film flop is the latest in a lengthy line of failures for Lohan, whose last movies have included the critically panned *Chapter 27* and *I Know Who Killed Me*.

An actor whose career seems to be moving in the opposite direction, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, recently discovered that he has a four-year-old son, *US Weekly* magazine reported. A source told the magazine that Morgan, who starred in the hit movie *The Watchmen*, learned he had a son with his ex-girlfriend, producer Sherrie Rose, a few weeks ago and has since met the little boy.

"He's shocked and surprised, but he wants to be in the child's life," the source told *US*.

Morgan also had recurring roles on the TV shows *Grey's Anatomy* and *Weeds*.



Rihanna armed herself with a tattoo. PHOTO: AP