

# **"It's Always Been About the Song": East Alton Native Tommy Karlas Performs Nashville Hits**

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
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EAST ALTON/GODFREY - No matter how much recognition Tommy Karlas receives for his music, to him, it's always about the song.

The Nashville songwriter has impressive credits, with songs on the albums of artists like Blake Shelton, Randy Travis and Old Dominion. But behind the man who wrote the No. 1 country hit "Roll With Me" by Montgomery Gentry and who now has a reputation as an artist in his own right, Karlas is an East Alton native who chose to celebrate his second album's release with a concert at Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC), headlining a show on the same stage where he competed in a school talent show at age 13.

"I think it was always being a songwriter first in my heart. It's always been about the song," Karlas said of his work. "It's cool because some people want to be an artist and that fits them. They thrive to be out there on stage and stuff like that. I love doing it and it's fun, but it's really more about just getting to get the songs out."

Karlas's second album, "What Matters to Her," debuted on Friday, Oct. 20, 2023. He commemorated the album's release with a hometown concert and after party on Oct. 21, 2023, at Hatheway Cultural Center at LCCC in Godfrey, performing alongside musicians and longtime friends Joel Shewmake, Charlie Brown and Billy Hurst.

But though Karlas has a natural presence on stage, he never expected to be the one singing his songs. He decided early on that he wanted to pursue a career as a songwriter.

"They're not stars. They're just guys who write songs, and that's a whole community in Nashville," Karlas explained. "My first night in Nashville, I was 14. I went to the Bluebird Cafe, which is where all the songwriters play. It's a very prestigious place. Taylor Swift got her start there, Garth Brooks. It's a little hole in the wall, but it's just an amazing place. There's no other place that I've ever been that it's like. And that's what made me want to be a songwriter for a living."

Back home in East Alton, Karlas created a five-year plan that ended with him living in Nashville. By age 19, he was in Tennessee and writing songs alongside thousands of other hopeful writers. He soon found success with major country stars and even snagged an ASCAP Songwriter of the Year nomination when "Roll With Me" became Montgomery Gentry's most popular song.

But after 20 years as a Nashville songwriter, Karlas realized music was changing with the advent of streaming services and shifts in the country genre. He found that artists weren't as interested in the songs he loved, but the thought of putting his best work

aside was unbearable. He decided that instead of waiting for an artist to perform his music, he would record his own album.

“Country really wasn’t cool for a moment. So to make a living, I was like, ‘Well, I’ve got these great songs. I’m gonna put them out, put out a songwriter album,’” Karlas explained. “I would have been happy having other people do them, but I really did just want the songs out there... There were years I wrote and didn’t write a song I liked, you know? So when I started writing songs that I did like and they weren’t getting recorded by other people, it was like, no, I want these. These deserve to be out there.”

Karlas’s first album, “Put It In Drive,” was released in 2021 under Sony Music. He decided he would go on a tour and “bring the Bluebird kind of thing to people’s towns” — intimate shows, where it was all about the music. Almost 30 years away from the 13-year-old boy who competed in his school talent show, Karlas found himself onstage at Hatheway Cultural Center again, playing his own music to his hometown.

Even now, as he performs his second album “What Matters to Her” on the same stage, Karlas can’t quite articulate why it means so much. He just knows that for the last few decades, whenever he pictured himself playing music, it was always at Hatheway, at home.

While Karlas’s career hasn’t always been what he expected, his love for the music is still as strong as when he first started writing songs. The enjoyment comes first, and he tries to convey this mindset to younger artists, too, whether they’re interested in music or writing or performing. It’s not about the money or the fame; it can’t be about that. Instead, it’s always about the song.

“The thing I’ve learned that I would pass on is to do it purely for the love of it first,” he said. “Don’t try to go for it unless you would be doing it anyway. Do it because you love it. Strictly for the love of it.”

“What Matters to Her” by Tommy Karlas is available everywhere now. Check out his [official website at TommyKarlasMusic.com](https://www.tommykarlas.com) for information about his music, upcoming shows and a full list of his songwriting credits.