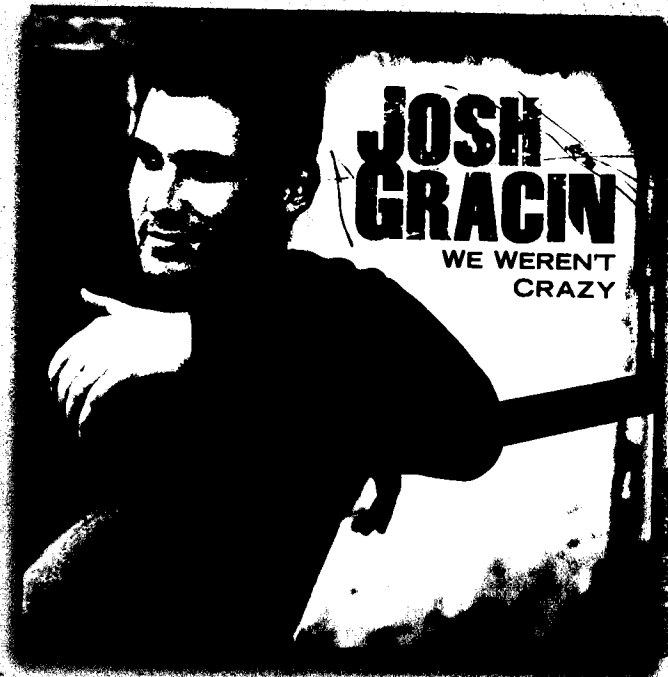




Looking back, Josh Gracin says the Corps "really prepared me for what I'm dealing with now." The former lance corporal has one album that will eventually turn platinum and has just released his second album with the title song and others written or co-written by him.



Singer Josh Gracin:

American as Country Music and The Corps

By R. R. Keene

*"Just a couple kids
a couple years ago
Now we gotta couple kids
of our own
We turn out right
proved them wrong
Look at us goin' strong
Lookin' back laughin'
'Cause they called us crazy. ...
But we weren't crazy."
—Lyrics from "We Weren't Crazy"*

Josh Gracin loves everything about country music.

"Not only do I love the music, but I love singing it, what it feels like singing it, the fact that it has stories about life: tragedy, good times, bad times, how to get through them and what to do. It's amazing. It is definitely life-music."

As a rule, most Marines have their heads screwed on pretty straight, especially the younger ones. That goes double for former Lance Corporal Joshua M. "Josh" Gracin who in 2003 sang his way into fourth place on the top-rated FOX Network television show "American Idol," while still making daily formations down the road at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., and devoting the rest of his time to his family.

For this former supply administrator and operations clerk with 1st Maintenance Battalion, First Force Service Support Group (now First Marine Logistics Group), life has been pretty good thus far.

Having good looks and a great singing voice helps, but the 27-year-old country music star says the Corps "really prepared me for what I'm dealing with now. We definitely have had some disappointments, and like the Marine Corps teaches, not everything is going to go the way you want it to and you got to stand up and fight back. It has always been the Marine mentality to never give up."

His life has almost been a ballad from an American songbook. The only boy in a family of four sisters, he grew

up with middle-American values, in Westland, Mich., 30 minutes east of Detroit.

Although he listened to rock and pop and played the saxophone beginning in the sixth grade and later in his high school band, country music was in his heart.

"I realized I could sing when I was 12 years old. I sang in a talent show for my junior high school," he said. "It was the first time I sang in front of anybody, and I knew right then I wanted to sing."

He sang Garth Brooks' 1994 hit "Standing Outside the Fire": "*Life is not tried, it is merely survived/If you're standing outside the fire.*"

It proved a good choice not only as a song, but also good advice.

With his parents accompanying him, Josh started singing at fairs and shows throughout Michigan.

"I came to Nashville when I was 15, recorded a demo and tried to pitch it. Nobody was biting."

He may have been a little too young for Nashville, Tenn. By the time he was 19, his schooling was behind him and he was on his own. "I was never in trouble, never did anything wrong, but didn't have any sense of direction and responsibility," he recalled.

It showed in a failed relationship with his girlfriend, Ann Marie.

"I wanted to change and I knew the best way to change was to do the most difficult thing I could possibly think of."

He also realized that he had "a sense of wanting to serve my country. It was something I definitely wanted to do."

"I've always done my research before I go and do something. Yes, I wanted to serve my country. I could have gone in the Army or Navy, but I loved the history of the Marine Corps. I loved everything about it."

In 2000, he made up his mind and marched to the Marine Corps recruiting office, ignoring the other service recruiters. The Marines marched him to Parris Island, S.C., where discipline, responsibility and a sense of direction are drilled into young men and women who just need a little old Corps guidance.

Josh explained his recruit experience as having "helped define who I was going to be for the rest of my life. It really helped prepare me for the rest of my life, mentally, physically and emotionally."

Did the training really work? Perhaps. He righted things with Ann Marie. He proposed, she accepted, they were married.

He was no longer a kid with a demo and a dream. He now had dependents: a wife and a daughter to support while serving at Camp Pendleton. Marines instinctively understand that luck favors the aggressive and those who smartly

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work with an eye toward positive goals.

