

# NO. 1 WITH A BULLET

Just a few months ago, no one knew his name. Now, with a new album, **LEON BRIDGES** is a step away from superstardom.

BY PETER SIMEK // PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTI AND SCOT REDMAN

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LEON BRIDGES IS STANDING IN FRONT OF A 30-foot-tall eyeball in downtown Dallas, and if you wanted to sum up the last few months of his life, you couldn't find a better image. Everyone in the world these days, it seems, is watching, waiting for what the young singer will do next.

On this warm April evening, Tony Tasset's giant *Eye* sculpture serves as the centerpiece of an extravagant party across

the street from The Joule hotel, closing out the weekend of the Dallas Art Fair. Cocktail waitresses in jumpsuits and goggles bounce around couture-adorned art dealers and collectors as they navigate an adult playground replete with a giant swing set. Bridges is the evening's entertainment, and the whole lavish affair feels like his very own debutant ball. His debut album, *Coming Home*, will drop in June. No one knew the name Leon Bridges seven months ago, but now everyone expects him to be North Texas' next big thing, maybe another Norah Jones.

And yet, in the midst of this wild scene, the 25-year-old singer stands unnoticed near the bar. Bridges is about 6 feet tall, with a perfectly manicured wedge of black hair atop a slender face with high cheekbones and a warm, broad smile. Tonight he is wearing a crisp, white button-down shirt tucked tightly into high-waisted dark gray slacks. Which is significant: what Bridges wears is nearly as important as what he sings. His music is most easily described as Sam Cooke reincarnated as a shy and unfailingly polite singer-songwriter from Crowley, Texas, and it perfectly complements the musician's man-out-of-time fashion







sense. Bridges tells me that in the morning he will board a plane for New York and a photo shoot with *Vogue*.

But there is something rough around his dapper edges. After he climbs onstage, Bridges seems unsure of how to acknowledge the crowd. "Where my brown-skinned girls at?" he asks this clog of Dallas socialites before he and the band launch into the song "Brown Skin Girl." As a shimmering rhythm and blues groove blares out of a collection of vintage amplifiers, Bridges settles in, his hips moving in a controlled, elliptical rhythm. He reels up on his toes and falls back down on his heels again to the beat. Then he launches into the title track of his album.

If you've never heard of Bridges, listen to one line of "Coming Home" and you will understand in an instant how, within weeks of his recording a couple of demos in a warehouse in Fort Worth, executives from dozens of labels had their eyes locked on this kid, clamoring for his signature on a contract. "Coming Home" is unmistakably a hit.

"Baby, baby, baby," Bridges croons, landing the last syllable with a pop of his heels. "I'm coming home."

By the time he hits that last "baby," a strange feeling wells up inside you. You have heard this song before. No, that's not quite it. You feel like you've always known the song, like it has *always* just existed, etched into your memory even before it was written. Bridges' voice, rich and buttery as fudge, phrases each syllable magnificently, pirouetting in and out of chord changes.

In this song, Bridges' sudden rise to fame doesn't feel unlikely. It feels inevitable.

**W**HEN BRIDGES BEGAN popping up at just about every open mic in Fort Worth a couple of years ago, music-scene regulars took notice. Cliff Wright, who played bass in the band the Orbans, first heard Bridges playing at a Potbelly sandwich shop during lunch. Quaker City Night Hawks singer Sam Anderson met Bridges after he began showing up every week to their Thursday gig at the Magnolia Motor Lounge. Bridges finally asked Anderson if he could play a few songs between the band's sets.

"He was so soft-spoken," Anderson says. "You could tell there was nerves going on. He didn't say much in the microphone between songs. But the performances were always there. He played three or four songs, and after he came off, I said, 'You didn't tell me you were awesome.'"



When Bridges arrived on the scene, he went by the name Lost Child, and his set consisted mostly of gospel songs. He had been listening to people like Usher and Ginuwine, had a moment when he made an attempt at playing neo-soul, and then, quite deliberately, settled on a sound. It came from a song he wrote called "Lisa Sawyer," a soulful ode to his New Orleans-born mother that is steeped in the sound of the year—1963—when she was born. After hearing "Lisa Sawyer," a friend asked him if he liked Sam Cooke.

"I felt bad because I had never listened to Sam Cooke," Bridges says. "So I started digging. I went on Pandora and started listening to Motown and Sam Cooke. After

listening to all that music, I started to see that that's where I needed to be."

Where Bridges believed he needed to be was in the music of another era, lost in the soft melodies and understated cool of a generation whose music had long since taken root in the cultural substratum, evolving through everyone from Marvin Gaye and George Clinton to Michael Jackson and Grandmaster Flash.

