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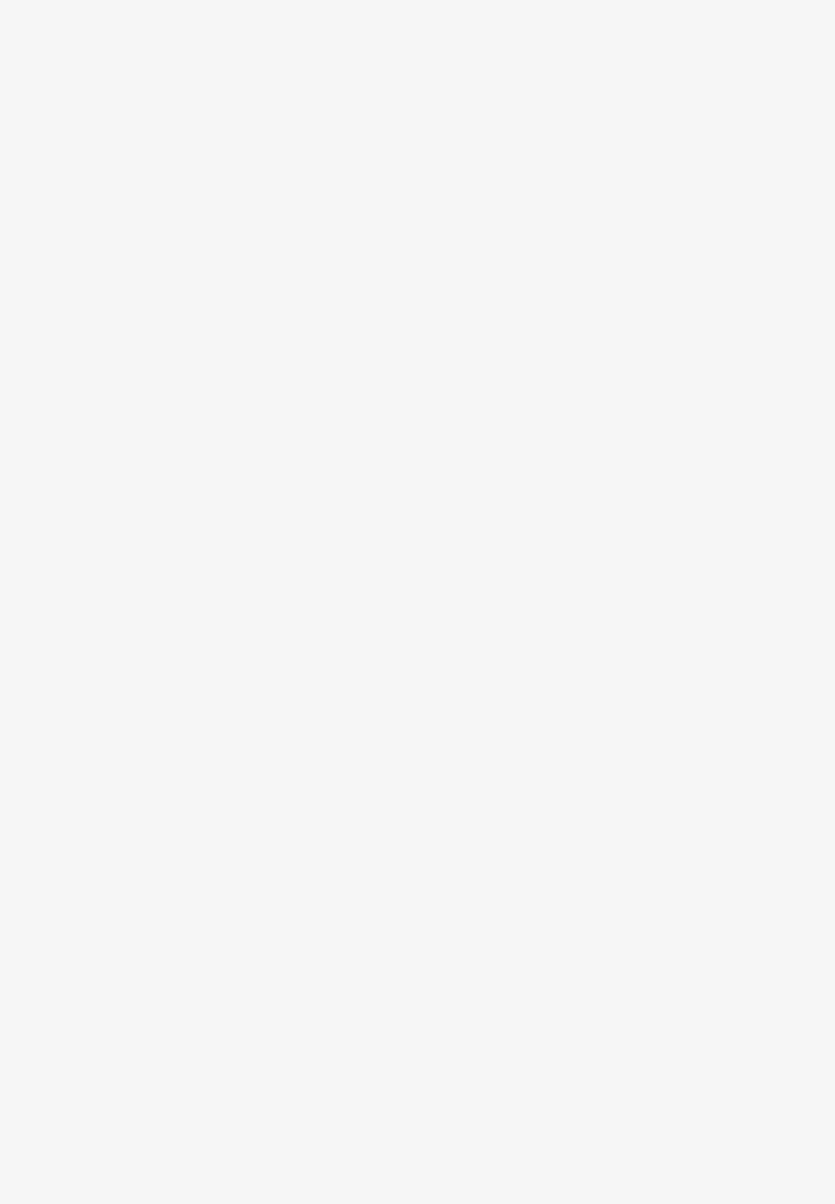
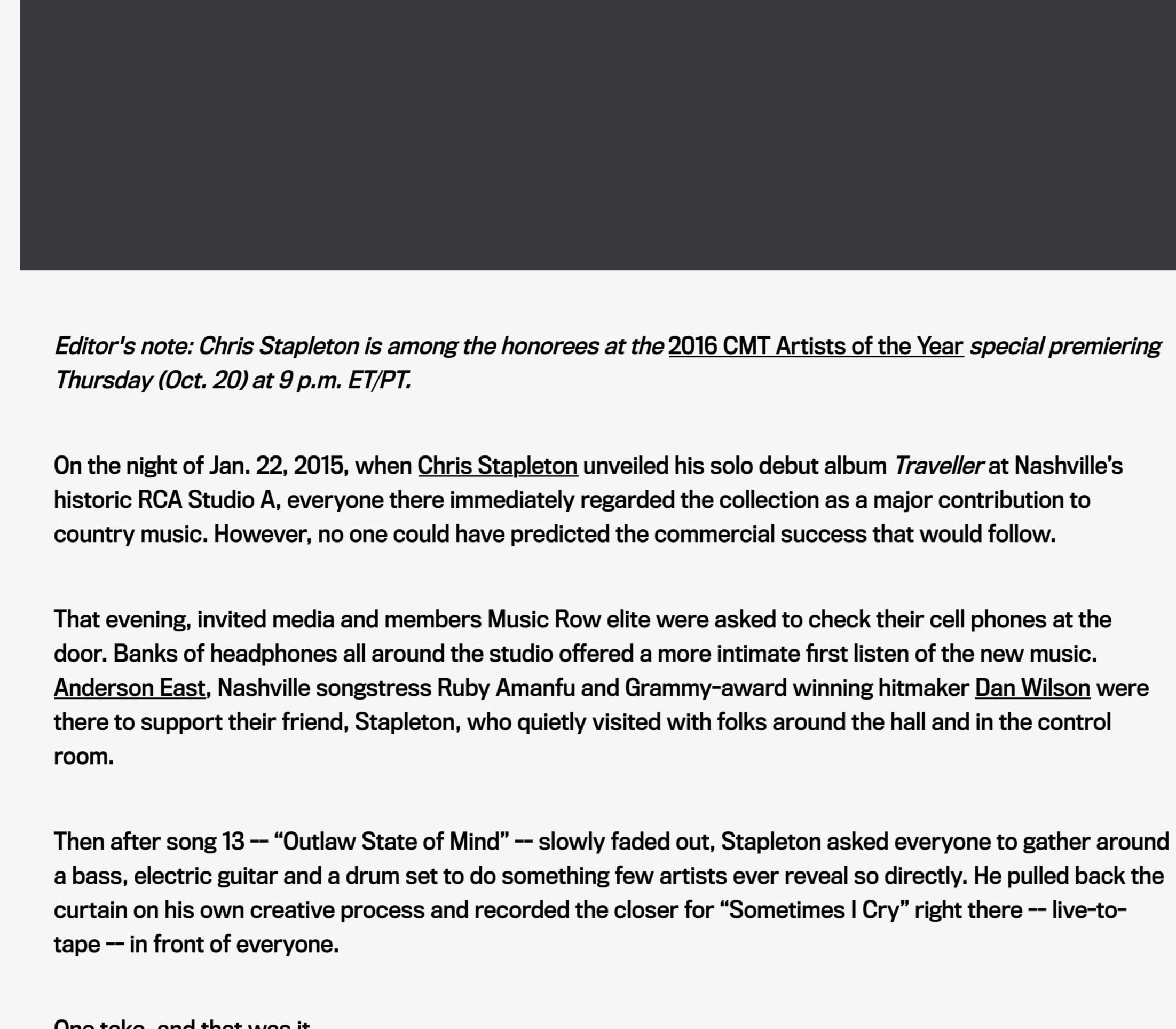
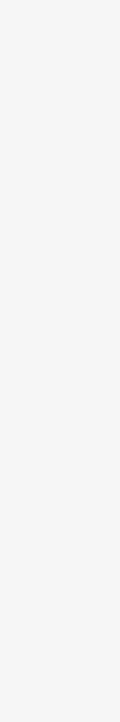
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CHRIS STAPLETON ON 'TRAVELLER' AND FUTURE MUSICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

