

# Sarah

## TRAHERN MARATHON WOMAN

T W O

R A I N M A K E R S

“There is no better partner in growing and protecting country music than Sarah Trahern,” UMG Nashville President Cindy Mabe says of her longtime friend and colleague, who’s headed the Country Music Association for the last six years.



“While she and the CMA have built so many inroads to growing country music internationally,” Mabe continues, “her focus domestically on streaming, music education, market research and helping to invest in new acts has been so important to our growth. Sarah fights the right battles on behalf of our artists and our community.”

That assessment is echoed by attorney **Jess Rosen of Greenberg Traurig**, who is deeply wired into the inner workings of Music Row. “Sarah Trahern understands country music—and its mission—from the inside out,” he says. “She knows the artists and the history, and she understands how to elevate their meaning to the highest levels. She’s the rarest jewel: an organizational leader who really gets the creative side.”

Trahern took a long and winding road with more than its share of obstacles to get to her pivotal role in the thriving country-music business. It’s hard to imagine why a **Georgetown** grad who found herself moving from producer to department head at **C-SPAN** at just 25 years of age would want to walk away from that groundbreaking cable network. After all, as the late pundit **Christopher Hitchens** wrote in the October 1991 *Vogue*, C-SPAN “boasts its viewers vote at twice the national average and also read many more newspapers and magazines than the average consumer.” Yet after eight years, including the 1988 and 1992 presidential campaigns, that’s just what **Country Music Association** CEO Sarah Trahern did.

**B**orn in Champaign-Urbana, Ill., to a mother who played classical viola with the **Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra** and the **UT Opera Theatre** in Knoxville, and a father who taught at the **University of Illinois**, she grew up going to **Bill Monroe’s Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival** and taking violin lessons.





Kelsea Ballerini announces a \$1 million grant from the CMA Foundation to support music education in Metro Nashville Public Schools in December 2016 (l-r): Leadership Music Executive Director Debbie Linn, Nashville Public Education Foundation chief Shannon Hunt, MNPS' Nola Jones, Music Makes Us Director Laurie Schell, District 4 Council member Robert Swope, then-Mayor Megan Barry, Ballerini, MNPS' Jana Carlisle, Board of Education Chair Anna Shepherd, Trahern, CMA Foundation Board member Ron Samuels and President Bill Simmons

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By the time her father became the chairman of the University of Tennessee English department, the pair were making trips to the **Grand Ole Opry**—and Trahern had moved to banjo and acoustic guitar. That she would find herself heading the CMA in 2014 was probably not on the bucket list for the young woman who’d grown up going to weekend bluegrass festivals around the Smoky Mountains with her father.

Although the youngster was exposed to the arts and the inherent value of creative expression, it was journalism that initially attracted her. At the same time, Sarah was plagued by mysterious foot issues, which required special shoes, then crutches and finally multiple surgeries. But she fought through it. Working at a political ad agency after graduation and starting her own

production company, she soon arrived at C-SPAN, a network doggedly committed to representing both sides of every story.

It was at C-SPAN, under the tutelage of the legendary **Brian Lamb**, that she came to understand the deeper reality of television’s economics, as well as the critical need for a narrative arc, which has characterized not just her career but also her ability to connect disparate information for a much greater whole. Whether it was making sure she had the same number of Democratic and Republican talking heads, or marshaling the all-star song/video collaboration *Forever Country: Artists Then, Now & Forever* to celebrate the CMA Award’s 50th anniversary, Trahern reaches beyond the obvious to create a larger inclusion.

It took her a decade to get from Washington, D.C., to the now-defunct

**TNN: The Nashville Network**, where she oversaw special programming and entertainment series for six years. Her time at the frequently dry political network solidified her practical embrace of country music.

“I woke up one morning and said, ‘If it takes me three months, or three years, I want to live in Nashville,’” she recalled in an interview at **The Country Music Hall of Fame** when asked about turning down producing C-SPAN’s *The McLaughlin Report* in order to make the move. “I had a lot of friends in bluegrass and acoustic music. My parents were from Clarksville. My cousin **Jane**, who is my best friend, was here. I knew Nashville was where I wanted to go.”

She also recognized the power of the genre. As the graduate of the **Vanderbilt**



Owen School of Management told *Vanderbilt Business* in a 2011 profile, “Country is unique in that it really is the soundtrack for America. There’s pretty broad appeal. It’s not just niche music anymore.”

Joe Galante, former chairman of Sony Music Nashville, says he recognized the 54-year-old executive’s passion at the then-emerging TNN—and later Great American Country, which she joined after its acquisition by Scripps. As he recalls, “In most of those [creative] meetings, there weren’t *any* women, so she stood out. But she was also a genuine fan of the music. She was genuinely creative and wanted to see content that reflected that.”