"But my generation wasn't able to experience that," Bridges says of his pursuit of his classic sound. "Me being a black man, I was like, Why aren't any brothers doing this kind of stuff?"

Anderson took Bridges under his wing, bringing him to song swaps and inviting him to play with Quaker City Night Hawks. It wasn't Bridges' music, however, that would really kick-start his career. It was his pants. Bridges was wearing high-waisted Wranglers and drinking beer on the patio of a place called The Boiled Owl Tavern when he was spotted by the girlfriend of Austin Jenkins, a guitarist and co-founder of the band White Denim. Jenkins was in a cowboy hat and his own pair of Wranglers, and his girlfriend made a fuss. They still have the picture she took, of the shy guy at the bar in his cool pants, not yet understanding that flint had just discovered steel.

Two weeks later, Jenkins stumbled across



**COOKING:**  
Bridges started off wanting to dance, then he found his voice.

“HE SAW THE SACRIFICE,” HIS MOTHER SAYS.  
“AS A SINGLE PARENT, WE DID EVERYTHING  
TOGETHER. THERE WERE MORE NEEDS THAN  
MONEY MANY TIMES, BUT WE GOT THROUGH.  
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For their retro studio, they found a back storeroom of the old Supreme Golf Warehouse Outlet, which had been converted into apartments, Fort Worth Bike Sharing’s offices, and a bar called Shipping & Receiving. They used a plywood partition wall to separate the sound booth from the recording space. The band moved air ducts and other debris to create sound barriers, but mostly they let the room function as another instrument, the natural delay time in the empty space providing a Phil Spector-ish wash of echo over the entire recording.

The first session took place in late August. There was no air conditioning, and the room was hot as hell. Instruments were set up on a carpet made of putting-green turf. In the center of the green, there was a stand and microphone. No one brought any expectations.

“Honestly, it was just: let’s see if all this shit works,” Jenkins says. “This guy has a great voice. Let’s see if something can happen here.”

The first track they recorded was “Coming Home.” As they played, patrons from the bar wandered in, and some were conscripted to sing backup vocals. Residents in the apartments above the warehouse came down to watch. People clapped after takes. “There was a wild, crazy energy,” Wright says.

As they recorded the song, Jenkins noticed that Bridges wasn’t just singing his parts; he was reworking some of the arrangements of his vocals. Freed from having to accompany himself on the guitar, he tweaked the phrasing of the melody lines and adjusted the lyrics to fit between other things happening in the arrangement.

“We were on fire,” Bridges says. “Right then, I knew this was something special.”

No one could have expected how coolly and calmly Bridges would take the whole thing. Here was this shy kid surrounded by musicians 10 or more years his senior, veterans of countless recording sessions, tours all over the world, and they were playing his songs. Bridges slid into the middle of it, swinging his hands at his sides to the rhythm of his homespun soul songs.

“He was completely fearless,” Block says. “He knocked the first tune out of the park,

then the second tune, then the third tune.”

Some people call Bridges a natural. But to understand how this singer was able to perform so well in this unconventional recording session, you have to know that no one who really knows the young man calls him Leon Bridges.

**L**EON BRIDGES WAS CREATED AT some point between 2012 and 2013, the name taken from the mononymous actor Leon, who played David Ruffin in *The Temptations*, the four-hour NBC miniseries first broadcast in 1998, and whom you might say bears some resemblance to Todd Michael Bridges, who was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1989.

By the time his family had arrived in Texas, around 1992, via a short stint in New Orleans, Todd’s parents had split. In 2002, Todd and his two siblings—older brother Wallace and younger sister Ivy—moved with their mother, Lisa Sawyer, into a 1,500-square-foot house on a gently curving street in Crowley about a mile from the city limits of Kelly Clarkson’s hometown of Burleson. A single mom living miles from her support network of extended family, Sawyer kept her brood close. Todd’s childhood was filled with simple pleasures and family. They invented games, lived at the library, and ate their mother’s Louisiana home cooking instead of fast food. Todd saw his father on weekends and spent summers with him. But at home, it was his mother who kept a tight, loving rein on the household.

“Todd saw the sacrifice,” Sawyer says. “As a single parent, we did everything together. There were more needs than money many times, but we got through. We had a strong faith in God. We were definitely a family unit—played together and cried together.”

Around age 11, he began to show an interest in dance, copying moves he saw on TV and listening to music while his mom was at work. When she came home, he disappeared into the garage to dance more. He tells me—and has claimed in other interviews—that he and his siblings were forbidden to listen to anything

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Bridges again, this time playing between Quaker City Night Hawks sets at the Magnolia Motor Lounge.

