

country loving

Finding happiness together, Nicole and Keith make sweet music in Nashville

When her favorite singer is performing, Nicole Kidman isn't the type to quietly sit back and enjoy the show. As her boyfriend, country rocker Keith Urban, kicked off a surprise gig at Nashville's Lipscomb University last month, the actress was "just cheering like a fan," says another concert-goer. "She seemed to be really into his performance." And after Urban wrapped his set, Kidman eagerly rushed the stage. "She met him as he was coming offstage," says the observer, "with a hug and kiss."

She may be an Oscar winner, but Kidman has embraced the role of Urban's No. 1 groupie with gusto. She's also embraced a surprisingly sedate life with the singer in Music City. Growing ever closer since they were first spotted together last July, the fellow Aussies, both 38, are now as much of a Nashville staple as the Grand Ole Opry—nesting at Urban's mansion in the posh Green Hills neighborhood, dining out with neighbor LeAnn Rimes, flashing that whopping diamond ring of Kidman's all over town. (An engagement ring? The couple still won't say, though Kidman has been wearing it on her ring finger since November.) Pals say there's no doubt Kidman and Urban are deeply



Kidman and Urban (in Nashville March 24) "really seem to be in love," says a source close to the actress.

in love. "They seem great together," says a source close to Kidman. "Real love just happens. You don't plan it. And that's what happened with them. They fell in love."

And lately, the spotlight-shy pair aren't afraid to show it—turning up

together in the front row at February's Grammys (their first major event as a couple), gabbing with Barbara Walters at *Unity Fair's* post-Oscars party and strolling hand-in-hand near Urban's home. All of which, of course, means that



Urban (with Kidman in November) "really has never talked about his private life," says his former manager Anastasia Brown.

folks from Malibu to Nashville's Music Row—including some close to the couple—are buzzing about when the two will set a wedding date. "They're perfect together," says a Nashville source. "I think they'll definitely get married." Through it all, Kidman and Urban have remained silent about their future, though

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Urban told *PEOPLE* in 2004 he was “absolutely” ready for marriage. “I thought it would have happened sooner than it has, quite frankly.”

For now, they're content to carve out a low-key life together out of the spotlight. Favorite outings in Nashville? Starbucks, where they

pore over the newspaper, and Bread & Company, where Urban gets his morning oatmeal fix. “They looked like they were definitely best friends,” says Nikita Walker, a Starbucks regular. “Everyone is so used to seeing them. No one bothers them.”

Probably because celeb-spotting is no big deal in Nashville, where

locals routinely cross paths with famous neighbors from Faith Hill to Al and Tipper Gore. Away from prying eyes, the pair can let their hair down (or in Kidman's case, put it up in a ponytail) and affectionately clown around. Dining at J Alexander's restaurant, Kidman put her

salad aside and playfully grabbed Urban's plate for a hearty whiff of his french fries. “They're very loving together,” says the Nashville source. “They're very doting. He holds her hand the whole time [they're together] and pats the top of her other hand at the same time. It's adorable.” Even supermodel Niki Taylor, who dated Keith on and off between 2002 and 2004, gives the couple her thumbs up: “I wish them both all the best.”

So besides Urban's predilection for tall blondes (he's 5'8", Kidman is 5'11"), what draws the quiet, driven guitar man and the reserved yet earthy Hollywood star together? “I want someone who says, ‘I will stand by you and be there for you, and your life is just as important to me as mine.’” Kidman told *PEOPLE* in 2003. She added, “I like to be in love. Nothing casual.

PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]



all about keith

HE COMES FROM THE OTHER LAND DOWN UNDER

Although he calls himself an Aussie, Urban is technically a Kiwi. Born in Whangarei, New Zealand, in 1967, he moved to Australia in 1971, when his family settled in the small farming town of Caboolture.

REBEL YOUTH

He faced his parents'

wrath at age 7 for painting his band's name on their garage door. But he didn't get as much grief when he dropped out of school at 15 to pursue his career. "It was a natural progression," mother Marienne told PEOPLE in 2003. "Music was always his passion."

THE LONG ROAD

Urban arrived in Nashville in 1992 after scoring four No. 1 singles in his native country. It took almost a decade of struggling

stateside (he took odd jobs mowing lawns) before he hit the U.S. charts with "But for the Grace of God" in '01. His 2004 album *Be Here* launched four chart-topping singles.

PLAYING FROM THE HEART

After details of his '01 proposal to ex-fiancée Laura Sigler—in which a man stood outside a restaurant with a sign that said "Will you marry me?"—hit Nashville papers, Urban has avoided public displays of affection. "He was always private about his girlfriends," says former manager Anastasia Brown. "He just wants to play music."

URBAN DEVELOPMENT
long before the No. 1 hits. Urban (in 2005, above) learned rhythm at age 4 by trumming his ukulele to the radio back home.



"I'm not interested in casual." Certainly she has found a match in Urban, who has never been cavalier about life or love. (Engaged once—to Laura Sigler, see box—he has never wed.) "He's extremely intense," especially when it comes to perfecting his music, says Anastasia Brown, Urban's former manager and longtime friend. "He's very private about his personal life. [And] he's not the type of person to show up at a party just to get a picture taken and get his face plastered in magazines." Urban can also be disarmingly funny. "He's got a wicked sense of humor," says Brown. "It can be dry and take you off-guard. You wonder what he's going to say next."

For Kidman, her down-home union with Urban seems to be the perfect

antidote to her high-wattage relationship with Lenny Kravitz, not to mention her 10-year fishbowl of a marriage to Tom Cruise. Adds another Nashville resident: "He's a really kind person, and Nicole sees that. Anybody can see that he's unbelievably down-to-earth."

Urban and Kidman met for the first time in January 2005, at an L.A. dinner honoring famous Australians. They were spotted spending time together in July, motorcycling and shopping around Woodstock, N.Y. Soon after, Kidman became a mainstay on Urban's "Keith's Alive in '05" tour, while the couple squeezed in plenty of countryside trips and inti-

mato meals. They celebrated Thanksgiving together in Nashville, with both sets of parents on hand (Kidman is "very attentive" to Urban's mother, says a source), and also spent Christmas there, strolling in Cheekwood Botanical Gardens.

Clearly, Kidman feels more and more at home. During a rare moment away from Urban, getting a manicure at Venetian Nails and Spa, "she seemed very relaxed" and bowled over by everyone's friendliness, says an observer. "She smiled all the time. She really likes Nashville because everyone is nice to her." **Especially its musicians.**

By Jason Lynch and Chris Strauss. Amy Green, Beverly Keel and Michael McCall in Nashville, Kelly Williams in Chicago and KC Baker in New York City