

# Country road

From Dapto, Wollongong to Nashville, Tennessee, country rocker Rick Caballo is picking up gigs and fans aplenty. LOUISE TURK talks to the talented and ambitious young musician who is enjoying his time in the spotlight.

IN HIS HOMETOWN OF WEST DAPTO, Rick Caballo is known as a good-looking dude who can sing and play guitar.

In Nashville, Tennessee, it takes a bit longer to describe him. He is introduced on stage as a "Spanish-looking, Australian-speaking, American-sounding country rocker, with a black soul band."

Not that Caballo minds. The 31-year-old is having the time of his life, performing and recording his music in the US, and occasionally experiencing the hoopla of celebrity culture that surrounds the entertainment industry.

Like the time he arrived at the Riverbend Festival in Chattanooga, with guitarist friend Duane Sciacqua who was touring with US country music star Rodney Atkins.

Caballo was snapped by paparazzi as he got out of the musos' bus, and then while riding in a golf buggy with Sciacqua towards the stage, through an audience estimated at 60,000 people.

"Everyone was trying to touch me and take photos of me as we headed to the stage in these buggies," he says. "I was walking up the ramp and I looked up and there I were people as far as I could see. I thought to myself 'I'm from Dapto, I can't believe this happening'."

Caballo was a regular on Australia's east coast pub and club circuit before deciding, two years ago, the grass was greener overseas for musicians.

"I love Australia but I've had so many doors slammed in my face," he says.

The singer/songwriter is in Nashville until June to put the finishing touches on his debut 10-track album, titled *Love Retaliation*. "I've been working on it all my life," he laughs. "It's the culmination of every crappy gig I've done, every good gig, and every late night I've spent on the road."

The album is produced by Sciacqua, an experienced guitarist who has played with Glenn Frey, Don Henley, Joe Walsh, and Paul McCartney. Caballo is recording in the studio with skilled session musicians.

"I was getting shafted in Australia and a friend of mine sent out an email, asking if there was anyone interested in working with me (in Nashville) and before I knew it I had about 10 people reply," he says.

"I chose Duane because he was the nicest guy and his sound is right down my alley."

"I guess there was an element of good luck as well. I was in the right place at the right time."

Caballo, who idolises Keith Richards,

describes his rock sound as "The Rolling Stones meets John Mellencamp, meets Bruce Springsteen".

Caballo spent a large part of 2008 in the US playing gigs and building up his contacts in the music industry. He can now call upon a number of musicians for live performances and recording session work. With regular work of three to four nights a week in Nashville, either performing solo acoustics or fronting a band, Caballo says his fans travel from as far as Texas to hear him play.

"You need a passion in life," he says. "There's no point getting up and going to a nine-to-five job that you don't like because you'll just burn yourself out."

"If you do something you love, then money or fame, or whatever you want, will come to you. Obviously, you've got to be good enough too. I check myself all the time. I look around and say 'these guys are playing with me for a reason'. It's not because I'm giving them money, it's because I'm playing at a level that they're happy with, and they like me as a person."

Caballo landed on the West Coast in mid March and spent a week in LA doing open



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mike performances before flying to Nashville.

During Caballo's time in California, he also caught up with a film producer who has asked him to write a song for a proposed movie.

"I went down to his ranch in San Diego and hung out there for a while," he says. "It was quite inspirational to talk to him about his life. He is a multi-millionaire who achieved success only after being rejected many times."

Late-night gigs are a different pace from Caballo's former life as an airbrush artist, using his craftsmanship on the fuel tanks of motorbikes and cars.

Caballo, who is single, says he is kept grounded by his parents and sister, who live in the Illawarra.

"I'm at a point where I can have a go now or be happy with playing at Dapto Pub," he says. "And if it doesn't work (in the States), I'm happy to do that. This is not about trying to get famous and making lots of money. This is what I do." ■



Pictures: ANDY ZAKELI