“He played ‘Coming Home’ first,” Jenkins remembers. “There were maybe five people still in there, and I was totally floored.” Jenkins went up to Bridges immediately afterward and asked if he wanted to record.

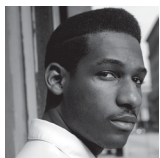
After Jenkins left, the bartender turned to Bridges. “You know he’s in White Denim?” he asked.

“Who’s that?” Bridges responded.

Even people who know White Denim, a psychedelic-rock act that came out of Austin to achieve some acclaim in the mid-2000s, weren’t aware of the scheme Jenkins and his bandmate, drummer Joshua Block, were hatching. Jenkins had moved back to Fort Worth in 2011, followed by Block a few years later. They had been acquiring vintage equipment—amps, microphones, a hulking soundboard from the 1960s that had been used to record the Grateful Dead—for an ambitious project. They wanted to record an album as albums used to be recorded in the heyday of rock and roll, mostly live on just a handful of tracks, with no overdubbing and little processing.

“The idea was a live studio,” Block says. “To take advantage of all the limitations and all the luxuries that you get when you use that kind of equipment.”





## LEON BRIDGES

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but gospel music. “Anita Baker, that kind of stuff,” he says. But when I bring this up to Sawyer, she’s incensed.

“I call him Pinocchio, and I said, ‘I’m going to beat you across your Pinocchio head if you say that again,’” Sawyer says. “And all he does is laugh.”

She admits there were a lot of gospel songs on in the house when the kids were growing up, but she also has a large record collection—“from Mozart to Mariah to Whitney to Babyface.” She just had standards: no profanity and no lyrics that were offensive to women. And Sawyer could sing. She sang at church, and she would sing with her son. When Todd got his first job as a park attendant at Six Flags Over Texas, they would sing together as she drove him to work, pretending they were on Broadway, trying to make each other laugh.

Todd Bridges enrolled at Tarrant County Community College, where he intended to pursue dance. Instead, he started spending time with musicians like Octavian Johnson, a pianist who would set up his keyboard in the school cafeteria. A half-dozen singers at a time would crowd around Johnson for freewheeling jam sessions that would play out like rap battles in the key of Usher, each singer jumping in the circle to improvise melodramatic R&B lyrics about anything from picking up girls to pairing Kool-Aid with sandwiches.

In videos of these sessions from 2010, Bridges is dressed in a pinky-purple t-shirt and white jeans, with a cap turned backward and brim flipped up. He mostly hangs off to the side, harmonizing as his classmates jump in and out of the ring. During a particularly raucous and hilarious jam called “Campus Cruiser,” he finally tries to kick in a lyric after about 10 minutes, only to be interrupted by a friend who jumps in front of the camera and sings in a faux-Auto-Tuned quaver, sending the rest of the crew into hysterics.

Bridges couldn’t figure out how to steal the limelight in the competitive musical arena of the Tarrant County Community College cafeteria, but Johnson recognized that he could sing. He encouraged Bridges to pursue music, and even though he insisted he was focused on dance, Bridges kept showing up to the sessions.

“Girls would ask him to sing to them all the time,” Johnson says. “We would sit

down in the cafe, and all these girls would come to listen to him sing.”

Johnson brought Louie the Singer, a pop R&B act from Fort Worth that packs the House of Blues with squealing preteen Latino girls, to TCC for a gig. After the show, Louie met Bridges and asked if he wanted to sing backup for him. Johnson was already gigging around, bringing in \$100 to \$150 per night. Suddenly, singing started to seem like a possible profession for Bridges.

Bridges asked his mother to buy him a guitar, and she took him to Music Go Round at the corner of Bryant Irvin Road and Highway 183. A classmate taught him two chords, and Bridges disappeared into his bedroom to practice. He worked at Rosa’s Cafe in Fort Worth busing tables, and he would bring the guitar with him to play during breaks.

As Bridges was finding his voice, he was already homing in on his style. In high school, his mom gave him an old coat that once belonged to his grandfather, and he wore it everywhere. He hounded thrift stores. His fashion interest started with skinny jeans, then it moved to wide-legged pants, and then high-water pants.

“Wow, Todd, you look like Urkel,” Sawyer told her son one day when he came back from the thrift store. “You want me to let the hem out of those?”

“No, Mom,” he said. “They’re good.”

