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Quirky Pancake Lyric Helps Black River's Jacob Davis Get His Career Cookin'

It's a word that gets tossed around a lot at IHOP or Cracker Barrel, but not so much in popular music.

The unexpected appearance of "pancakes" in the second verse of **Jacob Davis'** debut single, "What I Wanna Be," is so quirky that some early supporters are endearingly referring to it as "the pancake song." Aligning a first release with comfort food is, to Davis' tastes, a positive development.

"If you don't like pancakes, something's wrong with you," he says with a laugh.

As popular as they are in the kitchen or in diners, pancakes are not exactly top of the menu in popular song. They're mentioned in passing during a breakfast scenario in **Jewel's** 1996 pop single "You Were Meant for Me," and "cakes on the griddle" rhymes with "fiddle" and "riddle" in the chorus of **John Denver's** 1975 crossover hit "Thank God I'm a Country Boy." You can also find flapjacks in a number of non-hits and album cuts, but they don't typically help start the day on radio morning shows.

So when Davis sings, "Put some pancakes on your plate, girl," in "What I Wanna Be," it commands attention.

"When we were messing around with the verses, somebody threw that line out," says producer/songwriter **Forest Glen Whitehead** ("Love Me Like You Mean It," "Peter Pan"), "and we probably spent the next 15 minutes laughing about it."

Laughter was appropriate, since the writing room in June 2016 was extraordinarily upbeat. Davis had signed a publishing deal with Black River on May 10, 2016, and exactly one month later, the label surprised him with a recording contract during a party in the midst of the CMA Music Festival. Davis was still walking on air during the appointment with Whitehead and **Adam Hambrick** ("How Not To," "Somebody Else Will").

"I was kind of on cloud nine," says Davis. "I remember being in the room and telling them about the ink still being wet on the deal and just being so excited about somebody giving [me] a chance."

That positivity aligned with Whitehead's musical frame of mind. He had heard **The 1975's** danceable pop song "Ugh!" and arrived at the Black River building with a different chord progression that used the same sort of start-and-stop vibe. He played that for Davis before Hambrick arrived, and it set the blue-eyed soul tone for the day.

Davis "got excited," says Whitehead, "'cause it had different notes and more of a bluesy, soul sound to it, rather than the regular straight chords that you normally hear in country music."

Earlier, Hambrick had locked in on a fast-paced, rhythmic melody at home, and when he walked into the room, it fit right in as the first part of the chorus on "What I Wanna Be."

"I was just in my kitchen that morning making coffee, making breakfast — not pancakes — and I had that melody kind of in my head," recalls Hambrick.

The ultra-linear melody and swirl of words gets some relief when the tune jumps into another range halfway through that section. The trio returned to more syncopated rhythms to close out the chorus.

With the key part of the song established, they focused on the verses, starting with a barroom encounter between a hopeful guy and a woman of interest: "I know what you're thinkin'/Here comes another pickup line that you'll shoot down." It set up another quirky lyric as the singer attempts to explain that he's genuinely interested in the woman and is not just "some cashmere, craft-beer clown."

"I think that that was my line," says Davis. "We said 'cashmere' because we were trying to think about a guy at a bar almost in like a Wall Street area. It's just a bunch of guys wearing suits and sport coats. I thought 'cashmere,' and then for some reason 'craft beer' came out. It's kind of weird because I love craft beer, and I was like, 'Man, should we say the craft beer line? I love craft beer.' And they were like, 'It's too good. We're keeping it.'"

Making morning-after pancakes in the second verse was similarly meant to showcase the guy as someone who wanted to commit, not just score.

"We looked for a cultural way to say that and kind of contrast him against the one-night Romeo kind of thing," says Hambrick. "You don't make pancakes for someone you're trying to get rid of."

Before it was done, they concocted a bridge that slowed everything down and coaxed Davis into a falsetto range he hadn't much explored.

"Forest was really good about that," says Davis. "He would play a note on the keys, and he would turn around and look at me and say, 'Can you hit that note?' Then he would find another note and say, 'Can you hit that one?' Before I knew it, I was singing falsetto, and I'd never done that before, so it was pretty cool climbing that ladder of notes."

During the fall, Whitehead assembled drummer **Nir Z**, bass player **Tony Lucido**, keyboard player **Dave Cohen** and guitarists **Rob McNelley** and **Pat McGrath** to record at Sound Stage, looking to get a loose, live feel and combine the country and classic soul sounds at the heart of Davis' musical persona.

"I grew up on country music for the most part," says Davis, "but my dad always played old-school funk, a lot of Motown, **Earth Wind & Fire** and **Teddy Pendergrass** and obviously **James Brown** and **Otis Redding**. I always loved that."

Nir Z punched up the percussion with shakers, wood blocks and cowbell, and McNelley devised so much good material for the guitar solo that Whitehead extended it an extra two bars. And Cohen created a shimmering, starry effect during the falsetto bridge by stacking Wurliizer pianos. "You probably perceive only two, but there's four or five different parts going on there," says Whitehead.

"The bridge," adds Hambrick, "is kind of like the star on our Christmas tree for that song."

Davis mimicked the upbeat tone of the writing session in his vocal performance, and they resisted the urge to overpolish it and damage its joyful vibe.

"We didn't want to lose the rawness," says Davis. "There were some notes in there that I could've hit a little better, but it worked. Whenever a note may not be perfect, that makes you human as a singer. You're not perfect — I'm sure as hell not perfect — and I think the listener can kind of relate to that."

Black River shipped "What I Wanna Be" to radio via PlayMPE on March 9, and it debuted on the Country Indicator chart, which measures secondary stations, dated April 22. It's currently at No. 53 in its second charted week. It helps give Davis a unique presence, thanks to both the blue-eyed soul texture and the pancake nibble.

"We went with something different, something a little bit against the grain," says Davis. "But honestly, for me and Forest, that song just made us feel something. If you listen to it and it doesn't make you want to move, then you're a stronger person than I." ●