SINGER-SONGWRITER WILL BE HONORED DURING 2016 ARTISTS OF THE YEAR SPECIAL AIRING THURSDAY

By Lauren Tingle
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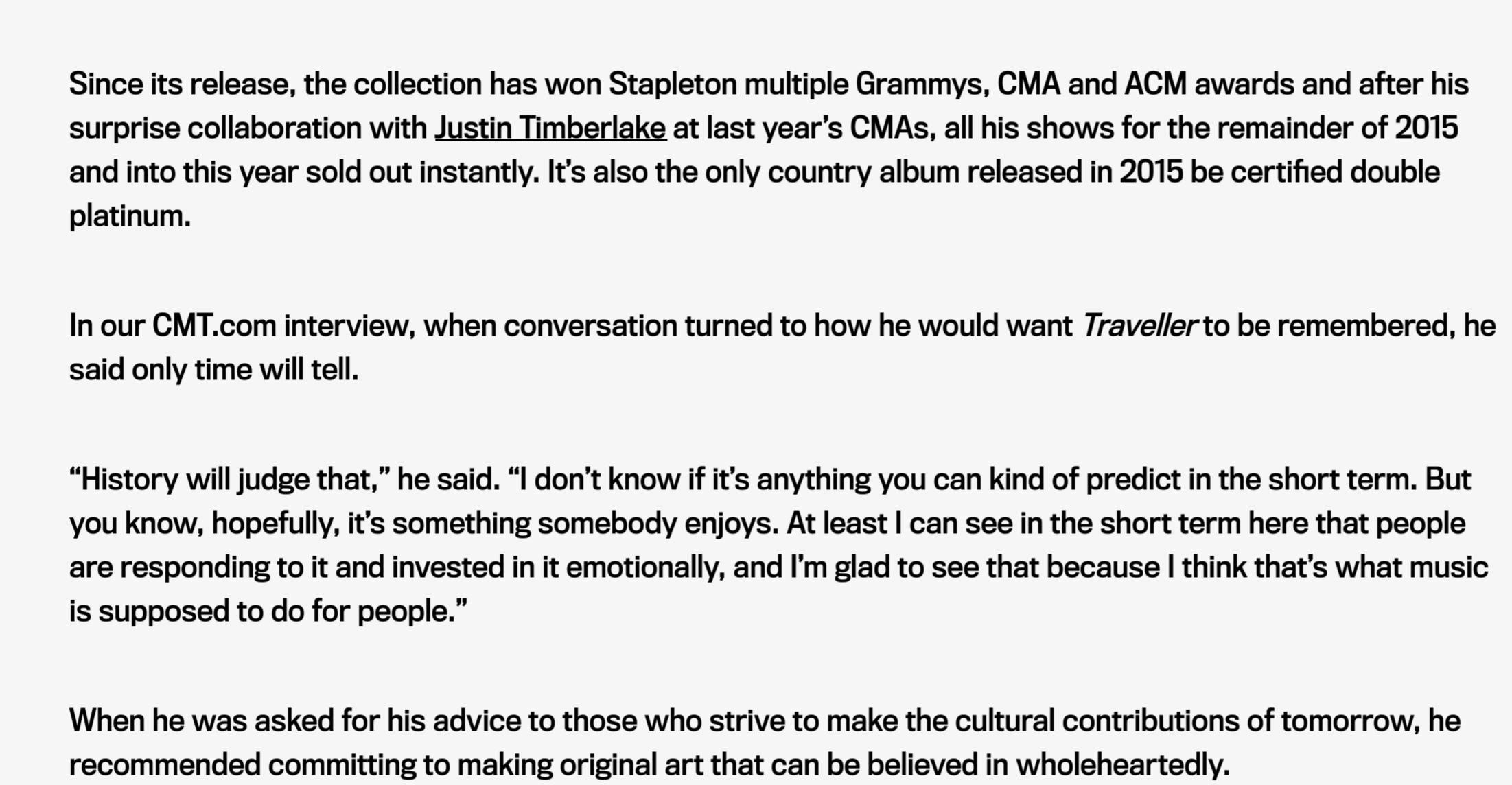
Editor's note: Chris Stapleton is among the honorees at the 2016 CMT Artists of the Year special premiering Thursday (Oct. 20) at 9 p.m. ET/PT.

On the night of Jan. 22, 2015, when Chris Stapleton unveiled his solo debut album *Traveller* at Nashville's historic RCA Studio A, everyone there immediately regarded the collection as a major contribution to country music. However, no one could have predicted the commercial success that would follow.

That evening, invited media and members Music Row elite were asked to check their cell phones at the door. Banks of headphones all around the studio offered a more intimate first listen of the new music. Anderson East, Nashville songstress Ruby Amanfu and Grammy-award winning hitmaker Dan Wilson were there to support their friend, Stapleton, who quietly visited with folks around the hall and in the control room.