That same drive saw the woman who’d battled those severe foot issues train for—and run—her first marathon in 2002 at Disney World, just after launching her own Sterling Productions. Her mother was at the finish line, sobbing. As Trahern recalled in 2015 to *The Tennessean*, “She kept saying, ‘I never thought I’d see this. I’m so proud.’”

Her tenacity—and the earlier mobility issue—forged a life view that defines her. Continuing to *The Tennessean*, “Here’s a great sense of accomplishment, and it gives you a great sense of perspective. Everyone has a challenge. Am I going to deal with it, or am I going to let it define me?”

Following her marathon achievement, she found the time to earn an MBA from Vanderbilt while Sterling Productions was creating specials for CMT, Scripps Network and PBS. She cited the importance of earning her masters to *Vanderbilt Business*, “It really rounded out my management experience. Also, my experience in the strategy course—developing numerous analytical plans and having to defend them in front of the class—has been quite valuable.”

The quality of her work, and her commitment to pushing the content past the obvious tropes, made her an in-demand creator. When tasked with integrating GAC into the Scripps fold in 2004, SVP Ed Hardy focused on Trahern.

Knowing the woman at Scripps’ *Shop at Home* had a past at TNN, he enlisted the HGTV production exec to take over the incoming country music channel. She quickly more than doubled the network’s



Top: Country Music Hall of Fame gathering (back row, l-r): Gary Scruggs, Dave Berryman, Trahern, Nancy Shapiro, Bonnie Garner, Kay Clary, Abi Tapia, Kyle Young; (front row, l-r): Liz Thiels, Mabe. Middle: With Joel Katz; with Luke Bryan and Ed Hardy. Bottom: With Jo Walker-Meador at 2016 Country Music Hall of Fame Medallion Ceremony





Archival photos from Trahern's childhood and her C-Span job that hang on the walls of her office

reach to 60 million homes, while overseeing their strategic planning and day-to-day operations, including programming and production.

Despite the slim budgets, Trahern embraced thinking outside the box. With a focus on new talent that needed visibility, she helped create and oversaw *Short Cuts* to showcase the labels' priority developmental acts; it helped launch a teen named **Taylor Swift**. When, in 2011, she was honored at the **Country Music Hall of Fame's** prestigious **Louise Scruggs Memorial Forum**—which recognizes groundbreaking female business leaders—Trahern recalled to the audience at the Hall's **Ford Theatre**, "Taylor and her mom **Andrea** came in to audition for us in our editing room. She played two or three songs, and I remember she brought out this 12-string guitar. It amazed me that she could actually play it. It was the perfect marriage for our short-form show."

In 2010, Trahern's agile navigation of budgets, programming and the music itself saw her rise to SVP/GM of GAC. It was her first of many appearances on *Billboard's* Top 30 Women in Music, but more importantly, she was in a position to spearhead a telethon mere days after the catastrophic floods that struck Middle Tennessee, drowning the **Grand Ole Opry** and **Soundcheck**, where so many artists kept their gear. The commercial-free, three-hour concert even raised nearly \$2 million for the victims.

**Warner Nashville** chairman **John Esposito** believes it's Trahern's ability to create consensus that allows her to work this kind of magic. "She knows how to push the buttons harder when required, but generally goes for the 'We'll all get there' approach. She also knows how to bring partners in to help her with that. She leans on a handful who she knows will give her good effort."

With an eye to creating great content that supported the artists, Trahern stood out. She wanted to see everyone succeed, and her time



at HGTV, when GAC was given a reduced role, strengthened her global vision. As Galante explains, “You get a worldview doing the things she’s done. We get so wrapped up in ‘the neighborhood,’ we don’t always see things in that larger perspective. She saw best practices in areas that we in the country business aren’t exposed to, and need. And her Rolodex just kept growing across so many different businesses.”

When **Steve Moore** stepped down as CEO of the CMA in 2013, and Trahern’s mentor **Ed Hardy** took the reins on an interim basis, her name began floating to the top of most people’s lists. Down-to-earth, granular in terms of budgets and deadlines, and passionate about music, she merged the business sense with the sparkle that sets the entertainment industry apart. As search-committee chair **Espósito** says, “Sarah pays attention to that magic every day of the week. We’ll figure out how to take care of the rest of the stuff as a matter of course.”

Galante also cites her unflappability. “She’s not one to panic. It’s very steady as she goes, and getting people going in the right direction. After she came back from HGTV, she had more confidence, more experience. It was a leading network, a cutting-edge lifestyle network—and that gave her a whole different vantage point.”

In November 2013, Trahern was announced as the new CEO of the CMA, effective Jan. 1. After relatively brief stints by **Tammy Genovese** (2007-09) and **Moore** (2010-13) following **Ed Benson’s** 14 years and **Jo Walker-Meador’s** 30 years of running the organization, Trahern earmarked stability as one of the goals.

