

# Paul Brandt, the Man Under the Cowboy Hat

**A country music superstar** from Alberta recently received an **honourary doctorate of divinity**. Why?

*By Amy Robertson*



**T**here is no sign of Paul Brandt, country music superstar, anywhere. There are no TV cameras, no security partitions and no cowboy hats. A few journalists with cameras and notepads sit inconspicuously throughout the auditorium, which is nearly full. Perhaps 1,500 people have come to watch the graduands of Briercrest College and Seminary, a small Christian college in Caronport, Sask., receive their diplomas today.

You would never know Paul Brandt is one such graduand, poised to receive his second honorary doctorate in seven months – this one a Doctor of Divinity.

He sits between a vice-president and a chancellor,

wearing a velvet tam instead of a cowboy hat, and a black and red velvet cape instead of a denim shirt.

He blends right in with the academics sitting around him.

Today isn't about Paul Brandt the musician. It's about Paul Brandt the man.

"Briercrest College and Seminary is pleased to present Paul Brandt as a worthy candidate to receive the degree of Doctor of Divinity ... in recognition of his commitment to faithful service in building the Kingdom of God," says President Dwayne Uglem. Three professors place a doctoral hood around Brandt's neck as he kneels, smiling.



**Dr. Sam Berg (left) and Dr. Marty Culy (right) hood Dr. Paul Brandt (kneeling).**

PHOTO: VIKTOR KARKLINS

Building the Kingdom of God isn't exactly part of the typical country star's job description. But for Brandt, building the Kingdom is exactly what the last decade has been about.

In 1995 Brandt had been singing and playing the guitar for 10 years. He was a registered nurse at the Alberta

Children's Hospital, and he'd recently won a singing competition at the Calgary Stampede.

One day he came home to find a life-changing message on the answering machine. A representative from Reprise Records in Nashville, Tenn., wanted to meet with him. Within weeks he had signed a record deal,

and he began recording.

The newly hooded Dr. Brandt steps up to the microphone on stage and begins to speak.

"I had a career launch that most people in the music industry would dream of," he says: a top-five hit "right out of the box" followed by number-one hit song called "I Do," a New Male Artist of the Year award (1996) from *Billboard Magazine* and a world tour.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, moved to Nashville. By 2000 he'd recorded three CDs. Life was good.

But Brandt couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

The executives at his label had begun to ask questions: What was more important, his marriage or his career? His beliefs or his music?

He had a dream about all the people he'd performed for. They were heading down a road as the gates of Hell were "smouldering in the distance."

Brandt's music was playing in the background.

There was nothing wrong with the three albums he'd produced. They were perfectly nice, perfectly moral – but they weren't pointing anyone to the good news of the gospel.

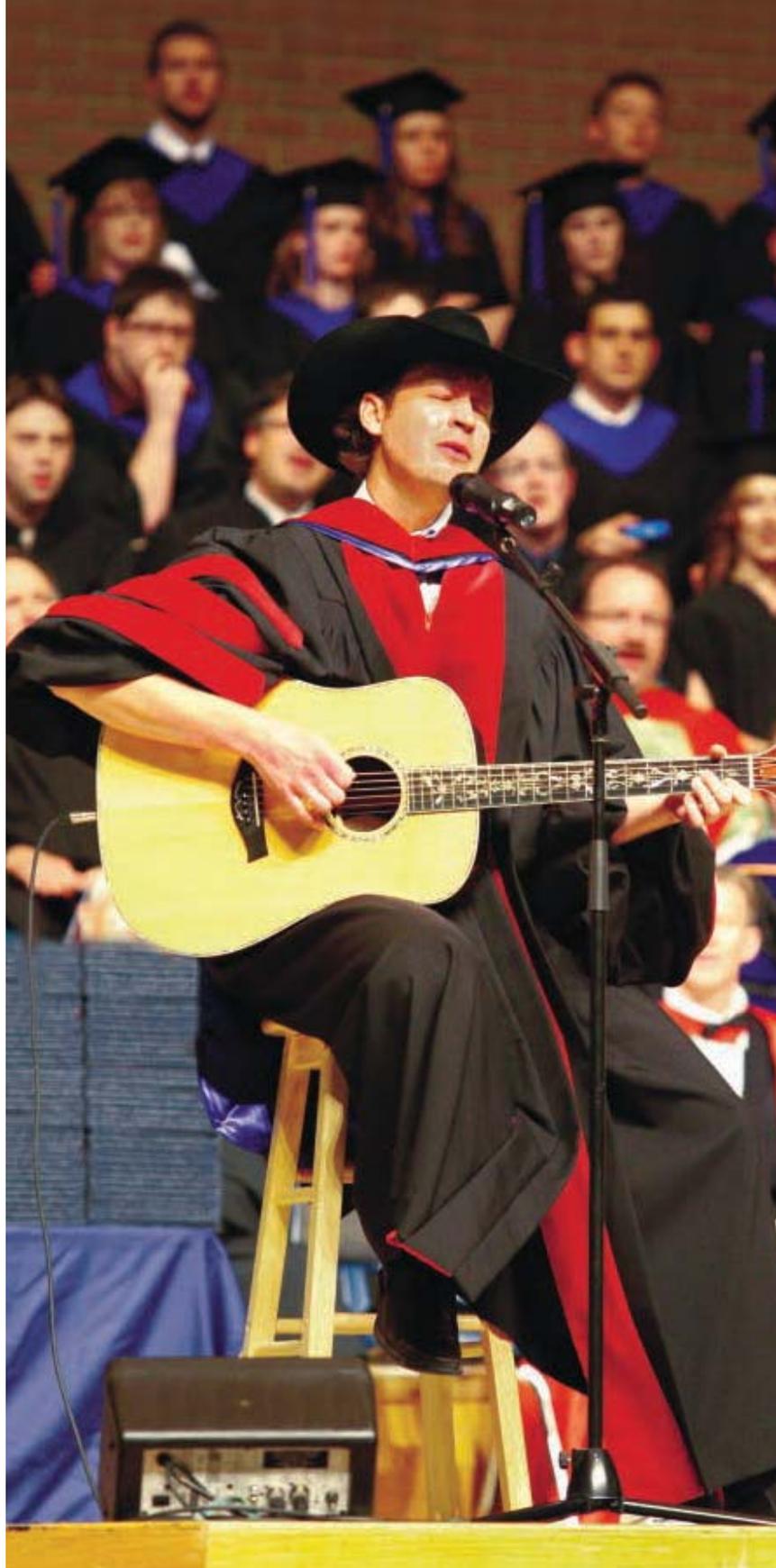
He and Elizabeth began to realize something needed to change.