Then after song 13 -- "Outlaw State of Mind" -- slowly faded out, Stapleton asked everyone to gather around a bass, electric guitar and a drum set to do something few artists ever reveal so directly. He pulled back the curtain on his own creative process and recorded the closer for "Sometimes I Cry" right there -- live-to-tape -- in front of everyone.

One take, and that was it.



Looking back, it was almost a miracle to be in the room that night because months prior, the historic studio was to be sold to a real estate firm that planned to raze the space for new condominiums.

But what makes *Traveller* a significant contribution in country music is that not only did it showcase Stapleton as a great interpreter of songs, the emotional integrity was there from the time it was first created. The title track was inspired on a cross-country road trip in a 1979 Jeep his wife Morgane bought for him after the passing of his father in October 2013.

In his current single "Parachute," he sings about being there for his love no matter what. There's pure accountability in "Nobody to Blame," mournfulness in "Daddy Doesn't Pray Anymore" and loneliness "Whiskey and You." Then gave new soul to George Jones' "Tennessee Whiskey" and Charlie Daniels' "Was It 26."

Since its release, the collection has won Stapleton multiple Grammys, CMA and ACM awards and after his surprise collaboration with Justin Timberlake at last year's CMAs, all his shows for the remainder of 2015 and into this year sold out instantly. It's also the only country album released in 2015 to be certified double platinum.

In our CMT.com interview, when conversation turned to how he would want *Traveller* to be remembered, he said only time will tell.

"History will judge that," he said. "I don't know if it's anything you can kind of predict in the short term. But you know, hopefully, it's something somebody enjoys. At least I can see in the short term here that people are responding to it and invested in it emotionally, and I'm glad to see that because I think that's what music is supposed to do for people."

When he was asked for his advice to those who strive to make the cultural contributions of tomorrow, he recommended committing to making original art that can be believed in wholeheartedly.

"I think that is the most important thing," he said, "and don't worry about chasing something else, because if you're chasing somebody else, you're just trying to do what somebody else is doing. If that's true to what you want to be doing, then that's a good thing, too. ...

"I just try to make music that I would want to hear," he added. "That's the only meter I can really have. Hopefully, somebody else would like it and want to buy it. With all the other things we have going on now as a result of the music, it would be easy to change focus or feel pressure to maintain the heat."

"But I want to go into making music with the attitude that I've always had, which is try to make the best music that I can. All the other stuff is kind of peripheral to that. I don't think you can make good music thinking about doing something other than making music. When other things enter the equation, it becomes something else."

And what makes Stapleton a true artist is that he has the talent and capability to deliver something different every time he creates. Before *Traveller*, he built a loyal following with the rock band the Jompson Brothers and he was a member of the bluegrass group the SteelDrivers.

He's also behind six No. 1 country smashes including Luke Bryan's "Drink a Beer," Kenny Chesney's "Never Wanted Nothing More," Thomas Rhett's "Crash and Burn" and Josh Turner's "Your Man," plus Adele has a version of the SteelDrivers' song "If It Hadn't Been for Love."