Hardy told *The Tennessean*, “She’s probably the first CEO I’ve seen there who does reach out and really communicate with the board members on a one-on-one basis. It keeps her pulse on what they’re thinking, and what they’re looking for with the CMA.”

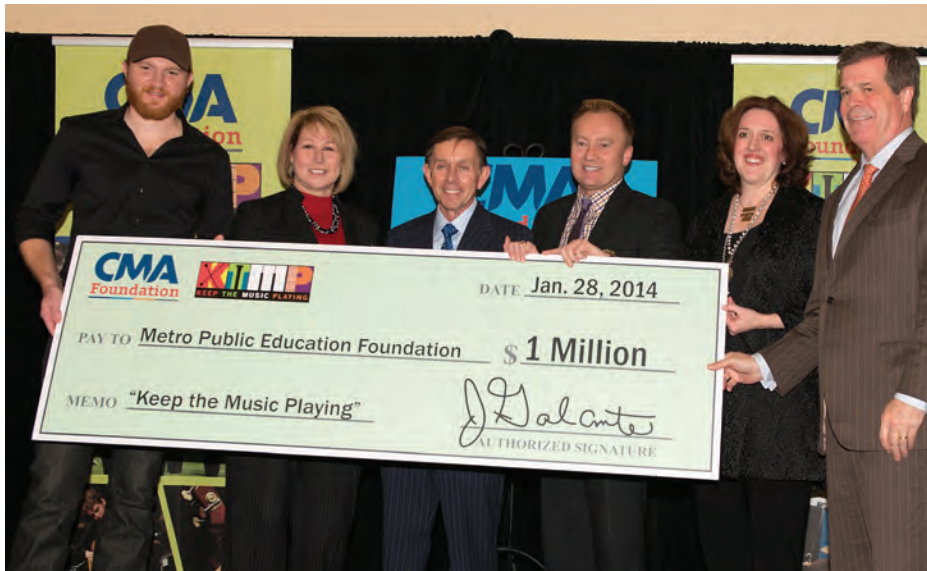
“Sarah showed she knew how to lead an organization from her years of leading at GAC,” **Espo** recalls.



*Top: At YWCA Academy for Women of achievement Celebration (l-r): Executive Director of the Tennessee Human Rights Commission Beverly Watts; philanthropist Nicky Weaver Cheek; Trahern; State Senator Thelma Harper; Kasar Abdulla, Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer at Valor Collegiate Academies; Latrisha Jemison, Regional Community Affairs Manager at Regions Bank; and Sara Finley, Threshold Corporate Consulting. Middle: Collecting Toys for Nashville Children in Need with Brett Eldredge and Delanie Walker. Bottom: With C-SPAN’s Brian Lamb*



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*Fifth Annual Keep the Music Playing All Stars Concert (l-r): Eric Paslay, Trahern, Joe Galante, Jay Steele, Shannon Hunt and Karl Dean*



*CMA Chairman's Award recipient Shane McAnally joins CMA Chairman Sally Williams, Trahern and Warner Music Nashville head and former CMA Board Chairman John Esposito.*

“But GAC was just one of the experiences she had in the world of television, and to be clear, *The CMA Awards* is a TV show—and having somebody with actual TV-show expertise set her apart.”

ABC SVP Alternative Series, Specials and Late Night Entertainment **Rob Moore** concurs: “She cares about country music, and *how* it comes across. But what’s invaluable with music specials, especially with a board the size of the CMA’s, is her ability to speak to both areas with such great shorthand. It’s a delicate needle to thread—explaining how a win from a ratings perspective *is* a win.”

At this point, Trahern isn’t just shepherd-ing her organization through the CMA Awards, she’s also working with ABC, producer **Robert Deaton** and CMA’s committees on the holiday special *CMA Christmas* and the summer special *CMA Fest*. With November’s CMA Awards now being aired globally—it was seen in 41 countries last year, compared to just three when Trahern took charge—the television properties are a big piece of her work. In addition to those properties, the CMA is heavily involved in the international expansion of country music amid the changing landscape of the music business overall.

“We have the three biggest [country music] properties on the air,” Galante notes. “She’s the head of the organization, which is the brand, and the governing board for this music. She balances all of it in a way that’s unique. People like to be in charge and give direction; the idea of being accountable? It’s so rare, but it’s one of the things that defines her. To the board, the staff, the artist community, she wants to make sure people know what we’re doing and where we’re going.”

“I see a two-fold shift in the Nashville landscape: The increasing popularity of the country-music genre, and the visibility of Nashville as not only a touring attraction but its continued evolution as an international destination,” Trahern explained in 2017. “These shifts implore us to continue focusing on scalability with our events and initiatives, while engaging a more diverse, global audience.”

