

# Climbing the Charts

*Two new artists emerge, each with a unique brand of music.*

## The Soulful Nerd

By Jean-Louis Ntang Beb

When you hear Kenny Wesley's tenor for the first time, you are immediately drawn into a funky musical realm. Going by the stage name The Soulful Nerd, Wesley (B.A. '04; M.A. '11) defines his style as "collard greens, corn bread and a bottle of Perrier."

He says he gets his soulful side from his native North Carolina, where, he says, "they love their greens."

"The Perrier is the extra, the sophistication, the Frank Sinatra and everything else that I like," he says.

One of the breakthrough moments of Wesley's career came in 2012 when his music was featured on the prime-time show *So You Think You Can Dance*. That was followed up on the show last May with the debut of his single "Damaged Goods," which helped his music extend his reach. It didn't stop there. The show *The View* also featured another single on one of its episodes. "There's nothing that can compare to listening to your song on the radio or TV," Wesley says.

Wesley says he chose the name Soulful Nerd because it was the only succinct way to describe himself to anybody who didn't know him. He believes that Soulful Nerd demonstrates that there is more than one dimension to any artist.

Wesley has been singing since he can remember, but his passion for music developed under the guidance of Mary

Brown, an early mentor who encouraged him to learn new languages and start with piano lessons. The piano lessons inspired Wesley to start playing for the youth choir, where he earned his stripes before joining Brown's music troupe. "She literally thrust me into music," Wesley says.

Brown also introduced Wesley to the idea of pursuing higher education when she took him and other students from his church to a college campus. It was the first time, he says, that he was surrounded by Black scholars. After the visit, Wesley's minister also got involved and motivated him to pursue higher education. When he was in the sixth grade, his minister even gave him a Howard University application. Excited by the possibilities, Wesley created a fake Howard diploma and hung it on the wall in his room as a motivational piece.

"I remember it had everything, even Latin inscription," laughs Wesley, who graduated with a degree in Spanish and a minor in chemistry. "I carried it throughout my Howard career."

After he graduated, he became a full-time Spanish lecturer at Howard, where he draws similarities between a classroom full of students and a venue full of fans. "Being a teacher is a lot like being a performer," he says.

With students, Wesley says he has to keep the classroom environment fun and engaging while he delivers his lessons. Much like a performance, the classroom



is a training ground where he masters the art of delivery.

“Delivering that message properly while maintaining the engagement level is something that definitely transfers back to performing on a stage in front of people,” he says. “Music is one of the reasons why I’m on planet Earth.”

*Ntang Beb is a former graduate assistant in the Office of University Communications and a doctoral candidate in the School of Communications.*



## A Little Bit of Country; A Little Bit of Law

By Brittany Jett (B.A. '13)

Shai Littlejohn (B.A. '96; J.D. '99) always envisioned herself following in her father's footsteps and being a lawyer, and so she did. But she also envisioned a second career singing, so she did that, too.

Today she is making a mark in Nashville. Inspired by country artists such as Shania Twain and Dolly Parton, she released her EP, *Shai Littlejohn*, last July and will release her second album this summer. While it's rare to find African Americans topping the country music charts, Littlejohn is filling up venues in Nashville, where she performs two to three acoustic shows a month, with a contemporary style that mixes classic country with pop and rock. Last year, she opened for singer Will Downing and competed in an opening-act selection showcase for singer Martina McBride. (She and her band will perform in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia this summer.)

“You really have to love country music as an artist, because your audience can tell when it's not authentic. You also have to be unique and put your own twist on it to be successful,” she says.

As a completely independent artist, Littlejohn does everything herself—including producing her music and booking herself for interviews and performances—while she retains complete control over what she records, performs and distributes. “Being a businessperson is just as important as being a creator,” she says.

Although Littlejohn moved to Nashville to pursue her music, she still has a part-time law practice in D.C., allowing her to pursue both careers. She will soon release an eBook download called *Quit the Firm, Join a Band*, which is intended to inspire audiences to “find the courage to quit what they hate and pursue the life they want.”

“In your passion you have to be bold, brave and consistent. You can't do it because you want to be popular,” Littlejohn says. “I'm making country music because I can and I want to.” ■ HU

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