

Running Tough

Rising star Sean Patrick McGraw vaults from playing bars to touring with two truly big stars—Toby Keith and Trace Adkins.

How the venues have changed for rising star Sean Patrick McGraw! For the past several years, Sean Patrick (no relation to Tim McGraw, he always points out) and his band have been riding the road at breakneck speed, grinding out 150 dates a year at small clubs, honky-tonk beer joints and multi-date music festivals. Now, the handsome New York State native finds himself playing halls that are a bit classier, and certainly higher-capacity.

This past year, Sean Patrick was picked to join Toby Keith on his America's Toughest Tour, featuring Trace Adkins. The tour has brought the former *Nashville Star* semifinalist the following he's been trying to cultivate since moving to Nashville a few years ago.

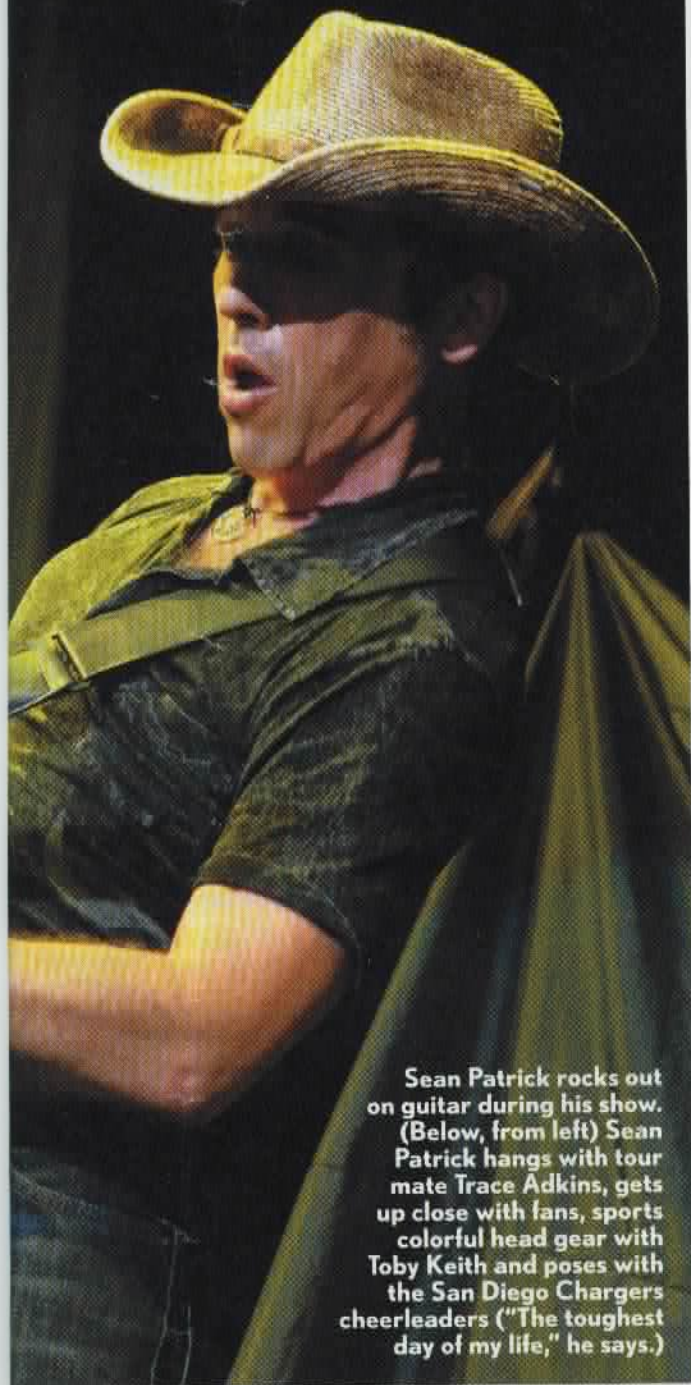
"I just never would have seen this coming," says Sean Patrick with a smile. "It's like you're constantly asking yourself, 'Can you believe we're doing this?' The fans have just really gotten behind us."

The catalyst for his good fortune came with his electrifying, rock-influenced set at the Stagecoach festival in California this past April, where he was a last-minute addition to the lineup. His wide range of songs, including his current single, "Dollar Ain't Worth a Dime," the playfully humorous "Cowtipping" and "Kickin' It Old School," caught the attention of not only fans but industry insiders as well. His performance there earned him a spot on Toby's tour.

"Quite literally, I canceled a gig at a hotel lounge to do Stagecoach," Sean Patrick remembers, "and we've been playing

PHOTOS BY HILARY ROMANINE





Sean Patrick rocks out on guitar during his show. (Below, from left) Sean Patrick hangs with tour mate Trace Adkins, gets up close with fans, sports colorful head gear with Toby Keith and poses with the San Diego Chargers cheerleaders ("The toughest day of my life," he says.)

for huge crowds ever since. We thought we were done with Toby's tour at one point, but they kept adding us on for a few more dates. You can't ask for anything better than that."

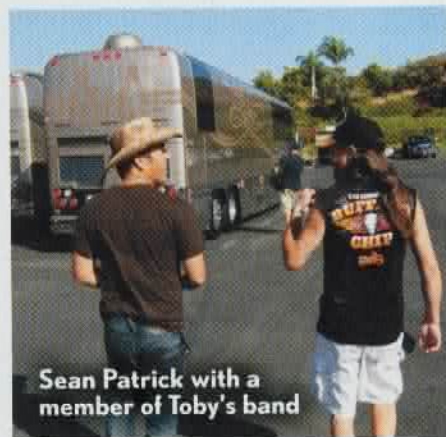
Well, a little advice from the top dogs never hurts, and Sean Patrick notes that Toby's management and crew have been more than willing to share their years of experience. Toby's bass player and bandleader, Chuck Goff, has been especially helpful.

"He told us that he knew we had been hitting it pretty hard over the last few years, but don't go into neutral after this," Sean Patrick says. "In other words, keep working hard at it and don't coast, just because you've gotten this great gig all of a sudden. Keep your nose to the grindstone—that's what Toby did."

Sean Patrick adds that Toby and crew have been "awesome" to tour with, mainly for the never-ending display of practical jokes at his expense. "Every stop we made, they would have fun with my name," he recalls with a pleasant grin. "The dressing room door would always have a variation of my name on it—Sean Penn McGraw, Sean Patrick Connery McGraw. The best one was Sean Danica Patrick McGraw," he laughs, referring to the female race car driver. "We always looked forward to the next show to see what they'd come up with next."

And up next for Sean Patrick is a new CD, which he hopes to release by year's end. "I have been in the studio cutting some new stuff," he says, "and I'm always writing new songs. I think all the hard work and years of hanging in there are maybe starting to pay off," he adds. "The last few months have just been amazing. It's like one day you're playing whiffle ball and a big league baseball scout sees you and goes, 'How'd you like to play for the Yankees?' That's exactly what this feels like."

— BOB PAXMAN



Sean Patrick with a member of Toby's band