C2C, country music’s U.K./Ireland “export” festival, has taken on a life to rival England’s biggest festivals. The CMA has also made a concerted effort to create a similar experience in Australia. Just as importantly, Trahern has become an ambassador





*All-star gathering at the 2016 Country Radio Seminar (front row, l-r): Trace Adkins, Maddie & Tae; Ashley Campbell, Trahern, then-CMA head and Grand Ole Opry VP/GM Pete Fisher; (back row, l-r): CRB/CRS Executive Director Bill Mayne, Easton Corbin, Chris Janson, Tracy Lawrence, Chris Carmack, David Nail, CRB/CRS President Charlie Morgan*

for the genre among Nashville's other industries. Galante acknowledges, "With the **Music City Council**, the **Hall of Fame**, the **Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital** at Vanderbilt, **Leadership Nashville**, Georgetown's **Baker Scholarship** program and the countless boards she's part of, Sarah has become a face for country music with those other groups. To be part of the fabric of the larger civic interest keeps a business many of those folks will never deal with front of mind."

Meanwhile, the **CMA Foundation**, through its **Keep the Music Playing** campaign, is committed to improving and sustaining high-quality music education programs across the U.S., working to ensure every child has the opportunity to participate in music education.

"Sarah is a visionary committed to

making the genre global, accelerating its outreach through the **Keep the Music Playing** charity and helping create and steer a long-range plan for where the business of country is headed," says Rosen.

"Her vision for her first years," Esposito recalls, "and I can't believe it's been six years, was to get the organization on a good track. She's had to get the staff right and made a good number of changes to do that, and to focus on building a great relationship between the board and staff. She then spent 2018 helping lead the charge for the development of a strategic plan. And in 2019, her vision is to take that strategic plan and narrow it to what we can accomplish, what will move the needle. She rallies us as board members to take ownership of that process with her, which I'm sure will lead us into the next

many years in positive fashion."

Realizing the herculean "Forever Country," a mash-up single and video of three classics featuring **Dolly Parton**, **Blake Shelton**, **Kacey Musgraves**, **Keith Urban**, **Brooks & Dunn**, **Luke Bryan**, **Miranda Lambert**, **Charley Pride**, **Faith Hill**, **Little Big Town**, **Carrie Underwood** and more to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the **CMA Awards**, it went on to be an **Academy of Country Music Awards** nominee. As she told *HITS* in 2016 of the third song to debut at #1 on the Country radio charts, "When we played the final track at our summer meeting, our radio-industry leaders lent their support and suggested a historic 'roadblock' rollout of the track at the same time across all the radio groups. Truly, they wanted to make it a universal moment





Specialists (l-r): ABC's Scott Igoe and Rob Mills, Trahern, Carrie Underwood, Brad Paisley and producer Robert Deaton.

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among our country-music outlets.”

That kind of expression of art shows the world what the CMA stands for, but it’s merely one of the reasons why Trahern was named *Billboard*’s Executive of the Year in their 2017 *Nashville Country Power Players* issue. She was also inducted into the **Academy for Women of Achievement** in 2018, recognizing her impact not just on the music but the industry that supports it.

“I think everything Sarah has done in her career has led to her being the perfect person to run the Country Music Association,” **Opryland Entertainment Group** Chair and CMA Board Chair-woman **Sally Williams** told *The Tennessean*. “In mind, it’s being the ultimate champion for not only the country music community, but the community of Nashville as a whole. I think she is diplomatic. She obviously has an

incredibly deep knowledge of relationships and experience with television, which is incredibly important to the organization. And she has a wealth of practical business skills, from strategic planning and visioning to the implementation side of that. Not everyone can do those things well.”

Though she told *Nashville Lifestyles*, “It was a dream back then, and it’s still a dream today,” Trahern is a can-do woman who remembers what it was like to be a young fan at the Opry. She realizes that for the music to have a future, it is up to her to bring together 7,800 members, 84 board people, a staff of 50 and the seemingly endless number of artists chasing the dream. If that means getting instruments in children’s hands (“A thriving music education program is an investment in the future

and provides important motivation to keep children engaged and in school,” she told *MNPS*) or building bridges between business and creatives, Trahern wants to grow the foundation and the future. “I often call the CMA, both the Association and the format of country, ‘The Big Tent.’ Under our association, we brand everything. The **Grammys** represent creators, and **RIAA** represents record labels. We include everyone who makes a living in the country-music industry,” she shared with *HITS*.

“My hope is that I will retire from this job,” the woman who likes to say she leads from behind told *The Tennessean*. “I would like to stay here for a while longer, then I’d like this to be my last job and enjoy hiking with my husband. Go to the CMA Awards, go celebrate the success they’ve had after me.” ■