Sawyer had no idea her son was writing songs until the day he walked into the living room and told her he had written one for her. For all that has been written about Bridges’ incredible voice, the strength of his lyrics—and of the song “Lisa Sawyer” in particular—have thus far been overlooked, probably because “Coming Home” is such a simple and endearing little pop song. In “Lisa Sawyer,” Bridges spins a generational tale of migration, through the South and out West, a song about witnessing love and faith, as well as suffering and hardship seen through a child’s eyes. It traces the journey of his own family in a way that parallels a metaphorical journey, raising them up from New Orleans and taking the Mississippi blues through the lens of midcentury soul as interpreted by the pure heart of a young man growing up in suburban Texas.

“She was born in New Orleans, branded with the name Lisa Sawyer,” he sings. “She had the complexion of a sweet praline, voice like a symphony of the most beautiful instruments.”

As he serenaded his mother, she started to cry. She looked for her own words but couldn’t find them.

“I had been talking about my life in bits

and pieces,” Sawyer says. “And he remembered everything.”

**THE FIRST RECORDING SESSION IN THE OLD Supreme Golf Warehouse Outlet had to end because White Denim was heading out on tour. But they made plans to rebuild the studio and put down more of the 22 songs Bridges had ready to go. It wasn’t until the recordings were out of the studio space, however, that Block realized they had something special on their hands. He sent the recordings to Jenkins and said he wanted to share the songs with their management. Jenkins was skeptical, but eventually they sent “Coming Home” and “Better Man” to Jonathan Eshak with Mick Management in New York.**

“Holy shit, be careful with this,” Eshak said.

They weren’t sure what to do next, so they contacted another Texan, Chris Cantalini, who runs the influential Dallas-based website Gorilla vs. Bear. Cantalini was also blown away by what he heard. “I got back to them immediately, like, Who is this guy?” Cantalini says. “I couldn’t believe these were new recordings from a kid in Fort Worth.”

They decided to let Cantalini post “Coming Home” on his site, just to see what kind of response it would get. Bridges had never heard of Gorilla vs. Bear, but he liked the idea of getting his music out into the world. On Wednesday, October 15, 2014, the track went live.

“We don’t know much about Bridges at this point,” Cantalini wrote. “And it’s hard to believe that this kid channeling a young Sam Cooke comes from our own backyard, or anywhere, but we can’t escape the promise of greatness we keep hearing in his timeless songs.”

When the post went up, Bridges was in a car headed to New Orleans. Jenkins texted him: “Are you checking the amounts of plays you’re getting with that?” Bridges wasn’t, but then he watched as they kept clicking up, up, up, all the way to New Orleans. By the time he arrived, more than 100,000 people had listened to “Coming Home.”

“I couldn’t believe that it was that particular song people were digging,” Bridges says.

“We were laughing and thinking, ‘This is ridiculous,’” Jenkins remembers. “And it kept on getting more ridiculous. I told Leon, ‘I think your track is on steroids.’”

Cantalini says he’s not sure how or why Bridges’ song took off. That kind of thing had only happened a couple times in the 10-year history of Gorilla vs. Bear. What was more incredible was that it happened organically, without any support from out-

side media, to a kid no one had even heard of the day before. That week, Cantalini starting playing the music on his SiriusXM show, and within a couple of weeks, both NPR and the BBC had caught on to Bridges.

That's when things got surreal. As promised, the group reconvened in the warehouse for another session in late October, but this time the stakes had changed. People not only knew about the recording session, they wanted to find out what else this reincarnation of Sam Cooke was up to. The band had to keep the sessions on lockdown. On October 29, the Mick Management team—now also representing Bridges—flew into town. The band set up in the bar area of Shipping & Receiving.

The handful of people who were in the bar that Wednesday night were watching the seventh game of the World Series. By the time the band started to play, however, between 20 and 30 executives from record labels all over the world, including Columbia, Atlantic, and numerous indie and European labels, were sitting at tables at the out-of-the-way drinking hole just south of I-30, waiting to hear the kid from Crowley sing.

"This never happens in Fort Worth," Cliff Wright remembers thinking. "A proper label showcase."

They began to run through their songs. At a table nearby, a group of young women, oblivious to what was happening, were laughing and talking loudly. Jenkins walked over and politely asked them to keep it down. After the showcase, a bidding war ensued. It came down to Atlantic and Columbia, and, on Christmas Day, Bridges tweeted the announcement: "It's a real honor to now be a part of the Columbia Records family," he wrote. "Been a long time comin'."