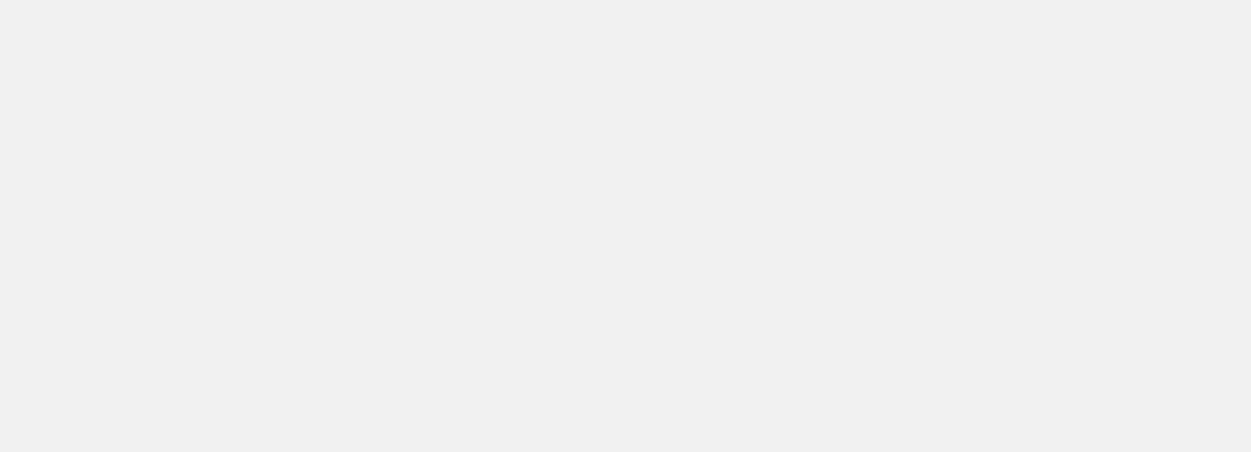
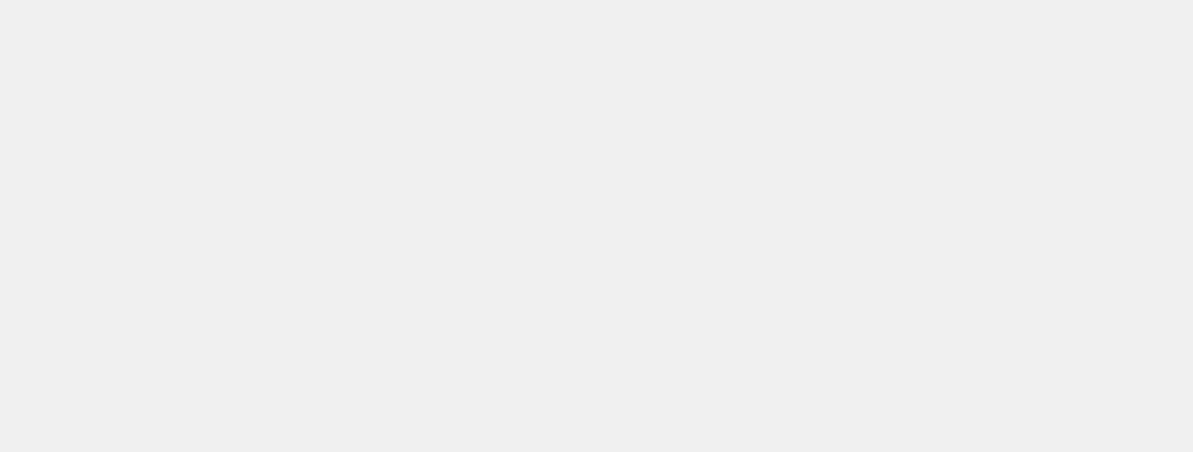
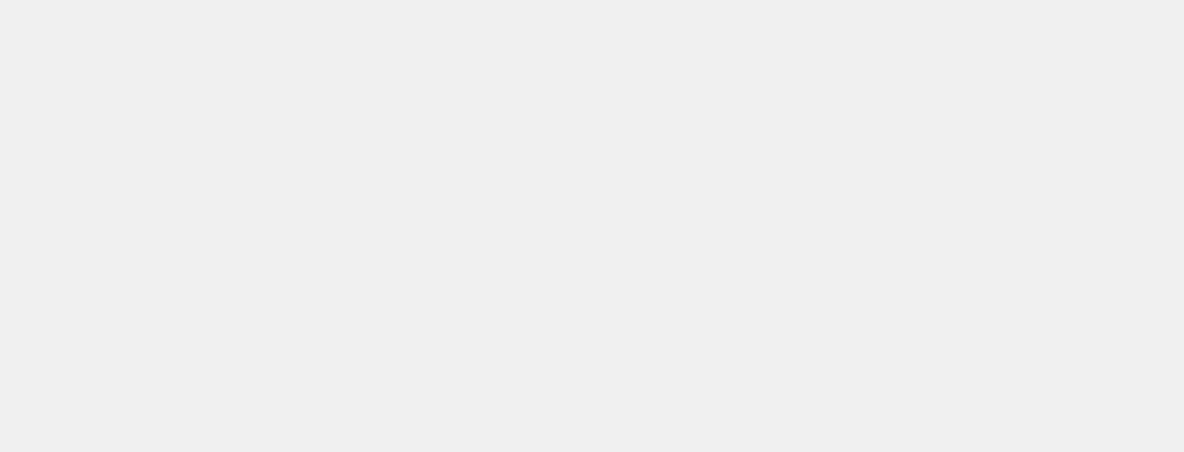
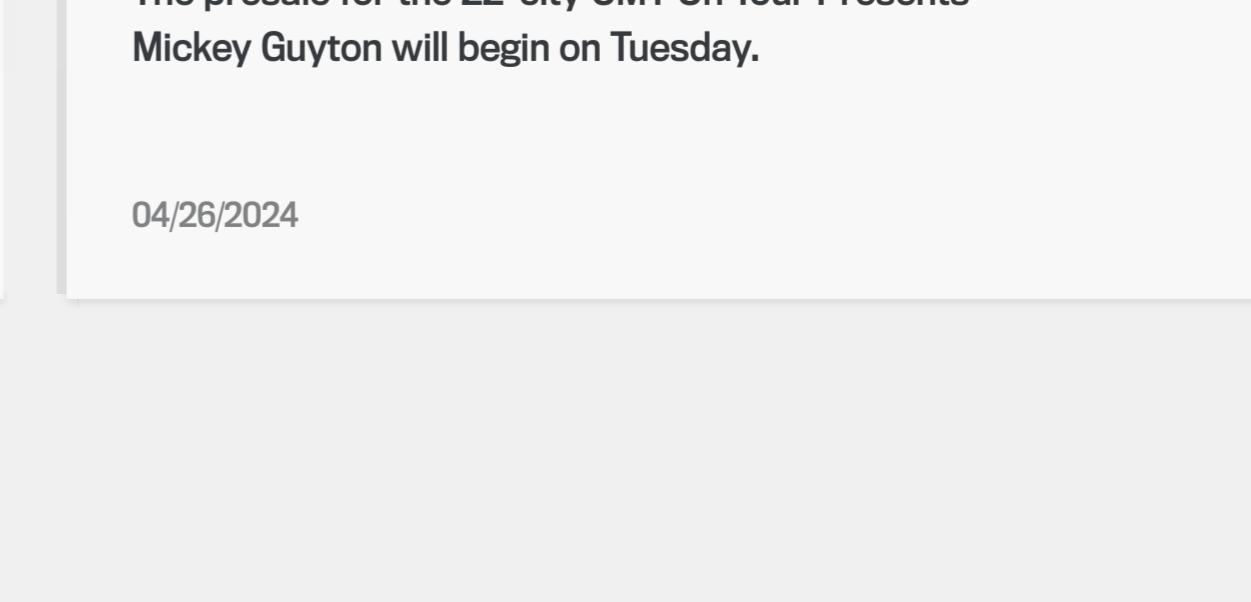
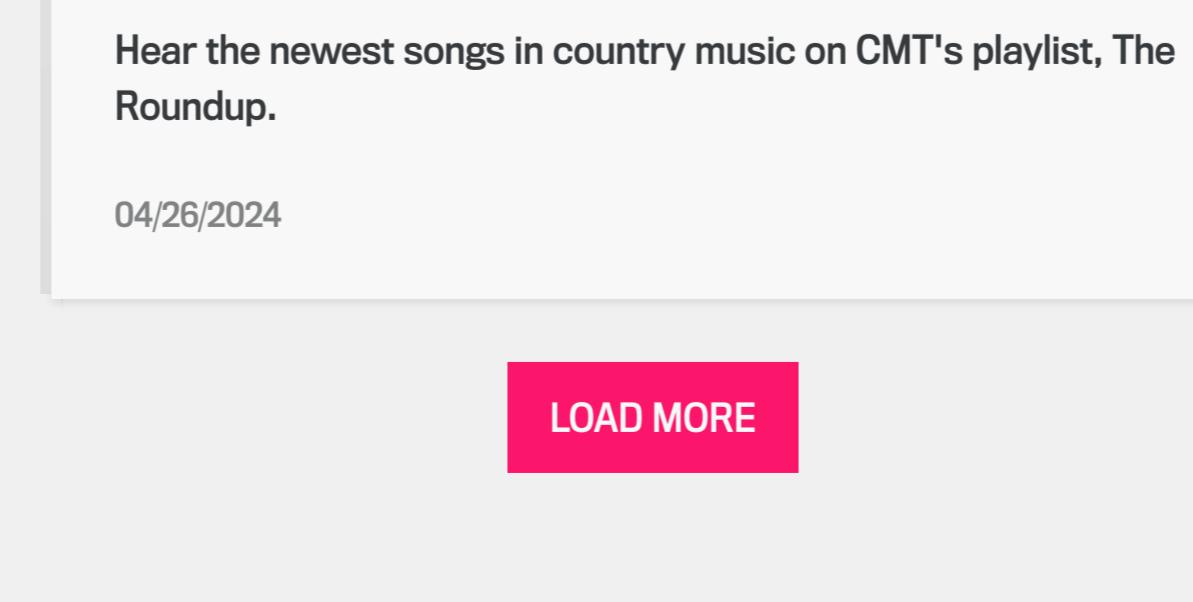
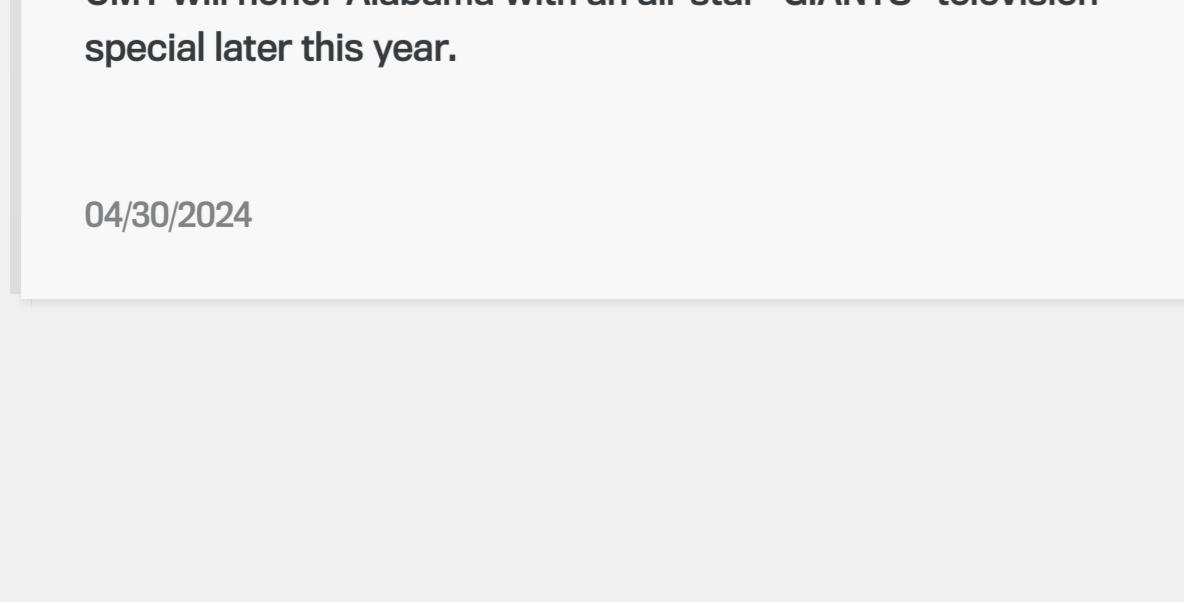
As far as what's coming on Stapleton's next album, he just hopes to keep making music without fear of judgment.

"We got to kind of make music in a bubble where nobody was really paying attention for this record," he said. "And it was a wonderful space to live in, and we'll try to recreate that or maintain as much of that as we can moving forward."

Stapleton is among the 2016 *CMT Artists of the Year* honorees with Bryan, Rhett, Carrie Underwood and Florida Georgia Line.

Shania Twain will receive the Artist of a Lifetime award and Kelsea Ballerini will be presented the Breakout Artist honor when the special airs Thursday (Oct. 20) at 9 p.m. ET/PT.

CMT ARTISTS OF THE YEAR



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