In addition to his duties as a Marine, he attended school full time and took a second job at a department store. "There's no way I was going to be able to do that before the Marines."

Then he saw his opportunity. "I was lucky enough to be stationed one hour and a half from where 'American Idol,' the biggest show in a long time, was to be filmed."

With the Corps' approval he made it to the show. His pipes, more used to sounding off than singing, were, nonetheless, still considered "world class." That, combined with his stage presence, carried him well into the competition. He eventually got cut, but not

before he sang "I'm Moving On," the hit single by Rascal Flatts.

*"At last I can see life has been patiently waiting for me
And I know there's no guarantees,
but I'm not alone.*

*There comes a time in everyone's life
When all you can see are the
years passing by
And I have made up my mind
that those days are gone."*

Josh later learned that the members of the group "were all sitting in their tour bus when the show came on and watched me sing. They made phone calls to Nashville, got me all set up. When I got there everything was rolling. They put me in contact with the right people."

But he still belonged to the Marine Corps, and although he'd been at Pendleton for practically his whole enlistment, he was very aware that many of his fellow Marines were under fire in Iraq.

"I felt guilty because I was singing and there were fellow Marines over there in foxholes."

That's when he got a letter from a Blue Star mother, who wrote: "My son and a friend's daughter are in Iraq and it gives us great comfort watching you, seeing how you carry yourself on stage, how you act and how respectful you are toward other people. It reminds me what kind of people Marines are, and even though they're in harm's way, I



Then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld went out of his way to meet Nashville's newest country star and posed with Josh and his manager, Jake LaGrone.



COURTESY OF JOSH GRACIN

Marines in Nashville for a conference March 25 took in the Grand Ole Opry and were escorted backstage to meet and take pictures with Josh Gracin after he acknowledged the American military men and women during the show. Sald Capt Charlie Pickett (center in front of door): "To see one of my favorite artists perform at the Grand Ole Opry in person was amazing, but to see a former Marine on that stage was something different all together. We all felt honored to be there, but even more proud to see Josh on that stage."

feel like they're going to be all right."

The Marines saw LCpl Gracin's newfound "celeb" status as a potential recruiting tool and sent him on tour throughout the United States to promote the Corps until he was awarded his Honorable Discharge in September 2004.

Meanwhile, he signed a contract with Disney's Lyric Street Records in Nashville and recorded his first album "Josh Gracin," released in 2004.

"I was on active duty and flying back and forth between Nashville and Camp Pendleton." Nonetheless, the album took off, quickly hit certified gold and is moving close to platinum. It produced three top singles on the U.S. *Billboard* Hot Country Singles & Tracks: "I Want to Live," "Nothin' to Lose" and "Stay With Me (Brass Bed)." Few in the Nashville music scene can recall when the last new male country singer made such a debut.

His second album, which hit the stores in April, had been delayed nearly 2½ years. Although disappointed, Josh turned some of the frustration into a blessing. "It gave me a chance to write several good songs and get them on the album." Along with Bob Pinson and Tony Lopacinski, Josh co-wrote the album title and single "We Weren't Crazy," which was released on April 1.

"I have always written, but I've really gotten better ... in the past few years because of the people around me. I have great musicians and great experience with songwriters in Nashville. Brett James, who wrote a lot of my hits on the first album and a lot of hits in Nashville, is now my producer. So being around him and getting his input has really helped.

"The Marine Corps helped in my life, there's no question about it. Every-

"The Marine Corps helped in my life, there's no question about it. ... It gave me a sense of direction, a willingness to fight and keep pushing and do what I need to do."

thing I have done since then has been because of that. It gave me a sense of direction, a willingness to fight and keep pushing and do what I need to do. It is always going to be a part of me. Hopefully, I will be able to get involved with them and do more." His last appearance for the Corps was in November 2006 at the dedication and opening of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, Va.

Life thus far has been good to Josh Gracin, and he knows it. After all, life, like country music and like the Corps, is all about consequence, i.e., you do

something and *this* is what happens.

He talks about his new album: "I wanted this to reflect my energy and values. ... I also wanted songs of substance that really explain who I am and what I stand for.

"That's a major thing I learned in the Corps: You can turn disappointment into blessings if you are willing to stand up and not let it get you down."

The Gracin family now lives near Nashville and has expanded to include his wife, Ann Marie; two daughters, Briana and Gabriella; and a son, Landon. His family keeps him anchored and focused on what's important in life.

He recently told reporters: "I'm no longer just some kid with a dream. I am a father and husband," and he added: "If I get a little carried away, I've got my wife to keep me humble and bring me back down to earth."

*"Coulda set it down
When things got tough
Coulda walked away from this love
But that'd been crazy. ...
We weren't crazy."*

Editor's note: Leatherneck would like to thank Josh Gracin's publicist, Katie McCartney; Tony Lopacinski, Bobby Pinson and Tim Hunze of Stage Three Music; and Theresa Torrance, Director, Copyright and Licensing, Stage Three Music, who with MFN Music and the co-publishers and publisher granted us permission to use the song lyrics reprinted in this story.



Leatherneck—On the Web See Josh Gracin's special family memories at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/joshgracin.