It's difficult to put a finger on what makes Leon Bridges' brand of historicized music so appealing to both listeners and record executives. When you listen to him perform, you can allow yourself to feel transported, to let your imagination drift to a more innocent—perhaps fanciful—moment in America when we all listened to the same music and danced together, with our hips set apart, swaying to the velvety voice of a beautiful young man in a well-pressed, button-down shirt. Not that that combination of visual and musical nostalgia hasn't won Bridges his detractors.

"He is pretty safe," the *Dallas Observer* wrote earlier this year. "And if KXT could dream up a platonic ideal of a local performer to champion, they'd invent Bridges if he didn't already exist."

But if you ask his bandmates and his other champions why they think his mu-

sic has such appeal, they mostly talk about his honesty and his sincerity, and how that manages to come through in his music. "The appeal for me is definitely unique to Leon," Cantalini says. "I don't know whether people were secretly clamoring for a throwback soul revival—I know I wasn't—but his songwriting has a timeless and transportive quality that is very rare, and yet it also feels indescribably modern to me in a way."

As the music executives were courting Bridges, seeking to bottle and package that timeless quality, his mother didn't grasp the level at which her son's future was being fought over. "Things happened so fast," Sawyer says. "Todd says, 'Mom, I met this guy, and someone is flying in from New York to meet me,' and I couldn't keep up with all the names and the encounters. I said, 'Todd, I want you to be very aware and very conscious of what you are doing when you are talking to these people.'"

Bridges is characteristically understated about the entire ordeal. "I'm a low-key person," he says. "It was a joyful time."

Still, he admits that he was a little confused that it was "Coming Home" that kick-started his career. In April, it sat at No. 20 on *Billboard's* Adult Alternative Songs chart. He wrote that song, he explains, after he decided to pursue his sound, to try to resurrect the feeling and melodies of classic soul that he felt his peers never got a chance to discover. He wrote the song just to see if he could write that kind of song. It didn't come from a deep place.

"It is definitely not one of my favorite songs," he says.

I ask which of his songs he does like.

"The song I like is my mom's song," he says. "And a song called 'Brown Skin Girl.'"

**AFTER THE CONCERT AT THE EYEBALL, BRIDGES** left to tour in support of the indie-folk band Lord Huron, with a stop at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to sing songs by the "5" Royales during their induction ceremony. Paul Shaffer accompanied him on keys. During rehearsals, Shaffer played the progression to "When a Man Loves a Woman."

"Is this key cool?" Shaffer shouted to Bridges.

"Yeah, sure," Bridges responded.

That night Paul McCartney danced in the front row as Bridges sang. Backstage he met John Legend, who told him that a friend had passed him "Coming Home," and he really liked it.

I ask Bridges if he was nervous playing for that kind of audience.

"I was very nervous before that," he admits. "But it gave me more confidence."

That's the zone Bridges is trying to stay in these days. Life on the road is "cool," he and his band are just "trying to figure it out," and "growing and getting strong."

"I'm just learning how to be a better performer," he says. "Learning just how to talk to people."

On the day I talk to Bridges' mother, he is performing in Chicago. I ask her if she ever gets worried about him out there on the road, if she's wary of this world he has entered—the entertainment industry, the whirl of fame, the fashion editors, fawning publicists, the music-hall backstages, all those admiring eyes, what it can do to the soul, how it can slowly eat away at who you really are.

To answer, she tells a story. When Bridges was 19, she lost her job. She was unemployed for two years. At the same time, her sister was battling a terminal illness. Bridges was working at Rosa's, busing tables, and at the end of each week, he would receive his \$300 check and bring it to his mother.

"And he never touched it. He never touched his own money," she says.

As the months of unemployment turned into years, Bridges looked for other ways to help. Finally, one day he came to her.

"Mom," Bridges said, "I'm going to shut my phone up so it can free up some more money for you."

Sawyer was taken aback. She couldn't believe that the teenager who was working and paying for his own phone would offer to give it up for his family.

"I want you to know this," she told her son at the time. "God has seen your sacrifice, and he is going to reward you for it."

"Yes, ma'am," Bridges said.

Each night Leon Bridges is out on the road, Todd Bridges' mom comes home from work. She puts down her bag and gets on the computer to see where her son happens to be that day. She reads what people have been writing about him and what he has been telling them. Sometimes she sends him texts and says she is thinking of him. Sometimes she offers him advice, reminding him not to let any of the attention get to his head, to not let it change him.

"Yes, ma'am," he texts back.

But Sawyer knows her son is going to be okay. If he can be trusted with a little, she says, he can be trusted with a lot.

"If I had the world to lay before him to say thank you for being such an honorable son, I would," Sawyer says. "So I'm just in awe as to what is happening to Todd—and Leon Bridges." **D**

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