"God was calling me to lay all my hopes and dreams on that altar," Brandt says, comparing his experience to the biblical story of Abraham.

So he did. He walked into the label executive's office one day for a one-minute meeting, during which he asked to be released from his recording contract.

After the papers were signed, Brandt, who didn't have a back-up plan, felt free – and terrified. All he could do was pray.

"I think You created me to do music," he told God that day. "You've given me the ability to sing and to write, and for some reason when I speak, people listen. So I'm going to do that. And You're going to have to take care of the rest."



**Paul Brandt performs "That's What I Love About Jesus" at the commencement at Briercreek College and Seminary on April 24.**

Brandt and Elizabeth moved back to Alberta where he began an independent, cross-country tour called Small Towns and Big Dreams. During the tour he recorded a



PHOTO: VIKTOR KARKLINS

live acoustic album. It sold only 1,000 copies – a failure by industry standards.

But then something strange happened. Country radio began to play his live independent album. “That never happens,” Brandt says.

Then people began to buy his CD – so many that he needed to do another tour. “That never happens,” Brandt says again.

Then he got a call from the organizers of Canadian Country Music Awards. They wanted him, an unsigned artist, to host. And at the end of the night, they called his name for Album of the Year.

That never, ever happens.

The night of the CCMA’s in as close to an audible voice that Brandt had ever heard, God spoke to him:

“I don’t need man’s ways to make things happen.”

Brandt’s independent album of the year went on to sell 40,000 copies. And he made more money on it than the number-one album he’d released years earlier, the one that had gone platinum (80,000 sales in Canada or one million in the United States).

Since then Brandt has left no doubt with his fans about where his allegiance lies.

In 2004 he released his second independent CD called *Risk*. Its 11th track is called “That’s What I Love About Jesus.”

In 2006 he told *Servant* magazine about an acoustic set he played one night: “A lady stopped the concert right in the middle of the show. There

are 2,000 people in the audience and she’s down front yelling at me. She said, ‘My son is sick, I have to take him to the hospital and you still haven’t played “Convoy.”’ I said, ‘We’d love to do that song for you ... Before we play, would you mind if we just prayed for your little boy?’ ”

Brandt and his wife continue to do humanitarian

work with the Alberta Children’s Hospital and with international aid organizations such as World Vision, Samaritan’s Purse, Place of Rescue (Cambodia), and the Ratanak Foundation. He’s also in the process of forming his own aid foundation, Priceles\$, which will care for orphans and widows around the world – specifically those enslaved by human trafficking.

Brandt has finished his Briercrest speech. He trades his velvet tam for a black cowboy hat, and the crowd laughs with him. He picks up his guitar and settles on a stool in front of a microphone. “I wanted to make sure that I had a song that was really clear about what I believed and what I think is the most important thing in life,” he says, tuning his guitar.

“That’s what this song is about.”

More than a few camera phones appear as he sings a simple acoustic version of “That’s What I Love About Jesus,” then transitions to “Amazing Grace.” Everyone in the room joins him.

“I was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Lethbridge [in October 2009], and that was for fine arts,” he says later. “That was exciting because it has something to do with my music and my ability to relate to people through my art. One of my main goals in my career has been to not only do that, but also allow my faith to shine through that. I think that receiving an honour like the one today signifies that’s happening.

“For me, that feels like a great accomplishment.”

“I hope that my music will be used ... like a billboard,” he continues. “Something that is used to challenge people and make them think about what they believe as well as entertain and enlighten. So to receive a recognition like this, it makes me feel like maybe some of those things are happening.”

There’s no denying that Paul Brandt, Canada’s most awarded male country artist, is worthy of honour, but the Canadian music industry has already taken care of that.

Today, Briercrest College and Seminary is honouring Paul Brandt, the man who is using his success to point people back to the God of the universe. The God who asked him to lay down his dreams, then gave them back again, plus more than he’d ever imagined. **FT**

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